

# When Poetry Is Locked Out

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## Introduction

Community Arts Partnership (CAP) is an organization whose aim is to take “the lead in the promotion, development and delivery of community arts practice in Northern Ireland” (CAP 2015b). The organization was

set up in 2011 after the merging of New Belfast Community Arts Initiative with Community Arts Forum. Its motto is *Connecting Creativity with Community*, and it seeks to achieve this in two ways: “firstly, supporting access and participation by seeking to affect policy through advocacy and leadership and secondly, promoting authorship and ownership through the active engagement in projects and programmes” (CAP 2015b). With respect to its second function, CAP runs a number of educational projects based on different arts forms, including the visual arts, the performing and carnival arts, media and digital arts, and eco-aware fashion. Each project consists of a programme of workshops run by professional artists who work with community groups and schools (CAP 2015a). These workshops provide participants from different sections of society with a central role and seek to engage those who might feel marginalized (CAP 2015a). In the process, “Participants are encouraged to gain a variety of skills, while communities are supported to take new directions, and build dialogue and understanding within and across communities” (CAP 2015a).

CAP’s biggest project is Literature and Verbal Arts (LaVA), one of whose strands is known as Poetry in Motion for Community. This article is based on excerpts from an interview with the project co-ordinator, the spoken word poet Chelley McLear. The article seeks to explore her views in relation to the contribution that

poetry can make to different communities, focusing in particular on that constituted by offenders.

## Poetry in Motion for Community

Initially, CAP’s Poetry in Motion for Community consisted of work with community groups and poetry on the streets; however, it now operates primarily with writers’ groups. The project encourages people to write and teaches them to edit, plan and schedule, as well as to choose illustrations, market their work, negotiate with others and engage in public speaking (CAP 2015c). The project focuses primarily on poetry and it has helped to promote its poets’ work via publications and more than 100 poetry performances (CAP 2015c). McLear remarked that just like other CAP projects it attracts “all manner of participation, a great diversity of participation”. As a facilitator of poetry writing workshops, McLear has worked with a variety of communities, including people with mental health problems, disabled people, senior citizens, and patients suffering from dementia. In describing this diversity, she claimed, “We work with everybody.” Diversity is an intrinsic feature of projects that aim at community building via poetry. Poetry writing has been shown to be an effective tool for community development and the engagement of marginalized populations in a process of self-expression (Sjollem and Hanley 2014). According to McLear, the project seeks “to promote the idea that language is for everyone and that language should be accessible for everybody... Many sectors of society might feel that they are excluded from that, that poetry is something just for posh people.” In her opinion, poetry is a democratic instrument that anyone is entitled to use for the purpose of connecting with other members of the same community or for cross-community communication.

## Reform through Poetry

One of the communities with which McLear has worked is that of offenders. She was a writer-in-residence with the Probation Board of Northern Ireland, working with a women's group. The women were on probation in the Belfast area and she hosted the group once a week for eight years. She also worked for the Prison Arts Foundation before it became quite difficult to facilitate creative writing in prisons and juvenile detention centres in Northern Ireland due to a change in policy:

*Whereas the Prison Arts Foundation previously had visual artists, writers and musicians in the prisons, a couple of years ago the aims and objectives were changed so that everything had to be accredited. Those within prison services were looking at educational targets. The move was meant to ensure that everything had an educational target. Unfortunately, the more holistic approach associated with the arts in prisons and the benefits of that, the soft outcomes, could not be measured. Learning became something that needed to be measurable in terms of so many accreditations every year. Thus, a specified number of offenders had to have obtained their GCSEs and their A Levels for a programme to be viable. Formal educational targets ousted the provision of arts education, which has in so many cases a more beneficial effect on men and women who are struggling with the kind of mental health issues that are so highly prevalent within prisons. The arts are perhaps the path that really allows those people to cope and reduce recidivism, so that when they leave prison they have a structure on which to support themselves, whether it's picking up a paintbrush or picking up a pen to write something. Those values are perhaps not valued as greatly as they should be. There had been wide arts provision within the prisons here up until about two years ago. Then there was a change in the provision of services and the change was very much towards accredited provision. There are far fewer artists working in the prisons now than there were three or four years ago. I'm not even sure if there are any creative writers working in prisons in Northern Ireland presently. There was a wealth of experience that is now no longer accessible for the men and women in prison.*

McLear's frustration is understandable given research evidence which shows that prison arts programmes may lead to an increase in inmates' "time management, social competence, achievement motivation, intellectual flexibility, emotional control, active initiative, and self-confidence", as well as "a reduction in disciplinary

reports and greater participation in academic and vocation programs" (Brewster 2014: 1). Creative writing programmes help inmates to unlock creative potential, foster a love of language and discover a powerful outlet for self-expression (Appleman 2013). Practising creative writing in prison has been described as being empowering for inmates (Davis 2012; Finley 2015).

According to McLear, it is difficult to evaluate the repercussions in the shift in policy that has jeopardized arts programmes in prisons:

*I think it's one of those things that are very difficult to measure because when somebody leaves institutional accommodation and tries to reintegrate into the community again, all we see are statistics for reoffending. We don't see where somebody hasn't reoffended because they have found something else to do with themselves. So, for example, you can't see the number of people sitting at home writing a poem or painting a picture instead of thumping a policeman. You can't see that. How can you possibly measure the ways in which ex-offenders have benefited from the arts? It's only by being in direct contact with them that you get to know. They tell you, "I've had a few drinks the other night and I was ripping and I was very upset but whereas I would have previously shouted at a policeman or thumped him, instead I went home and I picked up that coloured pen that you gave me and I wrote a poem to push the anger away." There is some evidence that this is helpful because ex-offenders are also facilitating art themselves. So there are some examples of offenders who have benefited greatly from the arts. They were inside and have come out and are now working in their local communities, assisting others who might be on the verge of offending or reoffending. The evidence is obvious if you're looking for it but when it comes to filling in an application form or a funding form or an evaluation, they want you to tick boxes and put numbers in boxes. They're not looking for conversation with somebody whose life has been saved or turned around by the fact that somebody taught them to paint or helped them to write poetry.*

McLear is convinced of the benefits that ex-offenders accrue from the arts, and poetry in particular. In fact, her views are in line with the idea that poetry writing is an effective way of helping offenders to reform themselves and transcend the limitations of the lives they would have led up to then (Rath and Shelton 2015; Rhodes 2002; Winter Stern 2016). Poetry writing has the potential to spur inmates' personal growth, emotional

balance, and increased self-expression (Reiter 2010), so that once freed they are much more likely to refrain from reoffending (Allen 2011; Kwan 2013).

### Conclusion

Given the significance of poetry for community building and personal development, the work of facilitators like McLear should be championed more broadly. Educational projects that seek to give voice to marginalized communities should be afforded the space and resources to thrive, rather than being stamped out due to stringent impact requirements. As in the case of poetry being used by offenders to reform themselves, such projects can lead to effects that while not easily measurable are invaluable both for individuals and society. When poetry is locked out of people's lives, the loss is suffered by all those who could have benefited from the experience, whether directly or not.

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