

Transformative Learning through University and Prison Partnerships: Reflections from “Learning Together” Pedagogical Practice

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Abstract: *This paper critically discusses two London-based “Learning Together” prison university partnerships—Middlesex University with Her Majesty’s Prison (HMP) Wandsworth and London South Bank University (LSBU) with HMP Pentonville. The paper documents how students experienced the shared classroom learning approach designed on principles of “transformative pedagogy”, and how students interpret their personal development and the knowledge and skills gained as a result. We share the steps taken to bring the learning together pedagogical philosophy to life and use evidence from module evaluation findings and critical reflections to demonstrate the transformations that happen. We interpret our findings through the lens of a transformative ripples model. In addition to exploring personal transformation, the wider transformations that occur within the public institutions at the centre of these collaborations—the prisons and the universities—are discussed. We argue that for prison and university partnerships to be truly effective, they must embed transformative pedagogic practices at their heart, ensuring the “how” we teach is as important, and deliberately considered, as the “what” we teach.*

Keywords: *Prison education, transformative pedagogy, prison–university partnerships, experiential learning, social justice education, prisons*

The UK is currently seeing expansion in the development of prison–university education partnerships in the way community-based students are brought together to learn alongside in-prison students. These are styles of classroom knowledge exchange that encourage active participation and nurture dynamic processes of self-realisation. They are collaborations specifically intent on developing mutually beneficial exchange for the students taking part and the prisons and universities involved. Moreover, they are collaborations that can have impacts for wider social change. The growth in prison–university partnerships currently occurring in the UK can be linked to the government’s ambition to improve the provision of education in prisons both at the compulsory curriculum level and at the higher university level (Coates, 2016; Gauke, 2018). These partnerships can also be connected to understandings of prison “rehabilitation” and the factors that most successfully assist reintegration into the community on release. It is shown that engagement in education while in prison is linked to lower rates of re-offending (Davis et al., 2013; Ministry of Justice, 2011; Ministry of Justice, Government of the United Kingdom, Justice Data Lab and Prisoners’ Education Trust, 2014) and greatly improves chances of entering employment on leaving prison.

The aims of this paper are to critically discuss the delivery of two prison-based modules founded on the shared classroom design and pedagogic practice of the learning together. The module Contemporary Issues in Criminal Justice was delivered by Middlesex University in HMP Wandsworth prison (January–May 2017) and the Education as Social Justice module was taught by London South Bank University (LSBU) in



HMP Pentonville prison (September 2016–January 2017). The partnerships come under the umbrella of the *Learning Together* network led by Amy Ludlow and Ruth Armstrong since the collaboration of Cambridge University and HMP Grendon in place from 2015 (Armstrong and Ludlow, 2015). Transformative learning is an underpinning principle of the learning together model in that it is learner-centered, participatory, and interactive. Classroom participation and dialogue are core features of the learning and teaching approach.

For the academic year 2018–19, 24 universities and 23 prisons are partnered together delivering 31 different courses. Geographically, Learning Together courses are run throughout England, with clusters in Cambridge, London and the North West of England. The majority of the partnerships have been in place for between two and three years. A number of the modules are running as first-time pilot projects, but many are in their second and third year of delivery. A second Middlesex–Wandsworth module was delivered between October 2018 and January 2019. Nearly half (46%) of the courses being delivered within the network are Criminology focused (Learning Together Network, 2018a). The authors of this paper led the delivery of the modules in the two London prisons comprising groups of community-based and in-prison students.

In this paper, we document how students experienced the shared learning approach designed on principles of *transformative pedagogy*, and how they interpreted their personal self-development and the knowledge and skills gained as a result. The discussion reflects on the common pedagogical practice that is grounded in the values of the wider learning together approach, which endeavors to create high-quality and academically rigorous learning experiences that encourage and support individual, as well as social and institutional transformation. The learning together model is typically narrated as inclusive learning communities with principles of equality and mutual respect reflected in the structures, policies and practice in place.

In this paper, we share the steps taken to bring the learning together pedagogical philosophy to life and use evidence from module evaluation findings and critical reflections to demonstrate the various transformations that happen. The concept “transformative pedagogy” is central to our interpretations (cf. Pompa, 2013a, 2013b). An underpinning framework, or model, applied to the material we present is the metaphor of the *transformative ripple*. This is useful to convey how, by planting the foundations of an enriching and empowering education base, other important social values emerge, which become shared within, and beyond the classroom. The paper demonstrates the wider value and benefits that emerge through this ripple-like effect as the impact and influence of the learning approach filters out beyond the student learners and the teachers immediately involved. Both the community-based and in-prison students reported significant alterations to their sense of self-determination and confidence as a result of participating in this shared class teaching model. As a knock-on effect, aspirations and goals for the future are reimaged (cf. Werts, 2013). Thus, we critically discuss the nature of *transformation* itself: What is it that is changing as a result of the conditions created, and what is the wider impact that can be deduced from this transformative ripple model? This is an underpinning research question of this paper.

A key organising concept of the learning together approach is transformative pedagogy and the way special attention is paid to *how* people teach and learn. Classroom participation and dialogue are core features of this pedagogical practice. In this way, students are contributing to the co-creation of knowledge that draws from the exchange of different perspectives and ideas among a diverse, mixed group of learners. We argue that for prison and university partnerships to be truly effective, they must embed transformative pedagogic practices at their heart, ensuring the *how* we teach is as important, and deliberately considered, as the *what* we teach.

In addition to exploring personal growth, we discuss the changes that can occur within the public institutions at the centre of these collaborations—the prisons and the universities. A second underpinning question of this paper therefore is: Through these enriching higher education experiences, can universities go further, in their role as public institutions, to extend values of social inclusion? Removing barriers to higher education can contribute more widely to social change and social justice.

