

University of Wales Trinity Saint David
Swansea College of Arts

Practise Based Portfolio
Element Three
Critical Evaluation
ADPA6000

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The four questions I proposed and researched for my literature review were regarding different aspects of offenders/ex-offenders differing treatment received both within and post the prison service. The areas researched were social skills, personal skills, transformative environments and learning skills. My overarching aim was to identify how to best help offenders/ex-offenders reintegrate into society with specific reference to building more positive personal relationships. Firstly, I contacted Jennifer Walmsley regarding what kind of resources were available to those both within and leaving prison. I was also interested in best practice for workshops other progressive programmes she had used. Secondly, I talked to an independent evaluator and researcher called Alex Russell who works with BareFaced Theatre Company on evaluating their projects. The process she employs is to gather all the information from the project and then writes up a report on how the project went ready for BareFaced Theatres website. This evidence is then used to best plan and accommodate the needs of the offenders/ex-offenders for up-and-coming theatre workshops. Thirdly, I interviewed a creative probation worker called Pauline Gulliver who runs an independent women's probation group who has collaborated with BareFaced Theatre Company on their Creating Change Programme. In her role as a probation officer, she oversaw different programmes and the effectiveness of these on women offenders/ex-offenders one of which was the Creating Change programme delivered by the BareFaced Theatre Company. Lastly, I talked to an ex-offender who answered my proposed questionnaire this gave me a direct insight into the real-life problems faced by offenders/ex-offenders on release from prison.

Transformative learning environments –

While interviewing Alex Russell the independent evaluator and researcher she mentioned that introducing transformative environments and learning with the offenders/ex-offenders is key. She said that just even the act of shaking their hands and giving them eye contact while greeting them is transformative as while in prison they are denied their touch and sense of individuality. Referring back to my literature review a transformative learning environment is something that I looked into. BareFaced Theatre (BFT) programmes aim to educate prisoners in prisons to learn and act equally (Barefaced, 2021) this is something I was aware of however I did not think something as little as shaking their hands and giving eye contact while greeting them could be that transformative to the offender/ex-offender, it is definitely something I will need to be aware of if I run this project in a prison environment in the future. Building trust and a relationship with the prisoners will be something which requires time and a gentle approach, when this has been established then real progress can be made.

During the time I interviewed the probation officer Pauline Gulliver, she mentioned the time that BFT went into her all-women's probation group to run the project Creating Change. Pauline went on to talk about her experience individually but also about one of the participants experiences too. She mentioned how a lady was just turning up to the sessions but was not getting involved. However, as the sessions went on by the fourth session the lady became involved in the workshops with BFT and began to open up about her feelings and emotions. While researching into this field for my literature review, I focused on how it

is difficult to get people to talk about their feelings and emotions. However, in the literature review I mentioned that I believed drama is a great tool to be able to get people to talk about their feelings and emotions and Pauline the probation officer talked about how she thought applied drama helped this lady to open up about how she was feeling. Again, the gentle slow approach will be necessary in the initial stages to build relationships and trust.

Active and Participatory Learning

During the time I was interviewing Jennifer Walmsley the director of BFT. I asked her about what type of drama methodologies she thinks is best for working with offenders/ex-offenders. She went on to talk about how the Geese Theatre Handbook is very helpful. She also mentioned the fact that she uses image theatre and devising. Jennifer talked about how being flexible and adaptable is very important as well as giving the people an opportunity to be heard. Referring back to my literature review I talked about how imagine theatre is a great way to get dialogue going and is great to see things from different perspective. While planning my three workshops that I would have liked to run in the prison I put in an exercise called 'point of view circle' which is a great game for image theatre and a great way to see things from other people's perspectives. This to me shows that I was going along the right lines of how I wanted my project to work. This flexible learning environment gives the participants a chance to explore and thus the learning is more experimental. This informal style can make participants feel more invested in their learning through self-advocacy.

Personal Skills and Social Skills

Personal and Social skills are intrinsically interlinked and at the core of all my intended workshops and the project as a whole.

