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# Visual Thinking for Convivial Learning in Cork Prison



Therese Cooper & James Cronin

Student response in glass to a series of talks on a history of Cork delivered by James Cronin (University College Cork). The light box shows a Plan of Cork from *Pacata Hibernia* (London, 1633). The subject of *Pacata Hibernia* is the Elizabethan wars in Ireland. The Plan of Cork represents a desire to control territory. Students translated this theme of surveillance into the symbol of the all-seeing eye, notice bottom right corner. Designer: Therese Cooper (Cork Prison) and Debbie Dawson, supported by the Arts Council of Ireland. (Photography by Therese Cooper, reproduced with permission of the Education Unit, Cork Prison, 2021).

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# **The Approach to Visible Thinking in Cork Prison**

## The Approach to Visible Thinking in Cork Prison

In 2016, the Centre for Adult and Continuing Education in University College Cork approached Cork Prison with a proposal to deliver a short course in art history in the Education Unit. We were delighted to facilitate this project. Sometimes those of us working in prison find ourselves understandably isolated from the rest of the community due to the constraints posed by our working environment. When UCC reached out we were delighted to forge links and become part of a wider learning community.

We began our series of lectures in January 2017 with James Cronin delivering a course on “Great Masterpieces of Art,” and in hindsight could never have anticipated the overwhelming response to the programme.

James decided to introduce the Visible Thinking model to promote critical thinking, originally designed as the Project Zero Classroom in Harvard University. Visible Thinking would prove invaluable as a tool for both looking at and producing artworks. The methodology fosters critical thinking strategies and promotes convivial conversations to promote creativity. Through the series of lectures we nurtured discussion and developed our own creativity in the form of a visual response to the works studied and discussed through our weekly talks and conversations. This meant we were engaged in Artful Thinking, which is part of the Visible Thinking strategy used to create connections between works of art and the uses of visual art as a process to foster a growth mindset in our students.

We set up our conversations about art by asking our students:

**What do you see?**

**How is it made?**

**What questions would you ask of the work?**

The studio artworks are student responses to these questions.

Since 2017 we have produced a considerable body of work. The students love working in this way as it promotes dialogue through creativity. Our visual research and approach to art practice is now embedded in academic thinking.

One of our participants commented:

*“We learned loads and never missed a lecture if we could help it.”*

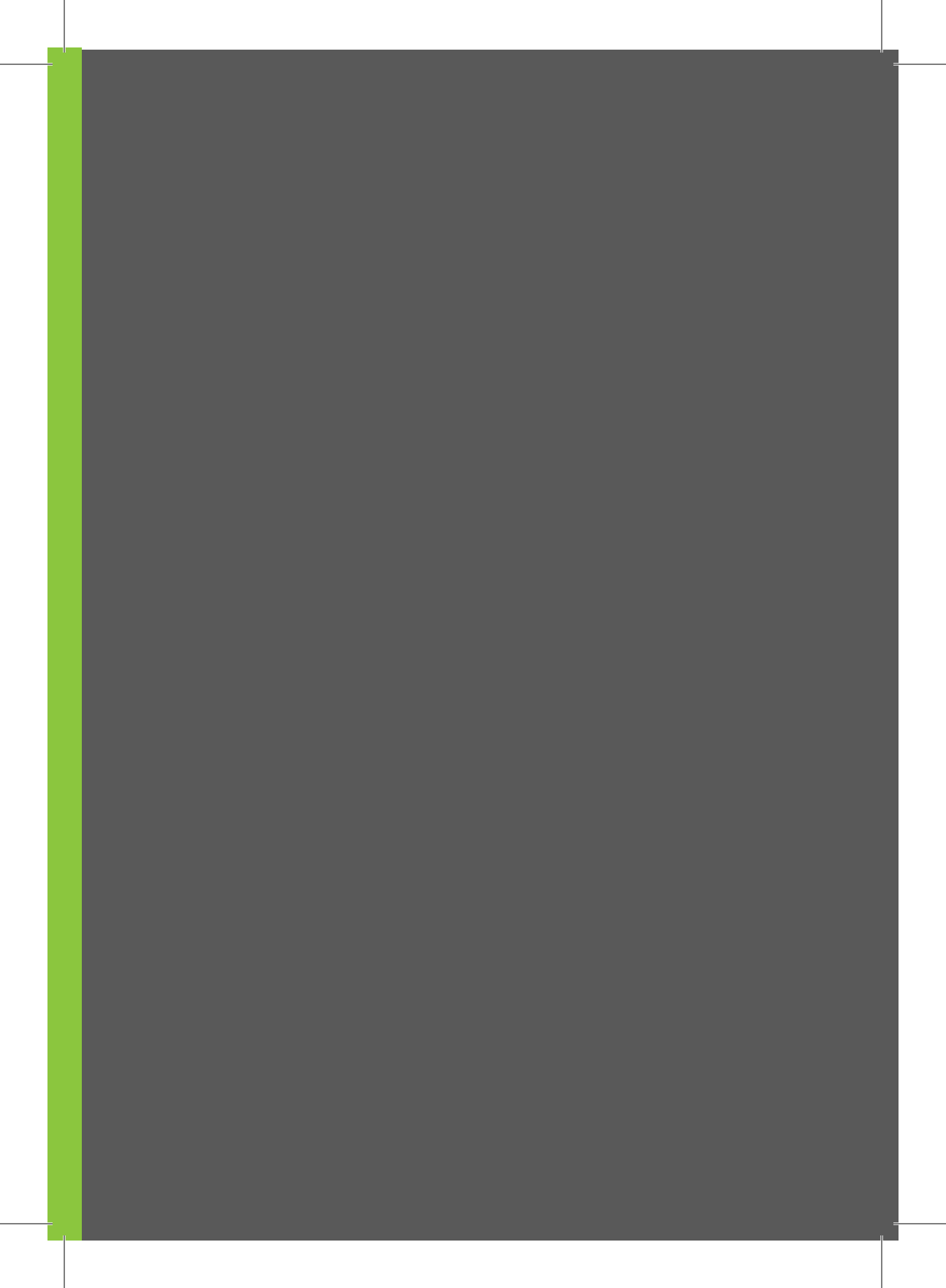
Another reflected:

