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## UCC Enters Cork Prison: Transformative Pedagogy Through Arts Education

This paper addresses the theme of learning through a community partnership between Cork Prison and University College Cork (UCC). Cork Prison is a closed, medium security prison for adult males. It is site of committal for counties Cork, Kerry and Waterford. This learning partnership has two objectives. The first objective is to promote student agency as influenced by UCC's application of the Project Zero Classroom, Harvard Graduate School of Education. Secondly, partners promote student empowerment by facilitating them to express their stories through their art, which is annually exhibited on Spike Island, Cork Harbour, from June to September. Insider art will be on display during the conference to highlight prison *as* a community within our wider community.

The learning points that guide this paper focus on three strategies to promote learning partnerships. The first strategy considers what the prison requires from the partnership. The second consideration is what the university can offer the partnership. I will further discuss this in my lightning talk outlining how I applied a rubric-based approach based on Project Zero (Tishman, 2017). My "slow looking" rubric, designed as a performance of understanding (figure 01), features three dimensions for understanding: 1) *Inquiry*: posing open-ended questions without either right or wrong answers; 2) *Access*: appealing to a wide range of learners; and 3) *Reflection*: providing opportunities for thinking about one's own thinking. The third strategy, considers that the context of incarceration is transformative by highlighting prison *as* community within community. At the panel, I will discuss this further through the minutiae of lived experience as a transformative pedagogy. Here, I will consider one inmate-student's artistic response to the idea of "home" as a "micrology of lived experience" (Seal & O'Neill, 2019, 17). I will discuss how his sustained re-making of a domestic space in social housing brought him back to his memories of home.

### **What prison and university each bring to the partnership**

Transformative pedagogy is an activist pedagogy combining the elements of constructivist and critical pedagogy that empowers students to examine critically their beliefs, values, and knowledge with the goal of developing a reflective knowledge base, an appreciation for

multiple perspectives, and a sense of critical consciousness and agency (Ukpokodu, O., 2009, p. 43). The potential for transformative pedagogy in prison arts education connects critical pedagogy with arts-based studio practices. It draws upon strengths of both communities: pedagogies fostered through collaboration at UCC and art practices fostered in the Education Unit since the 1985 prison riot on Spike Island, Cork Harbour. Using visual arts as a transformative pedagogy in an incarcerated community can undo some psychological and emotional damage inmates experience during their confinement. This partnership has been running since January 2017. Its steady growth is reflected by the fact that 30 students in Cork Prison participated across three courses co-designed and co-taught by the learning partners from 2017 to 2019. Working collaboratively, and with the expertise and experience of the strategic partners we support one another to empower our learners and to give them the critical approaches and practical skills to voice their stories.

### **What the university can offer**

Learning partnerships give visibility to prison *as* social communities and remind us that prison and society are interconnected (Foucault, 1991/1975). UCC and the Education Unit, Cork Prison, as learning partners, collaborate through an engaged curriculum that promotes visible thinking strategies central to the Project Zero Classroom <http://www.pz.harvard.edu>. At UCC, Prof. Áine Hyland and Dr. Marian McCarthy initiated Project Zero to promote critical pedagogy. Visible Thinking, a phrase of Project Zero, assists students to integrate thinking-about-thinking. This approach can empower educators and students in prison.

For a partnership to succeed there needs to be space to listen and learn. The learning partnership aims to scaffold conversations to guide students in how structuring their thoughts and verbal/visual responses can enhance creativity. As an “outsider” I needed to learn from the experience of “insider” teachers in the Education Unit and I needed to build circles of trust with the students themselves, which took time. I collaborated with teachers and artists-in-residence in the Education Unit in working towards the annual arts exhibition on Spike Island. We co-designed four courses with the intention to prompt conversations with students about what it meant to be a person to oneself and within society through conversations on art practices. This was the throughline connecting the courses. Throughlines describe the most important understandings that students should develop during an entire course. These courses were as follows: “Masterpieces of Irish Art” (January-March, 2017), “Ten Great Works of Prison Literature” (September-January, 2017), “A Little History of Cork” (January-April, 2018), and “Stories of Colour” (October-December 2019). Each course supported the art

studio practices especially for students who were developing art portfolios for progression pathways on their release.

### **How is the partnership transformative?**

Students communicated their understanding of the learning enacted through their artworks, which have become artefacts *as* assessment rather than *for* assessment (Slides 01-08).