The Learning Together network and the other prison university initiatives emerging in the UK are part of a more extensive prisons–university educational movement.¹ These emulate and borrow from programmes established in the USA such as the *Inside-Out* programme operating from Temple University, Philadelphia since 1997 and the “Prisons-to-College Pipeline” project in John Jay College of Criminal Justice, New York

(Halkovic et al., 2013). Other international initiatives include the “African Prison Project”, “The Prison Education Project” and “Project Rebound” (Champion, 2018), illustrating the growing popularity of prison education. These partnerships go beyond the standardized lower-level literacy and numeracy courses and core curriculum teaching that make up education provision in English and Welsh prisons. Further, they add a different dimension to the distance learning model of the Open University (OU) degree courses accessible in English and Welsh prisons. Specifically, this is in the way partnership courses are delivered through face-to-face, in-class teaching in the same format as conventional university teaching and that comprise in-prison and community-based students learning together.

Transformative Pedagogy

Transformation is a key concept in interpretations of teaching and learning journeys and is applied extensively in analysis of prison education that brings community-based students into prisons to learn alongside in-prison students. Theories of transformation, in this context, make reference to the personal individual transformations that occur, as well as the wider societal, community and institutional changes that can happen. Armstrong and Ludlow (2016) suggest by bringing prisons to the outside community, and the outside community into prisons; in essence delivering *education across walls*, acts of wider social responsibility, societal awareness and acceptance of prisoner rehabilitation and reintegration is enhanced. Darke and Aresti (2016), writing from their experience of running a university prison partnership say, “it not only provides an enriching educational experience, but transcends social barriers and changes the ways that participants can view themselves and the world around them” (p. 31). Similarly, authors writing on the Inside-Out programme, collated in *Turning Teaching Inside-Out* (2018), report on the transformative effects, relating it to the individual change it brings, the values of social change it contributes to, and the institutional impacts it has on universities and prisons. Pompa (2013b), the founder of the USA Inside-Out programme, states it “moves beyond the walls that separate us. In a more literal sense, it moves, actually, *through* the walls. It is an exchange, an engagement—between and among people who live on both sides of the prison wall...” (p. 133). Bumiller (2013) also writing on Inside-Out states “testimonials from both inside and outside students often report ‘life changing’ effects of participating in a course, such as finding a direction in the pursuit of social justice or renewing their commitment to higher education” (p. 178). These themes are drawn out further in our paper.

Different terms are used in reference to the combined community and in-prison student groups in prison university programmes such as *inside* and *outside* students or *in-prison* and *community-based* students. In this paper we adopt the terms community-based and in-prison students.

Prison–University Collaborations in Context

The university and prison educational partnerships emerging across the UK can be linked to the general drive for better educational provision within prisons, as well as the benefits from building and investing in these organisational relationships. Internationally, there is widespread recognition of the importance of providing meaningful education in prison (Champion, 2018), provided by the Council of Europe Recommendations 1989 (Council of Europe, 1990) and echoed by the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (2015), known as the Mandela rules. The Council of Europe particularly note that education in prison should be “no less important” than education provided in the outside community (p. 11), and indeed, should “resemble adult education outside prison” (p. 13). Costelloe and Warner (2014), in their analysis of “Prison Education Across Europe”, argue that if learning is grounded in an adult-education philosophy, it “offers a far richer and more authentic form of education” and as such, “can facilitate changes in a learner’s perception, attitudes and world view that are more likely to be truly transformative and lasting” (p. 175).

Following this global trend, in line with evidence on the effectiveness of prison education on recidivism rates (Champion, 2018), UK prison and university partnerships can be discussed within ideas that those who are incarcerated should be able to build necessary skills and competences that facilitate re-entry and inclusion in society upon release. The Coates report (2016) *Unlocking Potential* called for improved prison education highlighting that education provides “the chance to re-enter society successfully, to find work, to

live fulfilling lives” (p. i). Indeed, Coates acknowledged the value of higher education in prison and went further by calling for prison–university projects to be more than “isolated initiatives” and for higher education institutes (HEIs) and universities to ensure “pathways are facilitated for prison learners to gain access to college or university on release” (p. 55). This philosophy is advocated by the Council of Europe’s recommendations (15 and 16) that the outside community should be involved as fully as possible in prison education and that measures should be taken to enable those in prison to continue their education after release (1990).

The significantly lower rates of re-offending among those who participate in education while in prison was mentioned earlier. The USA longitudinal “Three-State Recidivism Study”, consisting of a treatment (involvement in correctional education) and a comparison group (no involvement), showed lower rates of recidivism by those who participated, in terms of re-arrest, re-conviction and re-incarceration (Streurer et al., 2003). The meta-analysis of educational programmes for incarcerated adults by Davis et al., (2013) found that people who participated in education in prison were 43% less likely to recidivate than those who did not.

More recent ministerial statements relating to prison reform and education in England and Wales were made by Justice Secretary David Gauke in May 2018. Similar to Coates, Gauke paid particular regard to prisoner re-entry and reintegration on release from prison and acknowledged the importance of access to education and employability skills saying prison should be “a turning point” where “the first step is education” (Ministry of Justice, 2018).

Discussions on the state of prison education in the justice system of England and Wales can therefore be located within the prison reform agenda under government scrutiny, albeit interrupted, and arguably with insufficient progress, since its initial announcement in 2016. The *Prison Safety and Reform* White paper (Ministry of Justice, 2016) set out ambitions for reform and in 2016, six prisons across England and Wales were “re-rolled” as “reform prisons”.² Intended as models of radical reform, these empowered prison governors with devolved budgets and autonomy, so improvements could be made more effectively within individual prisons. HMP Wandsworth was designated as one of the six reform prisons. The Middlesex–Wandsworth partnership was established during this period of internal change along with HMP Wandsworth’s desire to make available a greater breadth of education to the people in their prison. Indeed, amongst the ambitious, yet in part, contentious reform prisons management policy, HMP Wandsworth lost its designated status. This is too complex to discuss here, but it must be noted, reform and continued improvement is an ongoing institutional priority. Political upheaval as a result of the EU Referendum and *Brexit* and the subsequent dissolution of Parliament on 3 May 2017 caused a halt on the meaningful continuation of the prisons reform policy as envisaged in the 2016 White Paper, and the criminal justice system of England and Wales has a long way to go to fulfil its stated ambitions.