*"Yes, I enjoy the process, it's therapeutic as I have to put thought into each piece relating to something I learned on the course, I like that!"*

We exhibit our artworks on Spike Island as part of an annual exhibition that seeks to promote understanding between our students and the wider community. What follows will give readers an experience of our work and the pedagogy that has informed our practice. Each student has potential to free their imagination through artmaking and to reclaim their dignity as creative human beings through this process.

*Therese Cooper.  
Artist and Educator, Education Unit, Cork Prison.  
October 2021*



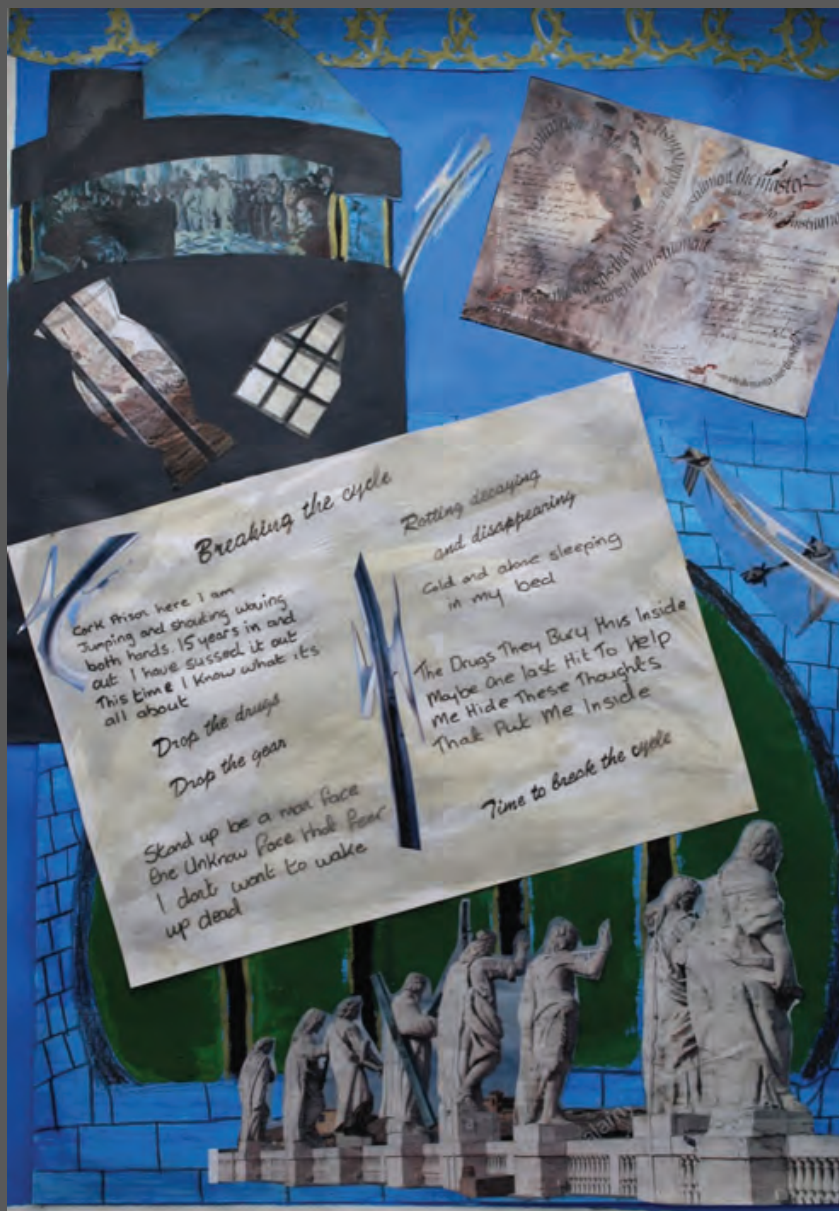




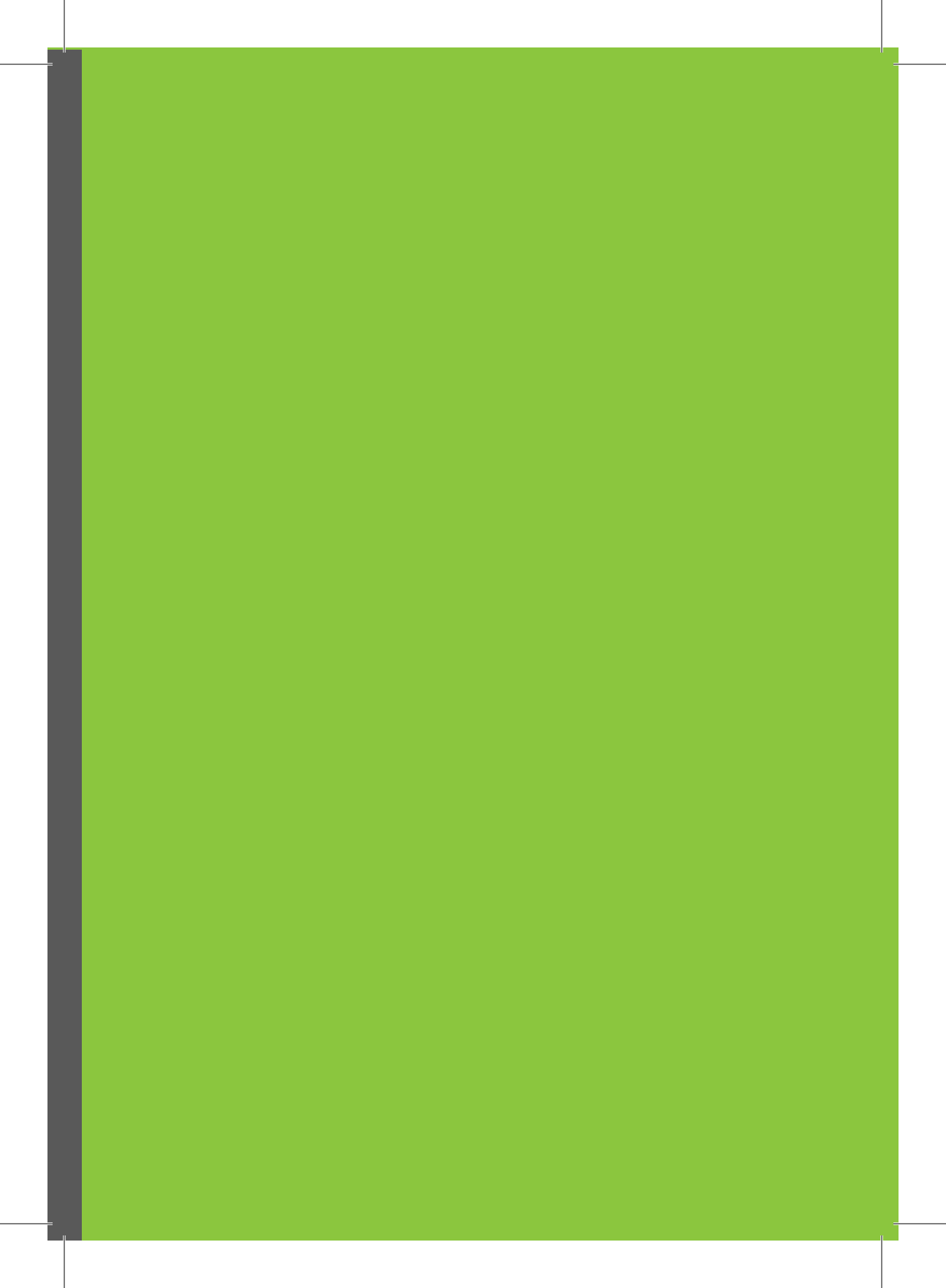
Student response to "Great Masterpieces of Irish Art." Lecturer: James Cronin (UCC); Designer: Therese Cooper (Cork Prison). (Photography by Therese Cooper, reproduced with permission of the Education Unit, Cork Prison, 2021).

