

Intro

Hello everyone, Today I am going to be giving a short presentation on my book Post a Poem **N**

As part of the Arts in Prisons Module we have been tasked with the creation of a creative resource for use in a scottish prison.

We have spent the last 6 weeks researching the criminal justice system and the role of art within this.

I am going to talk about some of the research that led me to the creation of this resource and what I am attempting to achieve through it's distribution within prisons.

I will then go into more detail of the resource that I have created and talk specifically about some of the decisions I have made within it. **N**

Why im here today

I just wanted to start by talking about the module, why I have chosen to undertake it and a brief overview of some of the learning that I have done over the past seven weeks.

As an artist who works with other people in a socially engaged practice it felt important for me to explore work within a criminal justice context as a way of developing a better understanding of this system, the challenges that the people who live within it are faced with, its larger effects on communities and what my role as an artist could be within all of this.

This comes from my own understanding of the issues that can arise within my own community in regards to prison systems and unfortunately, the tragic possible outcomes for people involved.

As a class we have accessed a wide area of research into prisons and the criminal justice system.

This has ranged from looking critically at prison systems within Scotland as well as systems present in other countries, the role of race within prisons, the effects of prison on families, and the role of arts practices within prison to name a few topics of research. N

Communication

However, I would like to highlight some specific research that relates to communication between prisoners and their family outside of prison as this was the initial research that initiated the thinking process in regards to my creative resource. [N](#)

One of the main issues that COVID presented within prison contexts is that it made it much more difficult for prisoners to have contact with their loved ones due to lock down and quarantine procedures. This is obviously a difficult thing to have to deal with. However, more to this, through researching I found that there was a clear link between family contact and recidivism. [N](#)

I would like to reference a finding from a 2014 ministry of justice report that states

“offenders who maintain family relationships and receive visits while in custody are 39% less likely to reoffend than those who do not receive visits”

As well as lowering re-offending, this communication with family is important for the prisoners well being and mental health. It is important that people in prison feel that they are connected with their families for support.

This communication is also important for the family members outside of prison. The transition to having a family member in prison and the change that has on the family dynamic can be difficult to adjust to, especially for young people.

communication is also difficult outside of COVID times [N](#)

In his ted talk “how storytelling helps parents in prison stay connected to their kids” Alan Crickmore talks about the project Storybook Dads.

Storybook Dads is a project that seeks to connect prisoners with their children by allowing space for prisoners to record and send them stories. Crickmore states: [N](#)

“200,000 children experience the shame and isolation of a parent in prison. That's more than the number of children each year who are affected by their parents divorcing. And it can affect the children of prisoners very deeply.”

I remember being quite shocked by this figure, especially when being compared to divorce which feels very common, I had no idea that this issue affected so many young people.

Crickmore goes on to talk about the issues involved with connecting while in prison. [N](#)

“maintaining contact with your family from prison can be very difficult indeed. And if a child does get to see their parent in prison, they have to go through the same pat-down searches as the adults. They walk through the same detector frames, they're sniffed by the same sniffer dogs, and all because some children have been the unwitting carriers of drugs and mobile phones. And when they get through to see their parent, they may be tired from a long journey, shy, tongue-tied, even upset. And it isn't easy for the parents, who may not be getting along. For many reasons, not just these, over half of prisoners lose contact with their children and families”

In addition to this, there are many financial barriers that are present in connecting such as travel costs, calling costs or postage costs

This all prompted me to think of ways in which I could offer a new channel of communication between prisoners and their families or loved ones. And as well, ensuring that this communication would be zero cost to those that engaged with it [N](#)

Poetry and My Practice

I started thinking about how I would bring my own practice into the project.

One of the main facets of my practice is work surrounding poetry. I have been writing and performing poetry over the last six years. **N**

Through the publishing company Speculative Books I aid in the construction of poetry books as well as organise live poetry events and workshops.

It was important for me to see where poetry could sit within this resource and so I began to research different organisations that work with poetry in a prison context.

One example of an organisation that works with poetry is PEN **N**

Founded in 1971, the PEN Prison Writing Program believes in the restorative, rehabilitative and transformative possibilities of writing. They provide hundreds of imprisoned writers across the country with free writing resources, skilled mentors, and audiences for their work.

It was incredible to see that there is already a vast network of prisoners engaging with poetry and writing.

Ideas surrounding poetry and communication were catalysed when we were given the opportunity to have a phone call with Spoon Jackson. A poet currently serving a sentence in San Quentin prison in California. **N**

During this session we listened to Spoon as he read some of his poetry to us. He also talked about the importance that poetry has had on his well being while in prison after he was encouraged to write by teaching artist and writer Judith Tennenbaum. This continued my understanding of the power of writing in this context to be transformative.

I was then able to share a poem of my own with Spoon.

This was an important moment in the development of my resource as I began to think about how I would be able to provide this experience of exchanging poems as a means of creating creative dialogue.

It also felt important to allow this particular interaction to influence my resource as it was the only time during our researching phase that we had direct contact with someone who was in prison. **N**

What is post a poem

Post a poem is my attempt to offer space for communication between loved ones separated by prison through the medium of poetry.

Post a poem is a book that is worked through separately, but in pairs. One person inside prison works through a book, while a loved one outside of prison works through an identical book.