The HMPs Wandsworth and Pentonville Learning Together Courses

The following section provides a brief description of the two prisons in which our modules were delivered, an overview of module content, the students participating, and their motivations to take part in the learning together teaching and learning style.

HMPs Wandsworth and Pentonville are combined category B and C adult male prisons in London.³ Both prisons were built in the mid-1800s and hold populations in excess of 1000 men.⁴ Both are *local prisons* designed to accommodate people serving *short sentences* and are close to courthouses in which trials are scheduled to take place with transfers out to other prisons. As such, the two prisons in which our courses were delivered, operate with highly transient populations. The average stay for a person in HMP Pentonville is approximately 60 days (HMIP, 2017, p 5). The transient populations inherent in both prisons was a challenge in terms of ensuring the in-prison students remained in residence long enough to complete the modules. A number of the Wandsworth students requested to be put “on hold” so they could complete the course before transfer. This in itself placed great responsibility on the course conveners to provide a valued and meaningful educational experience that outweighed the option of transferring to a less crowded, more appropriate prison environment.

The Contemporary Issues in Criminal Justice module delivered in Wandsworth mirrored the criminal justice course teaching at Middlesex University. The module was run over ten weeks in 40-minute subject-

specific lectures given by Middlesex academics with subjects explored and debated in small focused group discussions led by a team of group facilitators. Topics included crime and deviance, youth justice, court sentencing, desistance theories, comparative international prison perspectives and race and the criminal justice system.

Sixteen students completed the module; nine in-prison and seven community-based students. The Middlesex community-based students were candidates in law, politics and criminology. Six were female and one male, which broadly reflects the gender balance of Social Science students generally. The main interest in taking part was linked to the experience of studying in a prison setting. A core feature of studying criminology is to appreciate the complex and nuanced nature of crime and offending, and having the chance to engage in what was referred to as an “immersive” learning experience, was highly regarded. The Middlesex students especially commented on the rewarding opportunity they had been given to learn alongside people in prison. Advancing knowledge by applying theoretical learning to real life was also an incentive. To them, this was an enriching experience they emphasized could never be achieved through any subject expert, or specialist criminal justice texts. These benefits are summed up in the following comments provided by Middlesex participants:

Overall I think it was fantastic. ...one of the main things that drew me to it was the fact that it was going to be this very immersive experience that had two elements of society that don't necessarily overlap very frequently. (Middlesex University)

“It was an invaluable lesson being with those that have been through the criminal justice system...we wouldn't have had this any other way” (Middlesex University).

“This kind of experience is not replaceable...from talking to those students (Wandsworth)...that is something I could never get from a book...” (Middlesex University).

Interests also related to gaining employment within the criminal justice system, with this seen as experience that would facilitate it, in addition to the way this type of opportunity could enhance already established professional practice skills. Two community students were developing specialisms in *restorative justice* approaches, and one had for many years worked with homeless and young adults. Sadly, there are many overlaps among these groups with imprisonment experiences. Shay (2018), reflecting on her experience of running a version of the Inside-Out programme, similarly set out the particular usefulness studying a course of this nature has for law school students, in the way it involved more nuanced discussions about certain criminal justice topics (p. 248).

The main motivations for the Wandsworth in-prison students to take up this shared classroom opportunity included keenness to study at the level of university education with a special interest in criminology as a subject. A few expressed the wish to understand the criminal legal process with more clarity, with topics such as court sentencing and the disparity in sentence lengths between offence types of particular interest. Comparative prison systems were also subjects they were keen to hear about. The Wandsworth in-prison students viewed the contribution they could make to a criminology module as valuable in the way personal life experiences could illuminate the theoretical perspectives applied in studies of criminal justice. One young man expressed this in the following comment:

“I feel there are many contentious issues that have not been addressed or are pending that need to be brought to light about the prison system.”

The Wandsworth in-prison students came from a range of educational backgrounds with a mixture of those leaving school without formal qualifications, and those achieving GCSEs, A Levels and bachelor's degrees prior to prison.⁵ Three were currently studying *Open University* (OU) courses by distance learning and felt our weekly class-based sessions helped with that learning.

The “Education for Social Justice” module delivered in HMP Pentonville was linked to the Education faculty of LSBU and focused on how education is used as a tool for social change and the factors that can influence that. The history of education, the different learning theories, and the use of technology in education were covered in this course. The partnership developed as a result of the prison wishing to explore a prison–university course outside of the traditional criminology subjects that are typically taught within these progra-

mmes. Twenty-four students completed the module: 12 LSBU students and 12 Pentonville students. The LSBU students were on an Education Studies programme comprising *traditional* undergraduate students, plus work-based students. The work-based students (four of the 12) were employed in nursery, primary and secondary school settings and attended LSBU one day a week on an accelerated study programme. Ten of the 12 students were female. Akin to the Social Sciences, this is the typical gender balance among students on Education Studies degree programmes in the UK. Similar to the Wandsworth cohort, and in-prison populations more generally, a wide range of educational backgrounds were reflected, including those who left formal education before secondary school and others who had completed a degree prior to their prison sentence.

The delivery of the modules in both institutions carried the same academic expectations of university level tuition, with formal processes of assessment and achievement expected. A strength of the learning together approach is embedding academic rigour. Both modules finished with a celebration event where students completing the courses were able to recognise their achievements in front of friends and family.

Transformative Pedagogy in Practice

Before discussing our findings in detail, this section describes how Learning Together courses utilise an approach of transformative pedagogy in the classrooms they create. A working definition of pedagogy is the science of the art of teaching (Pollard, 2011). Particular attention is paid to the mechanisms and practical approaches that are employed to create purposeful learning environments which, in turn, facilitate transformation. In the context of transformative learning, learning together draws heavily on the work of Mezirow (1997), whereby transformation is defined as “the process of effecting change in a frame of reference” (p. 5). The process of personal change occurs when students are provided with alternative frames of reference and a new lens through which to view the world. Learning can be said to be transformative when a person has the opportunity to form and re-form meaning as an ongoing and iterative process. It is learning that is dynamic and evolving, where the roles of student and teacher are interchangeable and interlinked (Taylor, 1998). By placing particular emphasis on the contribution adult learners can make in the classroom, their experience and pre-existing knowledge acts as a valuable starting point for future transformation (Dirkx, 1998).