**Look Closer:**  
What does this composition represent to you?





Student response to "great Masterpieces of Irish Art". Lecturer: James Cronin (UCC);  
 Designer: Therese Cooper (Cork Prison). (photography by Therese Cooper, reproduced with kind permission  
 of Education Unit, Cork Prison, 2021)



# UCC Enters Cork Prison: Transformative Pedagogy Through Arts Education

*James G. R. Cronin,  
Centre for the integration of Research, Teaching & Learning,  
University College Cork.*



## Introduction

This essay makes explicit the processes of collaboration in a learning community partnership between Cork Prison and University College Cork (UCC). Cork Prison is a closed, medium security prison for adult males. It is a committal prison for counties Cork, Kerry and Waterford. The carceral environment can be inherently damaging to mental health by removing people from society and eliminating meaning and purpose from their lives. Art is emotionally liberating because it enables inmates to be creative and to reclaim self-worth through the process of preparing and producing artworks for exhibition. The learning partnership has two objectives: firstly, to foster critical thinking strategies influenced by UCC's application of the Project Zero Classroom, Harvard Graduate School of Education; secondly, to support student voices by promoting conversations on creativity resulting in the production of artworks exhibited during summertime on Spike Island, Cork Harbour, communicating prison as community within society.

## Fostering Conviviality

A reason for prison education is to nurture rationality and creativity to overcome irrational impulses that lead to prison while promoting attitudes and skills needed for life outside prison. The community partnership began in January 2017. Initially, 30 students participated in four elective courses co-designed by the community partners. 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). The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 stopped access to the Education Unit, but this hiatus in teaching has allowed time to consolidate the learning from this community learning partnership. Each series of talks was intended to support art studio practices for students developing art portfolios as progression pathways on their release. By working collaboratively with the expertise and experience of the strategic partners we were able to support each other with the purpose of empowering our learners by giving them the critical approaches and practical skills to support them in voicing their stories that revealed their unique perspectives on society and selfhood.

Designing learning for conviviality within an incarcerated community is a transformative pedagogy that has the potential to undo some psychological and emotional damage inmates experience through incarceration. This highlights the role of dignity in human selfhood and relationships. In this respect, "conviviality" aims to foster and scaffold autonomous and creative communication between persons in contrast with the conditioned response of individuals to the demands made upon them by others, and by a man-made environment (Illich, 1973). Transformative pedagogy aims to empower students to critically examine 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, 2009, p. 43). Promoting conviviality for creativity as a transformative pedagogy in prison arts education connects critical pedagogy with studio practices by placing emphasis on the student as performing their understanding by making the process of creativity explicit through the artworks. It draws upon strengths of both communities: pedagogies fostered through collaboration at UCC and art practices enacted in the Education Unit. Today, the Education Unit in Cork is highly respected within the Irish Prison Service for its pioneering pedagogies in art education.

The learning design focuses 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. To scaffold conviviality for creativity I applied a rubric-based approach based on Project Zero (Tishman, 2017). Project Zero was founded by philosopher Nelson Goodman at the Harvard Graduate School of Education in 1967. Goodman believed in the humanistic value of studying the arts as a dimension of cognitive activity, but found that the general communicable knowledge about arts education was zero. Goodman, therefore, gave the project its name “zero” since that’s where it was starting from. Project Zero researchers focus their attention on empirical work in the area of cognitive psychology, with a continuous emphasis on artistic issues. Today, Project Zero examines issues that go beyond the arts, to look at issues like problem solving and critical thinking. Visual thinking promotes critical thinking by asking questions based on observation. My “slow looking” rubric is intended to make visible a process of critical thinking (Table 1). It features three dimensions for understanding: 1) Inquiry: to encourage the posing of open-ended questions without either right or wrong answers; 2) Access: designed to be appealing to a wide range of learners; and 3) Reflection: encouraging students to experience the messy process of learning, but supported within the framework of achievable learning goals demonstrating their performance of understanding through the artworks they produce in the studio educational space. As an illustration of this process, one inmate student responded in his artwork to the idea of “home” as a “micrology of lived experience” (Seal & O’Neill, 2019, p.17). His making of a ceramic block of flats kept changing in response to our conversations about the evolving artwork over the duration of a year’s studio work (Fig 2). Finally, he decided to paint the ceramic block of flats to evoke childhood memories of the neighbourhood. His decision demonstrated how our ongoing conversations, over time, made explicit his perception of his home and neighbourhood as places of security and insecurity that had shaped his sense of himself as a person. His artwork highlighted a lesson in the dignity of personhood as being the fundamental philosophical and sociological position of what it means to be a human being, with value, intelligence, a history and a present.



## Creativity and the Student Voice

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, Áine Hyland and Marian McCarthy applied Project Zero as tools for conviviality promoting higher education as a learning community. Arts in education scaffold students to learn-about-learning as a process to promote conviviality for creativity.

For a partnership to succeed there needs to be space and time to listen and to learn from one another. 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 working towards the annual summertime arts exhibition on Spike Island.