The students reflected in their exhibition statement that visual pedagogies enabled them to contextualise academic thinking and by making connections between ways of looking and art practices they were empowered to produce a body of work sparked by conversations:

We the students in the Education Unit, Cork Prison . . . have all enjoyed each lecture series and have looked at art works from Caravaggio to Sean Scully. We have studied works of literature from Boethius to Nelson Mandela, and familiarised ourselves with medieval maps of Cork city through to the Art Deco architecture of Turners Cross Church. In response to the wealth of information gathered, we found that visual research through Art practice has helped and enabled us to contextualise academic thinking. By marrying both, we have been able to produce a considerable body of work. Some of the work on display around this room. We hope to continue with a new programme of lectures in the next academic year (“Inside-Out” exhibition, 2018)

Students acknowledged the scaffolding of the Project Zero Classroom for its potential to explore ways to deepen student engagement; encourage learners to think critically and creatively; and make learning and thinking visible. In the Project Zero Classroom, teachers also become learners who model intellectual curiosity with care, interdisciplinary and collaborative inquiry, and sensitivity to the ethical and aesthetic dimensions of learning. Students and their teachers acknowledged these dimensions in the exhibition statement.

Edel Cunningham, Supervising Teacher, Education Unit, Cork Prison, stresses the importance of the learning partnership for both individual and community reasons. Firstly, the partnership encourages students to reflect and critically assess: a skill new to many. Secondly, the partnership breaks down mental barriers that many student inmates might have about being able to access further and higher education. Research tells us that 60% of males with a father in prison will end up in prison themselves. Imprisonment is intertwined with social disadvantage, family dysfunction and negative educational experiences. If any of the participants tell their child that they attended a course delivered by UCC it has the potential to create in his child the aspiration that he/she might one day attend university.

## Conclusion

The goal of this learning partnership is the promotion of inmate-student engagement that can enhance positive interactions within the lived experience of incarceration. Partners seek to use the visual arts to express prison *as* communities within society and to promote inmate-student agency by making visible their stories through the medium of the visual arts. The following lessons are being learned from this learning partnership. Firstly, experiential learning that involves deep reflection and practical skills has the potential to create change agents for life. Secondly, everyone has the right to be actively involved in determining the conditions that shape their lives. Thirdly, the curriculum is co-designed by the partners in collaboration with the students themselves. The partnership has highlighted both the critical and constructivist dimensions of transformative pedagogy acknowledging that learning is socially situated and is mediated through the lived experience of prison as a learning community. Promoting critical engagement with the lived experience of insider students highlights that education is just as much a cultural currency on the “inside” as “outside” Insider students have chosen to engage with education to immediately improve their social environment and personal wellbeing independently of any future potential education may offer them to improve their lives on release.

## References

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- Tishman, S., 2017. *Slow Looking: The Art and Practice of Learning Through Observation*. New York: Routledge.
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Figure 01: A “slow looking” visual thinking protocol influenced by the Project Zero Classroom (Cronin, 2017)

| <i>Slow Looking</i>       | <i>Looking Stages</i>                               | <i>Guiding Questions</i>  |
|---------------------------|---|---|
| <b><i>Captioning</i></b>  | <i>What information does the title communicate?</i> | Who is the artist?<br>What is the title of the work?<br>What is the size of the work?<br>What is the medium (fresco, oil, tempera etc.)?<br>What is the date?<br>Where is the work now located?   |
| <b><i>Looking</i></b>     | <i>What do you see?</i>                             | How is the composition arranged (tight or loose)?<br>How is the subject painted (heavy or light brush work)?<br>How does colour evoke mood (atmospheric, dramatic)?<br>What details look familiar or unfamiliar to you?<br>Is there anything that stands out for you?<br>Does this connect with anything seen before?                             |
| <b><i>Connecting</i></b>  | <i>What connections can you make?</i>               | Do you recognise the subject (content of the painting)?<br>What does the subject-matter tell you about its meaning?<br>Who commissioned the work (patron)?<br>Why was it commissioned (public or private commission)?<br>Who owned the work (did it change hands)?<br>Is it characteristic of the period (art historical style)?                  |
| <b><i>Associating</i></b> | <i>What associations can you make?</i>              | What is the original historical context (period)?<br>How does context inform meaning (significant events)?<br>Do sketches inform the work (are there changes over time)?<br>Has the work been restored (ant new discoveries)?<br>What has been written about the work (art history)?<br>How does critical opinion inform meaning (art criticism)? |