The chance for students to engage in critical self-reflection is a key feature of transformative learning theory. However, the process of learner transformation is not linear, does not happen at the same rate for all students, and the resulting transformation can be difficult to measure and evaluate. In the analysis presented in this paper, we are exploring transformation in terms of the pedagogy developed and embedded in our prisons learning. That is, the explicit tools and teaching techniques used in the Learning Together classroom, which facilitate self-reflection and recognition of how the learning is changing one’s capabilities. More recent definitions of transformative learning explore the reimagining of “identity” as a hallmark of transformation (Illeris, 2014), which is particularly relevant in the context of the learning together approach. This is explored further later on in this paper.

A Transformative Toolkit

Transformative learning assumes that learning is a social process and as such is built on social constructivist models developed by key theorist Lev Vygotsky (1986). Social constructivism focuses on the role of language in learning and how the social interactions between peers, and more experienced others, combine to support a learner to extend their knowledge and understanding (Mujis and Reynolds, 2018). This learning theory is also aligned to the critical pedagogy approach advocated by Friere (1972), which places dialogue as the most important tool in the classroom.

In the learning together context, transformative pedagogy is learner-centred, participatory and interactive, therefore a range of tools and techniques are employed that help foster a transformative learning culture. These tools and techniques have a common purpose, which is to develop and support effective dialogue between learners and is central to the learning approach we apply (cf. Darder et al., 2009).

It is important to describe the specific tools and techniques employed within our prison courses, as assumptions are often made about broad approaches such as *inclusion* without due regard paid to the teaching practice

that enables it to truly happen. The pedagogic tools employed in both of our Learning Together courses align specifically with the methods employed by Kilgore (2011) in his account of bringing critical pedagogic practice into a prison education environment. The careful selection of such methods is a means to enable student autonomy, engagement and dialogue—all central features of transformative learning.

In tune with referring to tools and techniques, the following section describes the key components of the “transformative toolkit” as we refer to it. This places emphasis on the “authentic learning space” and the deliberately structured class sessions we design. The authentic learning space refers to creating an accessible and inclusive learning environment and is achieved in a range of specific ways sensitive to the context in which the teaching is being delivered and molded to our student audience. As part of this authentic learning space, the use of effective questioning to support class dialogue and debate is crucial and was planned into each week’s class session. In the context of our courses, this is to maintain focus on the social and criminal justice subjects under discussion and to maximize subject comprehension. Importantly, however, it has particular relevance for making sure sessions do not stray into conversation areas that objectify the in-prison students with their personal experiences. Moreover, valuing the students’ ideas and contributions is built into the small group discussion format and reiterates the culture of respect. The learning together approach empowers students to take risks with their learning, pushing them outside of their usual comfort-zone, which is the very essence of transformation (Maguire, 2016).

The close planning and structuring of our teaching and learning sessions with the aims of each session explicitly set out, embraces the diverse learning needs of the student group. As part of the planning process, establishing clear expectations for learning is also a consistent tool, avoiding assumed knowledge, particularly for those who may have had negative experiences of education (Kilgore, 2011). Paying due consideration to effective working arrangements, designing the classroom space so that students can engage in dialogue and hold open and exploratory conversations within small groups, is another important method in a transformative learning approach (Cranfield, 2016). This is particularly important when students are discussing life experiences, and pays attention to the sensitive nature of the dialogue. With this in mind, establishing clear boundaries and high levels of confidentiality and trust between students is essential and is agreed and developed in the initial set-up. Establishing this atmosphere is a key intention of the learning together style and is put in place by the students themselves, in the way boundary-setting and establishing trust and parity is agreed at the beginning of the modules.

Methods

The following critical discussions of individual and institutional transformation are founded on reflections of our experiences in setting up and implementing the prison courses, as well as the immediate outcomes and effects felt by the students, and the staff more widely involved. The findings based on the Middlesex University–Wandsworth prison course are drawn from a formal process and outcome evaluation carried out during the course delivery (see Ward, Gray and Cracknell, 2017). The evaluation used a combination of methods, such as one-to-one student interviews and interviews with Middlesex lecturers, group facilitators and Wandsworth education staff. A fieldwork diary was also kept which documented the many and various discussions held during the setting up and implementation stages of the module. As the teaching style was a new undertaking for Middlesex University and Wandsworth Prison, a dynamic process of reflexivity was necessary. Documenting detail and nuance was an important part of the process. Classroom observation also formed a valuable method of evaluation. Ethical approval to conduct the evaluation research was granted by the Middlesex University ethics review board and permission given by Her Majesty’s Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) to share the research findings.

Due to resource limitations, a formal evaluation of the LSBU module was not possible, but intrinsic to teaching and learning practice, critical reflection on the teaching was imposed. The Pentonville data is taken from student reflective journals, field notes compiled by the course convenor and feedback comments by visitors to the course through its duration. By collecting and presenting personal stories, a rich narrative is constructed and is used for a fuller understanding of the methodological challenges associated with evaluating transformative learning (Kim and Merriam, 2011).