*Table 1: A “slow looking” visual thinking protocol used to deconstruct an image and to promote student voice*

|                |  |  |
|----------------|--|--|
| Captioning     | What information does the title communicate? | Who is the artist? What is the size/medium? Where is work located? |
| Close Looking  | What do you see?                             | What does the subject-matter tell you about its meaning?           |
| Closer Looking | What connections can you make?               | Is there anything that stands out for you?                         |
| Connecting     | What associations can you make?              | How does context inform meaning?                                   |

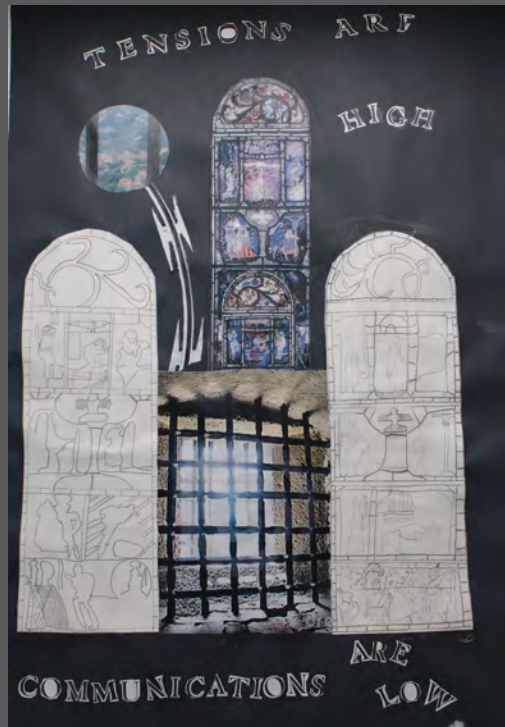


Figure 1: Student responses to "Masterpieces of Irish Art" series. Lecturer: James Cronin (UCC); Designer: Therese Cooper (Cork Prison). (Photography by Therese Cooper, reproduced with permission of Education Unit, Cork Prison, 2019).



Figure 2 & 3: Student responses to "A Little History of Cork" short course. Lecturer: James Cronin (UCC); Designer: Therese Cooper (Cork Prison). (Photography by James Cronin, reproduced with permission of Education Unit, Cork Prison, 2019).



Students communicated conviviality for creativity, so teachers could evaluate their artworks as processes rather than products of learning. The students reflected in their exhibition statement that our conviviality had unlocked the privileged language of disciplinary knowledge that had given them the confidence to produce a body of work where conviviality supported the messiness of learning:

*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 is 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 Project Zero Classroom as a conceptual framework to support their exploration of ways to deepen their engagement, encourage them to think critically and creatively, and make learning and thinking visible through the process of making studio art. In the Project Zero Classroom, teachers also become learners who model intellectual curiosity with care, scaffold collaborative inquiry, and foster sensitivity to the ethical and aesthetic dimensions of learning as acknowledged in the exhibition statement quoted above.

Ivan Illich's idea of conviviality can be summarised as promoting responsible interdependence: this stresses participatory decision-making, justice, and particularly justice for the most vulnerable as the foundation of a convivial society. 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 inmate students might have about being able to access further and higher education. 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 s/he may one day attend university.

## Learning Together

The goal of this learning partnership is the promotion of conviviality for creativity 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 promote student agency. 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 highlighted critical and constructivist dimensions of transformative pedagogy by acknowledging that learning is socially situated and mediated through the lived experience of prison. Both growth and transformation involve deep and careful self-reflection and this is challenging to enact within an environment characterised by fear, violence and intimidation. The curriculum allowed for open, non-adversarial conversation around neutral and abstract topics that had potential to encourage positive interaction between inmates, shared understanding, and a degree of empathy for different perspectives. Promoting conviviality for creativity highlights education as cultural currency both “inside” as well as “outside” the prison environment. Talent is found in unconventional places.

## Acknowledgements

I wish to thank officials and teachers at Cork Prison for providing access and to University College Cork for supporting this project through the Research Innovation Fund in Teaching & Learning, 2018. Thanks to Dr. Séamus Ó Tuama and Ms. Regina Sexton, Adult Continuing Education, University College Cork, for initiating this learning collaboration. With thanks to Prof. Maggie O'Neill and Dr. Katharina Swirak, Sociology and Criminology, University College Cork, for sharing scholarship and professional wisdom.

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**“Since 2017 we have produced a considerable body of work. The students love working in this way as it promotes dialogue through creativity. Our visual research and approach to art practice is now embedded in academic thinking.”**

*Therese Cooper*

## Masterpieces from Irish Galleries

In the series of talks entitled “Great Masterpieces of Irish Art” we discussed together how artists look at the world around them and what sense they make of that world through artistic expression.

### Our big question: how can we understand what we see?

The series fostered conversations about acts of looking through a close “reading” of a painting each week and by placing each painting within the context in which it was painted while also considering why the painting continues to attract public interest.

**Week 01. Caravaggio** (1571-1610) *The Taking of Christ* (1602), National Gallery of Ireland (NGI).

**Week 02. Johannes Vermeer** (1632-1675) *A Lady Writing a Letter, with Her Maid* (c.1670), NGI.

**Week 03. Frederic William Burton** (1816-1900) *Hellelil and Hildebrand, the Meeting on the Turret Stairs* (1864), NGI.