The book contains different writing exercises that take the participant on a journey that results with writing a poem for their chosen loved one.

The book comes with a stamped envelope that allows a zero cost mode of communication via the sending of the poem through the post.

These books can be gifted by the prisoner to a loved one during a visitation session, or, posted with an additional stamped envelope provided.

Taking through the book

This cover aims to be approachable and accessible through these doodle elements that are relevant to the book and introduces the idea of this as a workbook that you can mark how you like. N

This first page was important and went through quite a lot of drafts. It used to be much longer and wordy but I thought that it would be best to explain the book's usage as clearly and simply as possible along with these visual elements that draw the eye. N

This title here continues the aesthetic language from the cover of the book and draws you to what is a poem and why should you write one? Here I outline why I believe that it can be good to write a poem for someone and the benefits that it can have.

These first sections are to introduce the practical use of the book, and then, the conceptual/artistic use. N

When considering the language of the book I felt like accessibility was one of the key factors.

I was conscious that people that were using the resource would come from a different level of understanding around the language of poetry. This is the kind of thing that, when facilitating in person, can be resolved through conversation. However, this is obviously not possible when communicating via paper.

I also wanted this book to be accessed by a wide age range so that if they wanted, a prisoner would be able to give this book to their children.

That is why here in the different sections I have included a small, simple description of what these concepts are to introduce people that might not be familiar.

This idea of facilitating through paper is also the thought behind this next section. N

I chose to approach this book like I would a writing workshop. One common issue during workshops is getting stuck on what to write about. This is why I have included some writing prompts

These writing prompts are framed starting points that can aid if someone is struggling to come up with a basis for their poem. N

As with any workshop, the book begins with a warm up exercise. Here we have a short and simple description of this exercise and why you should engage with it. N

We then come to the first case of interactivity with the book.

I have kept it quite simple with this first page just introducing what this space is for and then continuing with framed blank spaces. NN

I have left a lot of space here, if the participant is using the book over different sessions and wants to begin each session with a warm up. N

This next section is the first of the technique exercises. This is a simple description of rhyming followed by an exercise where the participant is asked to create rhyming examples.

Here I have included a moment of offering different difficulties for the user. This initial task is to create as many rhymes for a word as possible. **N**

However, I also introduce a secondary challenge of trying to create the rhyme with the largest number of syllables. I give the example of hope and astronomic telescope.

My aim is to allow people with differing levels of writing experience to use and enjoy the book appropriate to their experience. **NN**

This next technique section is around imagery looking at metaphor and simile. **N**

In this section here I give specific examples that surround my family and friends. This is a moment where I'm trying to continue the framing of the book and remind the user that the poem that they are working towards is for someone they care about. **NN**

This is the introduction to the form section of the book, indicated by the change of title and colour. I chose to start with a list poem as I have found when facilitating workshops, a list poem is a great way to introduce someone to writing a poem if they haven't done much writing as the structure is quite simple.

I have given a short description on this page here. I also introduce my example poem which is on the next page. **N**

I felt like it was important to write poems specific to the tasks that I am asking for. Firstly, it is good to see an example of the task that you are being asked to complete.

I also wanted to offer something of myself within the book. In the same way that in a poetry workshop I would read a poem to connect with those involved, or in the same way that I connected with Spoon Jackson, it felt important to offer that same exchange within this book. **NN**

These next sections continue the elements present in the list poem section. Introducing narrative structures **NNN**, and then free verse.

Again, through my experience of running workshops, I have found that these topics in this order have worked well to engage new writers. **NNN**

This next section of the book is an important turning point. I tried to think of this moment performatively. Considering the book previous to this through the frame of a workshop, this next section of the book is the final performance.

As such I wanted to include something here that created a change in pace and highlighted the importance of this next section. On the right hand page, these instructions will be covered by the envelope that will be used to send the poem

My thoughts for this section is that by allowing this added physical element, this will lead to a small performance moment where the participant must lift the envelope to reveal the instructions for the next section.

This change in dynamic is an attempt to frame this next section as different and important and show a clear distinction from this workshop frame previous. N

These next pages are for the participant to create their final work. These pages will be perforated to allow for ease of extraction. NN

And a short thank you to those involved with the project, including the participant themselves. N

Practicalities of the book printing

In terms of the practical elements of the book

This is a mockup of the final book that will be A5 sized and printed using the online service mixam.

I have chosen this service as I have printed a similar sized book with this company before and found them to be a cost effective printer that produced a good quality of book.

They also offer recycled paper stock which is what I will use for ecological reasons.

The envelope provided will be a simple first class stamped A5 envelope that will be connected via glue dots.

The final pages will be perforated by a rotary cutter for precision

I would like to mention the version of the book that I was able to produce within the timeframe.

I have thought about further developments such as involving prisoners within the design process. This was my original plan for the illustrations however there was not enough time to develop this idea. However, it is my hope that this will be possible for further iterations of this book.

In conclusion

My hope is that by engaging with my creative resource prisoners will have access to a new mode of communication with their loved ones.

For me, this was a great opportunity to bring my own poetry and facilitation practices and apply them to this new context

It was also a great opportunity to share my poems with Spoon and I plan on sending Spoon the first copy of the book and in the hopes of continuing our exchange of poems.

Thanks and any questions