The “Transformative Ripples Model” in Action

When reflecting on the evaluations undertaken of our two modules, common themes emerged in the way transformation happens on a personal, individual basis, and on a social and institutional basis. We use a transformative ripple model to illustrate the impacts. Pompa (2013a) similarly referred to the “ripple” effect when discussing the Inside-Out programme and the wider impacts taking place from this style of shared learning. She gave examples of the “rippling” out expansions in the form of more “classes, think tanks, regional development and alumni activity” stating “the effects of this vibrant program are rippling in ever-widening circles” (p. 123). We develop the ripple model further by adding student voices which captures the transformative effects that happen when a pedagogical approach based on how students really learn, is embedded. If we consider the pedagogy we apply as a pebble dropped into a pond, the impact of the approach has various circular outward ripples as outlined below:

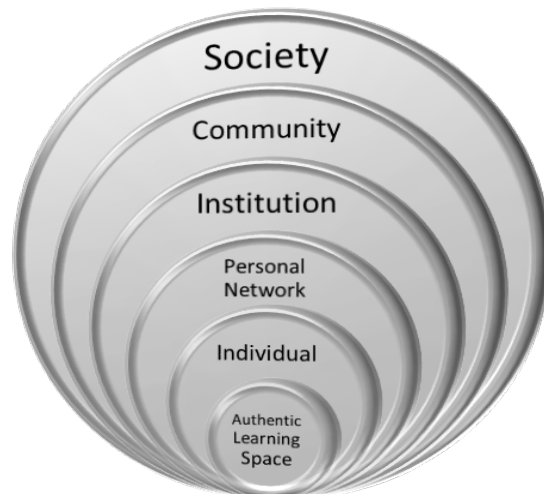


Figure 1. Transformative ripples associated with prisons university learning

Each of these is considered using evidence from our formal evaluation and critical reflections. As set out in Figure 1, the transformative ripples model begins with the authentic learning space, the classroom space we deliberately created to achieve the optimum conditions to foster student confidence. This ripples out from the individual learner to the students’ personal networks including family, friends and peers, before extending further to the universities and prison institutions involved. As the ripples become wider, but indeed less explicitly transformative, the community and societal level impact of this type of course design can also be considered. Whilst we acknowledge this level of transformation is hardest to capture, and difficult to illustrate with hard evidence, the critical reflection within our research indicates the real possibility for changes at the community and societal level.

Individual personal transformations and the authentic learning space. Both sets of students, prison and community-based, enthusiastically reflected upon the atmosphere created by the authentic learning space, the first drop in our transformative ripples model. Students reported on the positive, enriching experience involvement in the modules gave them, in terms of the interesting and stimulating topics and the in-depth discussions they were able to engage in within the format of the small mixed groups. Both the in-prison and community-based students commented on the unique opportunity sharing a learning space with people from different backgrounds to their own and exchanging knowledge and experience through dialogue gave. The small group discussions were particularly appraised as helping to test their held ideas and perspectives, knowing their contributions were valued, even if they were to be challenged and scrutinized by the other students.

The sense of satisfaction the learning together shared classroom approach embeds, that in turn helped students find their confidence and strengthen self-belief, were communicated with several student comments, such as the following:

“I like the fact that prisoners can integrate with university students. It creates a very good blend of knowledge and experience and also promotes a very positive environment to learn in.”

Similar sentiments were aired by the Pentonville in-prison students:

The course has been exciting and inspiring. The group work brought the best out of each and every one of us. There was an amazing exchange of knowledge amongst the group and it revealed the different skills that each individual brings to the table.

The cohesion and confidence established early on within the learning space was pivotal for students to put forward their opinions in a relaxed, non-judgmental way, allowing for the dynamic interrogation of ideas. A number of students, particularly the in-prison group, expressed thoughts on their own personal transformation as “personal growth” and as part of a “journey” with feelings of achievement and pride. The journey was not only from an emotional viewpoint, but also in the practical sense of gaining new skills, or building upon existing ones, that could be put towards further study and future employment. One Pentonville student reflected on the changes that had occurred in him personally in regard to inspiring ideas for future study: “I would describe my experience on the course as a brilliant eye opener. I’ve really enjoyed learning again and hope to use this as a platform to further my education.”

Student reflections also centred on points such as the sense of challenge and achievement they were taking from participating in university-level teaching and learning modules. The university-style environment, with specialist lectures, academic journal readings, set critical questions and the small group discussions, were particularly noted as part of the positive, enriching educational experience. It gave a chance to test and validate their capabilities at this higher level of learning and related to the structured sessions and guided critical questioning we set in place. By presenting a set of questions for discussion, independent student thinking is promoted, and the development of critical perspectives is supported. This is in the way students are encouraged to challenge existing perceptions and draw connections between the academic reading and personal experience. Questions such as the following are put forward: “How do the author’s arguments compare with last week’s reading?”, “How does the author draw their conclusions?”, “How does this compare to other reading you have done?”, “To what extent do you agree with their conclusions? Why? Why not?”

Appreciation was expressed at the sense of inclusion the classroom space garnered. This sense of inclusion and acceptance was uniquely powerful and expressed in the way “the university accepted us as one of them”. One student commented on the enriching experience of “studying in a normal environment”. The comments made in this regard can be interpreted from a perspective that it is the university as an entity that is viewed as accepting of people like them who were imprisoned at least in the present period. Indeed, feelings of stigma and concerns of social exclusion from societal opportunities on release from prison is a great concern, and the degree of humanity experienced within these courses went some way towards hope for the future. In some regard it can be linked to notions of identity and shaping new or rediscovered identities as students (cf. Clarke, 2016).

In exploring the concept of individual transformation, and in response to the question on the overall feeling students had been left with at the end of the course, one in-prison student who reported a fragmented early education expressed pride in himself for succeeding in the module: “I’m proud of myself for doing it.” The power of education was apparent within many of the comments connected to feelings of “building confidence and self-esteem” and developing “a good sense of achievement” and “a sense of self-belief.” These are important attributes for all student learners, but for some of the in-prison students who had not previously experienced education in any satisfying way, the learning together approach, intent on embedding empowerment and self-belief, is likely to have had an enduring impact. This aligns with the accepted notion that education is an empowering tool and is central to the critical pedagogy developed by Paulo Freire. This underpins both transformative pedagogy and the values of the Learning Together network: “What the educator does in teaching is to make it possible for the students to become themselves” (Horton and Freire, 1990, p. 181).