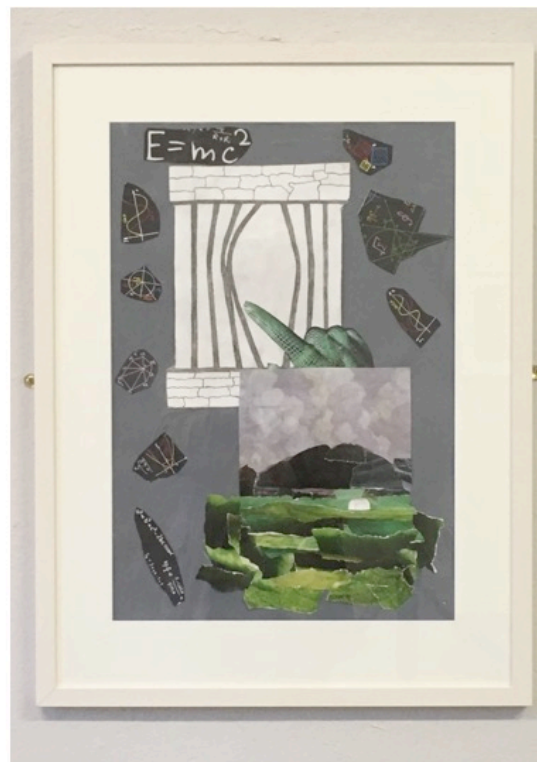
Slide 01: Student response to “Masterpieces of Irish Art” short course (by permission of Cork Prison)

**Making thinking visible:** student response to Harry Clarke *The Eve of St. Agnes* (1924) using windows as metaphors to express tensions between imagination (stained glass) and imprisonment (prison window and razor wire). This student reflects on building personal resilience by fostering effective communication strategies. The lesson is that communication diffuses tensions in prison. The student’s text reads: “Tensions are High; Communications are Low”.



Slide 02: Student response to “Masterpieces of Irish Art” short course (by permission of Cork Prison)

**Making thinking visible:** student response to Paul Henry A *Connemara Village*, 1933-34, on creativity as freedom. The index finger melting the liquid prison window bars acts as a metaphor expressing the transformative capacity of creativity as a form of resilience. This is visually communicated by means of a landscape collage assembled to evoke the student’s memories of a secure childhood beyond a threatening urban environment. The mathematical symbols evoke his childhood memories of success at school.



Slide 03: Student response to “A Little History of Cork” short course (by permission of Cork Prison)



A student response to locality evoking a childhood memory of social housing, Togher, Cork

Slide 04: Student response to “A Little History of Cork” short course (by permission of Cork Prison)

**Making thinking visible:**

student response to a sense of place evoking a secure childhood memories of a “house” that became “home”.

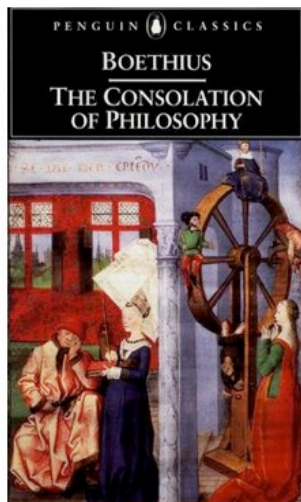
The sculpture resembles the modernist architecture of the National Building Agency Housing projects in Cork in the 1970s. For this student, social housing evoked memories of community and solidarity.







Slide 05: Student response to “Ten Great Works of Prison Literature” (by permission of Cork Prison)



Student response to the meaning of fate as expressed in Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy* (manuscript written around 524)



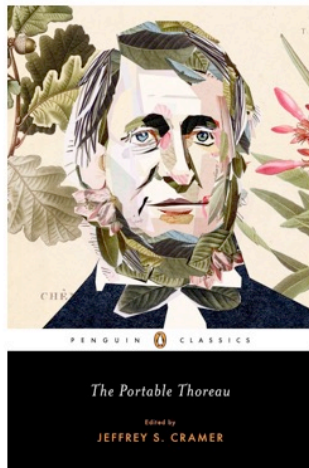
Slide 06: Student response to “Ten Great Works of Prison Literature” (by permission of Cork Prison)

**Making thinking visible:** student response to the meaning of fate as expressed in Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy* (written around 524). The student reflects on the nature of retribution through the transcribed text: “It is because you don’t know the end and the purpose of things that you think the wicked and the criminal have power and happiness. . .”

Students worked with artist Mary Timmons, visual artists in prisons scheme funded by the Arts Council, to respond to UCC’s short course on prison literature. Here, a page of paper is transformed into a ceramic plate to represent ideas of permanence through intellectual transmission by means of texts and images.



Slide 07: Student response to “Ten Great Works of Prison Literature” (by permission of Cork Prison)



Student response to the nature of justice as expressed in Henry David Thoreau, *Civil Disobedience* (first published in 1849)



Slide 08: Student response to “Ten Great Works of Prison Literature” (by permission of Cork Prison)

**Making thinking visible:** student response to the nature of justice as expressed in Henry David Thoreau, *Civil Disobedience* (first published in 1849). The “T” initial signifies Thoreau. The student reflects on the question of justifiable resistance to authority through the quotation: “If it is of such a nature that it requires you to be the agent of injustice to another, then, I say, break the law.”

Students worked with artist Mary Timmons, visual artists in prisons scheme funded by the Arts Council, to respond to UCC’s short course on prison literature. Here, a page of paper is transformed into a ceramic plate to represent ideas of permanence through intellectual transmission by means of texts and images.