**Week 04. William John Leech** (1881-1968) *A Convent Garden, Brittany* (c.1913), NGI.

**Week 05. John Lavery** (1856-1941) *The Artist's Studio: Lady Hazel Lavery with her Daughter Alice and Stepdaughter Eileen* (1909-13), NGI.

**Week 06. Jack B. Yeats** (1871-1957) *Communicating with Prisoners* (c.1924), The Model, Sligo.

**Week 07. Harry Clarke** (1889-1931) *The Eve of St. Agnes* (1924) Stained Glass, Dublin City Gallery, The Hugh Lane.

**Week 08. Paul Henry** (1876-1958) *A Connemara Village* (1933-34), NGI.

**Week 09. Louis le Brocquy** (1916-2012) *A Family* (1951), NGI.

**Week 10. Sean Scully** (1945 - ) *Wall of Light Orange Yellow* (2000) Dublin City Gallery, The Hugh Lane, Dublin.





*Student response to "Great Masterpieces of Irish Art" series.  
Lecturer: James Cronin (UCC); Designer: Therese Cooper (Cork Prison). (Photography by Therese Cooper, reproduced with permission of Education Unit, Cork Prison, 2021).*

**Look Closer:**  
**How is scrap paper used  
to form a new composition?**





Student response to "Great Masterpieces of Irish Art" talks series. Lecturer: James Cronin (UCC); Designer: Therese Cooper (Cork Prison). (Photography by Therese Cooper, reproduced with permission of Education Unit, Cork Prison, 2021).

**Look Closer:**  
**Where is the visual tension**  
**in this composition?**

## Ten Great Works of Prison Literature

When we imagine the places where writers penned their greatest masterpieces, a jail cell usually doesn't come to mind. Whether the authors were prisoners of war or victims of bigotry, solitude produced many a great book. From Oscar Wilde's apologia on spiritual awakening to Henry Thoreau's thoughts on civil disobedience, we surveyed authors whose great mental escapes from incarceration resulted in some of their most insightful and profound works that continue to console and to **inspire**.

### Our big question: How can confinement foster creativity?

The tension between freedom and captivity has led to unexpected creative breakthroughs which this series set out to explore.

#### Week 01.

##### **Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy***

(manuscript written around 524) Boethius writes the book as a conversation between himself and Lady Philosophy. Lady Philosophy consoles Boethius by discussing the transitory nature of fame and wealth ("no man can ever truly be secure until he has been forsaken by Fortune"), and the ultimate superiority of things of the mind, which she calls the "one true good". She argues that happiness comes from within ourselves.

#### Week 02.

**Rustichello da Pisa, *The Travels of Marco Polo*** (printed in 1300) was written by a cell-mate of Marco Polo. The book spread throughout Europe, providing Westerners insight into the exotic East.

#### Week 03.

**Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote*** (first published in 1605) humorous and satirical "Don Quixote" is considered to be the first modern European novel, and its hero the original knight in shining armour. Cervantes penned part of his great work while serving time for his debt troubles in 17th-century Spain.

#### Week 04.

**Henry David Thoreau, *Civil Disobedience*** (first published in 1849) one night in jail inspired the American philosopher Henry David Thoreau to write his classic essay on civil disobedience. "Under a government which imprisons any unjustly," he wrote, "the true place for a just man is also a prison."

#### Week 05.

**Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis*** (first published in 1905) published after Wilde's death, the letter chronicles the journey of redemption that Wilde experienced in confinement.

#### Week 06.

**Frank O'Connor, *Guests of the Nation*** (first published in 1931) is a short story portraying the execution of two Englishmen held captive by the Irish Republican Army during the War for Independence (1919-21). It discusses themes of trust and betrayal of human relationships in wartime.

#### Week 07.

**Martin Luther King Jr., *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*** (first published in 1963) a fan of Thoreau's essay "Civil Disobedience", King was imprisoned for organising a nonviolent protest against racial segregation in Alabama. It was in jail that King penned the now historic phrase, "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

#### Week 08.

**Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*** (first translated into English from Russian in 1963) the book focuses on one day in the life of a prisoner in a labour camp in Siberia, Russia. Despite its bleak surroundings, it is a story of the triumph of the human will and of humanity under imprisonment.

#### Week 09.

**Jack Abbott, *In the Belly of the Beast*** (first published in 1981) the book contains correspondence between Abbott and famous author Norman Mailer. Mailer, impressed with Abbott's writing talent, helped him get parole in 1981, which was the same year his book was published. Australian film, *Ghosts... of the Civil Dead* (John Hillcoat, 1988), employed Abbott's disjointed narrative style to highlight how an unaccountable prison system dehumanises prisoners to the ultimate detriment of society.