With regards to the aim that involvement in the module can transform and shape future aspirations, many of the students talked about how the courses made them want to further their studies, or that it had given them ideas for future employment that would not otherwise have occurred. One Wandsworth student now has ideas to combine his accountancy background with statistical analysis of criminal justice data, for the employment options it could open up. This student stood out for the academic ability he already held, but other students noted how the opportunity to access education at this higher level had given them techniques

to reflect on what they could do, and how it could be applied in terms of future employment. One young man, now undergoing his second long spell in prison, had been moved to thoughts of employment in helping young people, saying “I want to help young people...guiding them using my own experiences”.

Transformation “rippling” out to personal networks. With reference to the next ripple within our model, we found a wider impact on the personal networks of those involved. These included peers based in the prison, among the university community, friends and family and other members of their close networks, as well as the education staff within the prisons, prison staff and university colleagues.

For the in-prison students, the effects as they ripple out to their personal networks were immediately felt within the general prison environment when they returned from their weekly courses. A number of students remarked the module sparked interesting and spirited discussions “on the wings” that were a welcome departure from the usual prison conversations. A Wandsworth in-prison student noted the different reception from his prison peers as a consequence of studying and doing well on the Learning Together course. He mentioned how others saw a difference in him which in a way can be linked to a reshaped identity as a university student. This was perhaps more emphatically endorsed due to achieving this success while mastering English as a second language. Werts (2013), in his writing on studying an Inside-Out course in Graterford Prison, Pennsylvania, similarly noted the ripple out impact from the class: “The energy generated in the class carried over into the prison, where men were studying together, competing for the best grade against each other, and having positive impacts on their peers” (p. 138).

These ripples outwards, and their effects, can be linked to notions of identity transformation. Clark (2016) writes on the change in identity that prison education can bring, discussing the way engaging in education in prison can help to shape self-identities that go beyond being “a prisoner”. Clark draws from the desistance writings of McNeil (2012), setting out how “the identities and narratives in prison reinforce a prisoner’s criminal identity (the term ‘offender’, a prison number, the subject of a narrative around risks of offending and its mitigation), rather than promoting any prosocial positive alternatives” (p. 4). As one Wandsworth student noted, “I have never really given myself an identity. I suppose I am a student”.

Several of the Wandsworth students not only commented on their own feelings of accomplishment from completing the module, but also the pride of their families. For some students this was particularly meaningful. It is true many people in prison have experienced disrupted, problematic family backgrounds and for whom demonstrating young adult success and receiving sufficient parental attention has had no place to emerge. One student in this category noted how pleased his father was which he said made him “feel good about myself” and was uniquely powerful in terms of the impact this course was having on personal self-fulfillment. This family pride was particularly felt at the end of course celebration when students, along with their family and friends, the group facilitators, lecturers, prison and education staff and wider university colleagues, gathered together in the graduation-style event to celebrate students’ successful participation and completion of the modules.

The importance of family support and the acceptance towards people being released from prison is recognised in criminal justice policy documents and reform proposals as essential in the rehabilitation and reintegration process (Ministry of Justice, 2014; Ministry of Justice, 2016; Cameron, 2016; Gove, 2016). This is also supported by literature on desistance theories and the crucial role of families as effective social bonds for reducing reoffending (Sampson & Laub, 1993, 2001; Brunton-Smith & McCarthy, 2017).

The deeper and wider penetration the Learning Together course was having, which can be linked to notions of social change, related also to the nature of discussions the community-based students were having with peers, friends and family. They talked about conversations they held, in which assumptions and stereotypes could be challenged and narrow fixed views held about people in prison and their intellectual capabilities, could be confronted. One Middlesex student commented on the nature of the conversations she had been drawn into:

It opens up this great conversation about how useful and kind of wonderful a programme like this in terms of ... breaking down barriers and creating commonality. For me, it’s been the great basis for larger conversations about criminal justice and the way we perceive people who are incarcerated. (a Middlesex University student)

This was added to by another community-based student who came from a different cultural background and one where imprisoned people are afforded few rights. He himself took time to alter his perceptions of the capability and potential of people in prison. His comment illustrates the power of how education can change attitudes, and world view as mentioned earlier:

I told him [flatmate] “those gentlemen are very clever, they are so clever. They understand the articles and the readings very fast.” I would say “they surprised me a lot because they talked about those theories... knowledge through their own experience and they even extend that knowledge to something that I am not so familiar”. So, I told him, “do not underestimate anyone because of where they are going and what they experience, no, because they are good and they have such big potential to achieve more than a normal person, even as I do.” (a Middlesex University student)

Institutional transformations. Continuing with our analysis as framed within the transformative ripples model, we turn to discussing the way transformations can occur within the institutions our teaching and learning is rooted within. These are the prison and the university. We consider how the courses generated conversations and institutional debate around the purpose and nature of collaborative prisons and university education.

Notions of institutional transformation could be evidenced in the reactions coming forth from Wandsworth education staff, prison staff, and senior prison governors. They took pride in the progressive approach they were implementing by accepting community-based students into their prison to learn alongside in-prison students. The Wandsworth Prison Governor in post at the start of our module believed collaborative learning with higher education institutions was invaluable in the way it could help people re-establish their lives on release. He tweeted in support of the module: “Proud of this initiative and the learning that will come from it for us, our men, and Middlesex University students”. Also, as the course progressed, reports of its success filtered back to Middlesex University with accompanying pride among senior colleagues supporting the initiative from the outset. It is indeed the case that university students of criminal justice need a broad, informed and compassionate understanding of offender and imprisoned groups. Providing an opportunity for university students to learn alongside the offender groups they are likely to gain employment with, can help nurture the right attitudes of acceptance, belief and respect among future criminal justice practitioners. It is therefore imperative that universities are open to encouraging avenues into these areas of employment, and that the risk and ethical dimensions that need consideration within this work are embraced without institutional fear and overly sensitive interpretations of risk and harm.

With regards to the Middlesex lecturers who taught on the Wandsworth module, all found that extending their teaching practice into a prison-based classroom brought with it professional benefits. Despite teaching criminology for some years, most staff had not been inside a prison. It was evident the value derived from the in-prison teaching experience was transformative in the way staff were introduced to the talent among the in-prison learners and the immediate empowering results this deliberate collaborative teaching and learning style was seen to be having. The following comments given by Middlesex University lecturers draw attention to the unique teaching experience it provided:

“It was an extraordinary teaching experience...one of the most collaborative teaching experiences....”