Both Jennifer and Alex both talked about building trust throughout the whole process of my project. Firstly, they talked about building trust with the prison and how long of a process that is. It took Alex a year to be able to build trust with a prison in England before actually entering the prison itself. Not only would I need to build trust with the prison but also with the offenders inside the prison before even getting to run my workshops. Jennifer mention how she and her co-facilitator would go around each cell individually and introduce themselves. They would then talk about the programme that they are running and would then invite each offender individually. They would hand out leaflets with dates on and then the offenders could sign up in their own time, this then means that they can sit and think about whether they want to take part instead of giving Jennifer a straight answer. While researching into applied drama in prison in all honesty this I not something I thought about. I may have thought about building trust with offenders/ex-offenders in my workshops, but I did not think about building trust beforehand with the prison itself and also the offenders. This is something that I will keep in mind if I ever get a chance to run this project.

Jen and Alex also both mentioned to me that they believe it would be beneficial for me to have a co-facilitator alongside me as the prison environment itself can be very daunting. This can be due to the prison procedures that are in place and the very environment itself.

They believe having someone to vent to after the workshops is a great way to get things off your chest if you ever feel overwhelmed. This is again something I would keep in mind in the future if I ever did run these workshops.

I asked Jen and Alex what BFT's evaluation process is like. Jen went on to talk about how it is mainly questionnaires, 1-10 scales and reflective statements or chats in-between the workshops. Alex had a more in-depth approach to it as it is what she specialises in. She went on to talk about how she is an ethnographic researcher which means the research she does is more qualitative. However, the evaluation methods for BFT are more quantitative rather than qualitative. Hearing all of this made me believe I was along the right lines of how I would evaluate my project and collect all the data as these are evaluation techniques which I am familiar with. Both Jennifer and Alex went on to talk about their Theory of Change in their Creating Change Programme Reports. The Theory of Change outlines the whole project in three different stages, and it is their way of plotting out everything that happened in the programme in three different stages. Jennifer mentioned that they do this so that it is easy for people who are reading the reports to see and understand the process of the whole programme overall and in three different stages. Jennifer mentioned that she wanted the reports to be understandable and accessible for everyone and that is why she has three different versions of the reports too: videos, paper and online. This is defiantly something I need to keep in mind if I run this project as I will want people who are not used to this field of work to understand the type of work I would be doing and also understand the whole process of it.

Having talked to facilitators and an Independent Evaluator and Researcher I felt the next part of my process was to talk to an ex-offender, to better understand their perspectives on the system itself and also their willingness to participate into these types of programmes. The ex-offender that I spoke to wanted to keep his name anonymous. However, this person is a close family member to me, to make sure that the interview was fair I devised a set of questions beforehand that I was going to ask a number of ex-offenders but unfortunately was not able to get in contact with many and another ex-offender did not feel able to contribute at this time. As a facilitator I did not want to just look at it from a professional point of view but also from an offenders/ex-offender' point of view. This interview brought up a wide range of points including the common misconceptions around applied drama and what its intentions are. The interviewee said that if asked to join a drama workshop that he would be reluctant to join in as he is a 'closed book'. Other barriers that may have prevented him from joining the workshops would have been a lack of confidence, difficult family and friend relationships and concerns about being socially involved in group tasks. Coincidentally these are the skills that I would have focused on in the workshops if I were able to run this project in a prison environment. Other concerns that raised with the interviewee were the fact of leaving prison having been in there so long and coming out into the community and back into his family home. He raised the concerns over family and social relationships having changed and also the new home environment had changed too. These concerns and anxieties prevented him from fully appreciating the fresh start he had been given.

Conclusion

After the whole process of researching, interviewing and creating this project I believe I now have a great understanding on what I would need to do to get this project to be successful. Although the researching itself may not have been as informative as I would have liked being able to interview all those people who either specialise in this field or have experienced these situations first hand really gave me a clear understanding of how I would like my project to run in the future.

Bibliography

Barefaced Theatre (2021) *Theatre & Arts for Personal Development and Social Change*.
Available at: <http://www.bearfacetheatre.org> (Accessed: 15th of April 2021)