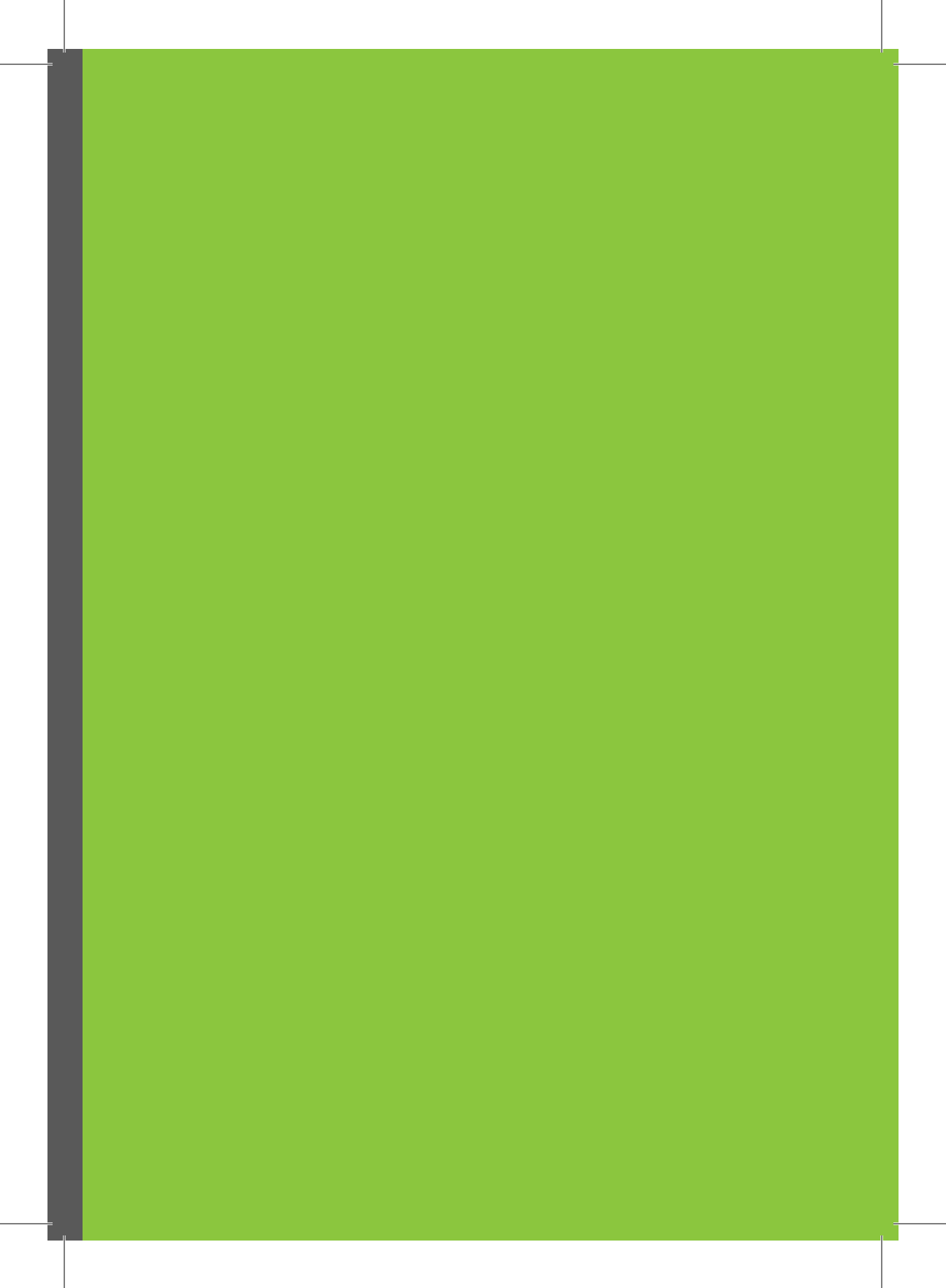
#### Week 10.

**Nelson Mandela, *Conversations with Myself*** (first published in 2010) is a scrapbook-style piece of work chronicling Mandela's life. The book includes letters and diary entries that Mandela penned during his 27 years in prison.



Student responses to "Ten Great Works of Prison Literature" series of talks highlighting the emancipatory potential of writings about freedom and justice. Lecturer: James Cronin (UCC); Designer: Therese Cooper (Cork Prison) and Mary Timmons, supported by the Arts Council of Ireland that offers opportunities to visual artists to work with groups of students and their art teachers in Irish prisons. (Photography by Therese Cooper, reproduced with permission of Education Unit, Cork Prison, 2021).