“Given what we do, engaging with people in the criminal justice system and people on the receiving end of it ... seeks to ground or apply what we do to the real world”.

In this paper we argue that programmes such as the learning together initiative encourages a more pluralistic culture in universities and prisons that can be transformative for the institutions, as well as for the individuals participating. Universities as public services should be committed to being socially inclusive, welcoming students from different and diverse learning backgrounds. Indeed, this is frequently stated in university mission statements via corporate strategic vision documents. Involvement with initiatives of this type are important evidence for universities to demonstrate commitment to “widening participation” agendas currently promoted at the national policy level through the Higher Education and Research Act (2017). Widening participation is defined by removing barriers and facilitating entry for people from non-traditional educational

and social backgrounds and strongly embeds principles of social justice and equality of opportunity and diversity (Thomas et al., 2017).

Community and societal transformation. Within the alterations we could see happening, specifically the way new dialogue about how collaborations between prisons and universities can have far-reaching positive impacts for both, we consider the final stages of the transformative ripples model we apply. This sees the transformative effect rippling out towards the community and society more widely (cf. Pompa, 2013a, 2013b). Societal transformation is, perhaps the hardest to capture and one of the furthest from the pebble of pedagogy. In terms of evidence to illustrate this, it is less tangible than the direct individual and institutional transformations we were able to evidence, but comes from our reflections on the outcomes of both courses. Nevertheless, wider changes and aspirational transformation in society about the role of education in prison and the role universities should take to support positive efforts for social justice are beginning to form. Pompa (2013b) says something metaphorically along the lines of wider societal transformations: “The hope is that, in time, through this exchange, these walls between us, around us, and within us will become increasingly permeable and, eventually extinct—one idea, one person, one brick at a time” (p. 133).

The partnership that occurs between university and prison institutions generates links with other organisations within the community, for example, through external visitors interested in the programmes and local media representatives who become informed, potentially also contributing to changed perceptions of the institutions and people involved in these courses. For example, a visitor to the LBSU–Pentonville project, not directly involved in teaching or in the criminal justice system, but who was keen to learn more about the course by attending a class session, expressed, “Within minutes, I could quickly feel any preconceptions I had subconsciously held, relating to current prisoner education, being totally eradicated. I left the prison feeling both inspired and ‘re-educated’ myself.”

Criminal justice institutions such as prisons should not be viewed as separate entities to the communities in which they are located, but as a part of them, with important opportunities to embrace social justice and inclusion. This was particularly apparent for our two prisons that are set in the heart of London’s residential and business communities, who have much to gain from contributing to community reintegration pathways and utilizing the skill and potential held among prison populations. The results that can emerge from prisons, extending beyond their walls into the community, and the outside penetrating and positively contributing to what goes on in prisons as Ludlow and Armstrong (2015) suggest, is socially transformative. It adds meaning to social responsibility and enhances wider societal awareness.

The ripple effect out towards the community also includes future employers of Learning Together students. Part of the transformative aim of the module, studying within the prison walls, was that it can develop and build upon skills that are transferable and will enhance future employability within the criminal justice system. The inspired learning that emerged from our authentic learning space built this up among our students. The community-based students commented that the collaborative style of learning conducted among a diverse group of people with very different background experiences, helped to develop a set of skills not ordinarily focused on in campus-based classroom learning. A number of the community-based students, both Middlesex and LSBU, expressed the course had generated a heightened interest and aspiration to work with people in prison as a potential career opportunity. Prisons can find it difficult to recruit graduate-level prison officers as the role is not viewed as rewarding in the way it is in other countries such as Norway, for example (Pratt, 2008). The exposure to prison work that our module facilitated, altered notions of what *prison work* entails and how interesting, varied and satisfying it can be. The Prison Service of England and Wales has been shifting their focus to concentrate on graduate recruitment in an attempt to further professionalise the service.

Equally, the possible transformative effects of bringing the *outside* community *in* as part of the Learning Together programme and how this can ripple out to benefits for wider society can be seen in the way one Wandsworth student draws attention to the advantage with seeing people in prison for who they really are, and that is as “normal people”:

People have a different perception of prisoners, but once they get to know us, [we’re] more than that, like friendly people...we’re just normal people at the end of the day [and changing perceptions] will give others a chance, down the line, in employing ex-offenders.

These views are supported, and made all the more powerful, when considering the UK Government discussions on prison reform and the education and employment strategy, in recognising that it, “will help break down both the barriers and the prejudices prisoners have faced” (Gauke, 2018). Government level discussions on prison reform in the English and Welsh system centre on the positive impact prisoners can have within society upon release and the importance of education and employment within prison as pivotal to the way successful reintegration can be achieved. Utilising the existing talent and competence of people in prison, rather than wasting it by denying access to education, is related to these values. This recognition was powerfully articulated at the end of module ceremony by a Wandsworth student, who expressed the collective sentiment of the men and the gratitude they held for being given this educational opportunity: “I want to say thank you to my fellow desisters, not ex-offenders, for proving that we’re an asset to society and not a liability to society.”

This comment raises important critical questions of why such gratitude is expressed when receiving an educational course in prison? Rather than articulations of extreme gratefulness for these one-off experiences of classroom education, the exceptional achievements and contribution people in prison have to offer to wider society should be foregrounded.

