

Key learnings

This extended project and collaboration, along with the embedded research have provided an opportunity to deeply reflect on our practices and outcomes. This document summarises our most common learnings, aiming to inspire new thoughts and approaches for future collaborations. While we are not claiming these are brand new findings for applied theatre practice and work with women in the criminal justice system, they represent critical elements worth highlighting.

The Importance of a Trauma and Gender Informed Approaches

A trauma and gender informed approach in a prison setting is essential for several reasons. Many women in the criminal justice system have endured significant trauma, both before and during their time in prison. This trauma often manifests in behaviours that are misunderstood or punished rather than addressed therapeutically. By recognising the lasting impact of trauma, this approach integrates perception and consideration into every aspect of our delivery and is respectful of the participants' childhood and lived experiences.

In adopting a trauma and gender informed approach, we are able to focus on the entire person, moving beyond the women's criminal identity as well as addressing routes to offending behaviour and accountability. It also ensures that our work does not re-traumatise the women by being mindful of common triggers, sensitive themes and challenging ways of working. This practice requires a high level of care, deep listening, and the ability to be fully present, balancing the needs of both individuals and the group. Awareness of previous trauma empowers the delivery team to tackle complex themes courageously and to adapt activities as needed.

The Play Is Not the Thing: Prioritising Process Over Product

One of the most significant insights gained by the delivery team is the critical importance of focusing on the process rather than fixating on the final product or outcome. This method becomes particularly crucial where the ultimate goal is to facilitate personal and collective growth, rehabilitation, and expression rather than simply producing a polished final product. Central to this process-focused approach is the slow and deliberate development of group dynamics and trust. It is essential to create a safe creative space within the prison setting, where participants feel comfortable enough to play, share their stories, and listen to others. This requires a delicate balance of patience and adaptability, as the facilitator must be ready to extend certain moments or pivot to different activities based on the group's immediate needs and responses.

Embracing the process means being attuned to the needs of the women and allowing the work to unfold organically rather than adhering rigidly to pre-set plans. This might involve spending more time on particular exercises that resonate with the group or changing direction entirely. Such flexibility demands a deep level of presence and attentiveness from the facilitator, as they must continually assess and respond to the group's energy and feedback as well as strong co-facilitation and in each other to lead this and go off plan.

By following the "hot spots" illuminated by the participants, the facilitators allowed the process to be shaped by the women's experiences and insights. This women centred approach not only honours their voices and stories, but also ensures that the work remains relevant and meaningful to them.

Prioritising the process over the product empowers the participants, giving them a sense of ownership over the work. It encourages them to engage more deeply, knowing that their contributions and experiences are valued and can influence the direction of the project. This empowerment can lead to profound personal and collective transformations, as the participants discover new aspects of themselves and their capabilities. In this context, the journey itself becomes a powerful and transformative experience, laying the groundwork for enduring change.

The Intensity of Practice in Place-Based Learning

This project posed significant challenges for every team member, whether director, actor, producer, facilitator, academic, or prison worker. Working within the prison walls adds a level of intensity to the roles, bringing you to the core of your craft. The processes of producing, facilitating, and directing are amplified in this environment, primarily because so many elements are beyond your control. Regardless of the planning and preparation, circumstances can change at the last minute in a prison setting.

This environment constantly pushes your practice, demanding flexibility, solution-oriented thinking, and quick decision-making. The vulnerability of the women, the complexities of group dynamics, and the unpredictability of the setting can be challenging. However, this also means that small victories in other contexts can feel monumental here. The potential for learning and growth as an artist in this space is enormous, offering an incredible richness of practice.

Creating a Brave Space for Artistic Risk-Taking

Our sustained partnership has allowed us to establish strong, trust-based relationships, enabling the artists involved to take risks. The project's bold and ambitious nature has encouraged artists to explore new roles and practices. A co-delivery model between artists with varied expertise has been instrumental in facilitating this exploration.

The duration of our collaboration provided the space to experiment with different working models, such as workshoping various films to see which resonated most with the women, exploring intensive delivery models versus weekly practice, and deciding between engaging an entire enterprise (work group) or allowing individual sign-ups from across the prison population. We also tested different creative approaches and timelines, such as when to screen a film or introduce new themes to the creative process. The trust from the prison to allow for trial and error, and importantly, the possibility of failure, was pivotal. This trust was rooted in the shared understanding that the core of all practices was the care for the women. At the heart of this brave space were the women, who embarked on an incredibly courageous journey, exploring these films and their own autobiographies. The ongoing nature of our work meant we could continue to engage with women across projects and integrate a co-researcher element, allowing them to reflect on their experiences with us and help plan the next project for a new group. Placing them at the centre of the delivery, in a position of influence, autonomy, and empathy, offered a powerful contrast to their projected identity as prisoners.

Taking the Time to Witness

In addition to the opportunity to experiment with new ideas, the process of observation and reflection has proven to be invaluable. This has allowed highly experienced artists to take on the roles of researchers or observers as a way of engaging deeply with the practices of others and to sit in the role of learner. This process has been profoundly enriching, fostering an environment where every member of the team has had the opportunity to evolve and refine their artistic practices.

The dedicated time to listen, engage, and co-learn has been crucial, made possible by the team's openness in identifying the areas where they needed to grow. Any traditional project team hierarchies have softened, allowing each individual to lead different aspects of the creative process and equally step back at various points. This shift has not only democratised the exchange of ideas and knowledge but has also empowered everyone to contribute meaningfully, ensuring a more dynamic and collaborative creative journey for all involved. This has been amplified by the position of the student placements from York St. John University who's position moved frequently between co-student alongside the women, to teacher for both the women and the rest of the delivery team as they brought their own practices, like music, into the work. It also is evident in the moments where the women were enabled to lead the space, guiding the work by their reflections on the films and in the moments of witnessing their autobiographies that enabled the team to learn more about women, the criminal justice system and social justice. We had a great deal to learn about them and the films through their creative responses.

This culture of mutual respect, shared leadership and co-learning has not only strengthened individual practices but also created a collaborative space where innovation and creativity can thrive. The blend of experimentation, observation, and shared learning has transformed the artistic journey into a collective experience, where the boundaries between teacher and student blur, and everyone contributes to the evolution of the work.



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