**Look Closer:**  
**What is the significance of words painted on ceramic?**



**“Yes, I enjoy  
the process.  
Its therapeutic  
as I have to put  
thought into each  
piece relating  
to something I  
learned on  
the course,  
I like that.”**

*Student feedback*

## A History of Cork told through its Historic Buildings

This series of talks, "A Little History of Cork" re-introduced students to their own place by telling the history of Cork through its built environment. This six-week series of talks concentrated on the close relationship between the present and the past. We reflected together on the peculiar "echoic" quality of the cityscape whereby its texture and history actively affects the lives and personalities of its citizens.

### Our big question: how can the city evoke living memory?

Cork has long been a place of commercial importance, largely due to the excellence of its harbour. The city's narrow alleys, waterways and Georgian architecture give it a distinctly Continental feel. The city is dominated by the river Lee which separates into two channels creating an island in the centre where most of the city centre is built.



*Detail in stained glass of Plan of Cork, Pacata Hibernia (London, 1633).*

**Look Closer:**  
Do you notice the silhouetted figure?  
What do you think this figure represents?

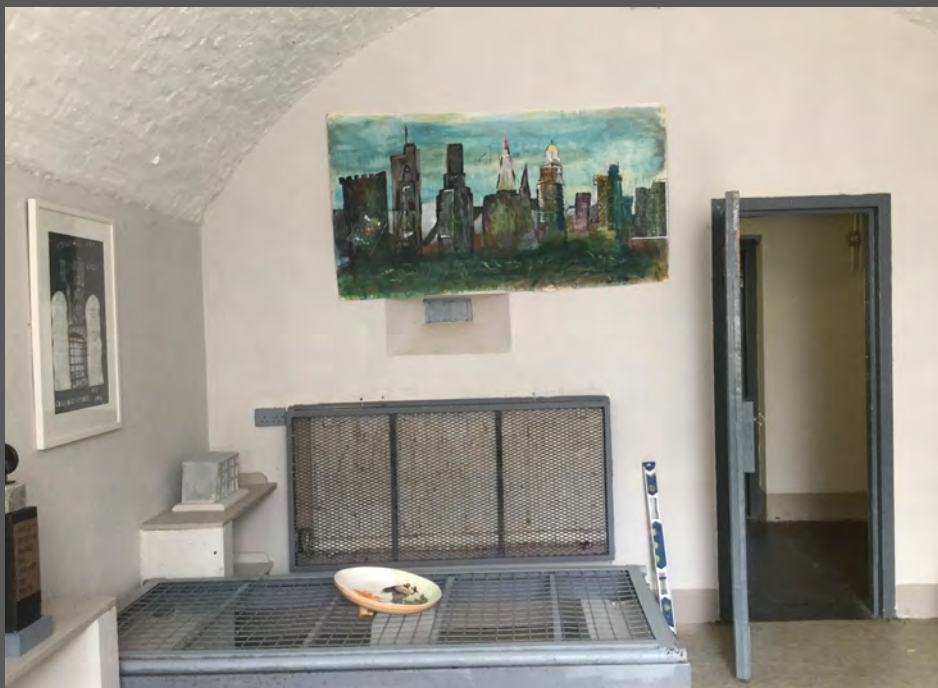




*Student response to "A Little History of Cork" talks. Lecturer: James Cronin (UCC); Designers: Therese Cooper (Cork Prison) and Debbie Dawson supported by the Arts Council of Ireland. The response highlights the interplay between space and memory (Photography by Therese Cooper, reproduced with permission of Cork Prison, 2021).*

**Look Closer:**  
**What does the outlined head superimposed on a street plan represent to you?**





*General view of the exhibition space in Fort Mitchell, Spike Island for the annual exhibition of the artworks produced in the Education Unit, Cork Prison. This exhibition takes place in the former cells in the "young offenders" prison, closed in 2004.  
(Photography by Therese Cooper, reproduced with permission of Education Unit, Cork Prison, 2021).*

## Further Reading

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The Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program, The Inside-Out Center, Temple University, Philadelphia <https://www.insideoutcenter.org/about-inside-out.html>

Visual Thinking, ProjectZero, Harvard Graduate School of Education <http://www.pz.harvard.edu/projects/visible-thinking>

## About the Authors

**Therese Cooper** is an Art educator in the Education Unit in Cork Prison since 1994. She teaches Ceramics and has a keen interest in fostering Art practice as a tool for critical thinking strategies.

**James Cronin** is College Lecturer in Teaching and Learning Enhancement in the Centre for the Integration of Research, Teaching & Learning, University College Cork. He is a recipient of a Teaching & Learning Research and Enhancement Award (2018) and Teaching Excellence Award (2018), University College Cork, both awarded for collaborations with prison educators to promote critical thinking strategies through the Arts and Humanities in a non-traditional learning community. He has research interests in critical pedagogy and emancipatory education in theory and practice.



Therese Cooper, Education Unit, Cork Prison and James Cronin, University College Cork, share their experiences of a community learning partnership. This booklet represents artworks produced during this learning partnership process to reflect on art-making as thinking made visible.

<https://sites.google.com/view/james-g-r-cronin/home>