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper has set out the transformative pedagogical approach employed by two London Learning Together partnerships. We argue that for prison and university education partnerships to be truly effective, they must embed transformative pedagogic practice at their heart, ensuring that the *how* we teach is as important as the *what* we teach. Our argument has been formulated, and interpreted through a transformative ripples model, to demonstrate what it is that is changing as a result of the pedagogic conditions we created, and the wider impact this approach can have on individual, institutional, and social transformation. This was an underpinning research question. We have considered how transformation can be enacted, through what we call the transformative toolkit, and the extent to which it can be seen. The ripples model demonstrates how far reaching transformation can extend as a result of the prison-university educational partnerships we were involved in. This paper has presented the role of the educator as key to drop the “pebble” that begins the ripple process by creating an authentic learning space and using the right pedagogical tools to nurture confident learning. It is, however, also necessary to reflect on the role of the student in taking responsibility for the way transformation happens. Taylor’s review of transformative theory and practice (1998) encourages practitioners to work collaboratively with students in creating conditions specifically intent on fostering transformative learning. For learning together pedagogic practice, this is an important aspect for sustaining transformative learning opportunities.

Prison and University partnerships, through Learning Together and other collaborative networks, have arguably *raised the bar* for the delivery of higher education in prison, and have highlighted the need for a greater range of higher education offerings. The partnerships that operate as a part of the Learning Together network provide a workable blueprint for the delivery of higher education in prison and have become an important and valuable part of university curriculums. These partnerships, founded on principles of accessibility and inclusion, offer a richer kind of engagement with learning and a wider range of students can gain access to conventional and established forms of teaching and learning (Haggis, 2006).

Establishing programmes that benefit the individual and the institution, and which positively impact on the wider networks of those involved, does not come without its challenges and must be tackled head on for any long-term meaningful benefits to be felt. From our experience of getting the Wandsworth module off the ground, it was clear a programme of this nature needed complete “buy-in” from the top-down in both institutions—the prison and the university. In terms of the prison, a pre-existing relationship with the then governor was the link from which the implementation of our module became possible. In regard to operational management, it would not have been possible to execute the weekly module sessions without members of the education staff facilitating the arrival of the men in the classroom by physically going on to “the landings”, opening cell doors, bringing men from their work places, and so on. It was apparent, just in this small way, that prison policy decisions in terms of staffing levels has a profound effect on the operation of a “purposeful

activity” in prison, which is a central element of prison and rehabilitation reform.

Going forward, as part of wider university learning communities, there is an opportunity for universities to take the lead in establishing and supporting prison to university pathways that is evidently needed. As Coates (2016) requested, Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) and universities should engage with facilitating access for people with prison experiences. She noted voluntary guidelines are in place in respect to the admissions procedures of universities and stated “fair, proportionate and transparent practice” is necessary when assessing the suitability of applicants with criminal records (p. xx.). In May 2018 the UK Universities and Colleges Admissions Services (UCAS) removed the requirement for university applicants to declare previous criminal convictions. This is linked to the “ban the box” campaign taking hold, which is now supported by many employer organisations including the civil service so that applicants are not obligated to declare criminal convictions at the initial recruitment stage of employment. Although the ban the box movement has culminated in government reform so that people do not have to declare their criminal convictions at the initial stage of applying for a university place, there needs to be a cultural shift in how the community, and society more widely views people released from prison. There is a wealth of talent, skill and commitment of those who have spent time in prison that is not being utilized. HMPs Pentonville and Wandsworth are London-based prisons and “pipelines” to London universities can be opened through these prison–university partnerships.

Transformative learning based on the pedagogical practices established by the Learning Together programme have been analysed within the relative short term of their establishment four years ago. The foreseeable transformative effect from a teaching and learning method of the style Learning Together programmes adopt, requires continued self-reflection. In terms of the future, research based on the foundations of this paper and others, needs to extend to analysis on student experience and outcomes for prison learners post-release as they access further study and employment. The future destinations of the university learners need to be examined as well to gauge the longer-term influence programmes adopting this “immersive” approach have. This is in order to understand how, when and why transformative learning experiences translate into positive outcomes.

Our prison–university partnerships within the learning together initiative aimed to provide an accessible and inclusive learning space in which ideas and assumptions were explored among a group of people from different and diverse social backgrounds and life experiences. The pedagogical toolkit on which the modules were based provided an educational experience for all students which is individually transformative in the way it develops self-confidence and purpose, reframing expectations and beliefs and developing future aspirations and goals. From interpreting our findings through the transformative ripples model, evidence from evaluation data and critical reflection, demonstrates the way transformations begin with the individual and filter out towards the institutions in which they are grounded. Moreover, values of acceptance and inclusion are reinforced which can extend beyond to the community and society more widely.

The paper has located the discussion of transformation within the wider prisons policy of England and Wales and argues there is much value to be had in expanding this style of learning and teaching. Prison students have academic capabilities that need to be utilised rather than wasted, and appreciation of the complexities of crime and offending are a compulsory part of criminology course curriculums. As such, it is imperative criminology courses reach beyond campus-based, textbook learning to illuminate the breadth of prison, offender reintegration and community rehabilitation type employment roles that are available. Alongside developing these uniquely beneficial educational programmes, progress needs to be made in the way people with criminal convictions are able to access higher education establishments once they leave prison. Universities and higher education colleges should be committed to developing prison to university pipelines.

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Footnotes

¹ Prison university partnerships are also operating across a number of other universities, such as Durham University since 2014 (Durham University, 2014), and Kent University since 2015.

² The autonomous “reform prisons” were HMP Coldingley, HMP Highdown, HMP Ranby, HMP Holme House, HMP Kirklevington Grange and HMP Wandsworth.

³ Male prisons are organised into four security categories from A-D. According to the Prison Service Instruction (PSI) 40/11, category B prisons are for “whom the very highest of conditions of security are not necessary but for who escape must be made very difficult”. Category C prisons are for those “who cannot be trusted in open conditions but who do not have the resources and will to make a determined escape attempt”.

⁴ Prison population records show Pentonville usually has a daily “roll” of around 1200 men and Wandsworth 1500 (Howard League for Penal Reform, 2018).

⁵ GCSEs and A Levels are the national examination certificates taken in England and Wales. GCSEs (General Certificate of Secondary Education), are taken in several core and chosen subjects, usually at the end of year 11 at the age of 15-16. A levels (Advanced Level) are normally taken, in usually 3-4 chosen subjects, at the end of year 13 at the age of 17-18.

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