

The Catalogue of Imagined Provenances – October 2022

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Earlier this year, students from the university's new MA in Applied Theatre were afforded the opportunity to work alongside myself and colleagues from Rideout (Creative Arts for Rehabilitation) on a unique drama and writing project taking place in three prisons in Staffordshire. *The Catalogue of Imagined Provenances* is the result of a partnership between Rideout and the National Justice Museum (NJM) in Nottingham. IATL's Project Support funding enabled six MA students to each spend one week with Rideout in one of three Staffordshire prisons; HMP Stafford, HMPYOI Swinfen Hall, and HMPYOI Drake Hall.

Amongst the National Justice Museum's collection is what was, until the early noughties, the Prison Service's own archive. This archive includes a significant number of objects made by prisoners over the last century. Very little is known about these objects. In most cases we don't know who made them, where and when they were made, or indeed why. Rideout's project set out to address this in a creative way, by taking photographs of the images into prison and asking serving prisoners to invent histories for some of the pieces. In addition to imagining who might have made the objects, participants were also asked to consider the evidence that might 'prove' their story.



The involvement of the MA students in the process of creating these stories has been key to the success of the project. Rideout wanted to give the students an opportunity to develop their professional practice by having them assist in the co-creation of the content of the workshops, and then co-facilitate the process in prison. This was enabled via a preliminary

planning workshop in which all students contributed ideas for exercises that they felt might help stimulate participants' imaginations. This allowed students to draw both on strategies taught in the MA, but more widely to share experiences of working with different groups and thinking about whether a particular approach would work in a prison context.

Each of the prisons offered different demographics, particularly in respect of age and gender, but also in terms of the type of regime. This meant whilst there was a clear structure to shape of the week's activities, we also needed to allow plenty of scope for adapting activities. Furthermore, the content of the workshops evolved following each week as the team learnt more about the processes that best helped participants to develop work. Core elements that were used in all three workshops were:

1. Introductory drama games and exercises to develop group participation
2. Reference to processes used in contemporary television programmes such as Antiques Roadshow and Fake or Fortune.
3. Visual and written exploration of real objects and documents, including objects whose function is unclear
4. A discussion about what makes something precious?
5. An introduction to history and the importance of recognising undocumented lives
6. Making the case for a specific historical object to be included in an archive
7. Creation of stories and 'evidence' based on images of objects in the museum's collection.



By the conclusion of the workshops, the project team had collected a total of 31 stories covering 25 objects. The range and depth of these stories is considerable. Perhaps not surprising given the context in which the stories were made, there is a good deal of sadness

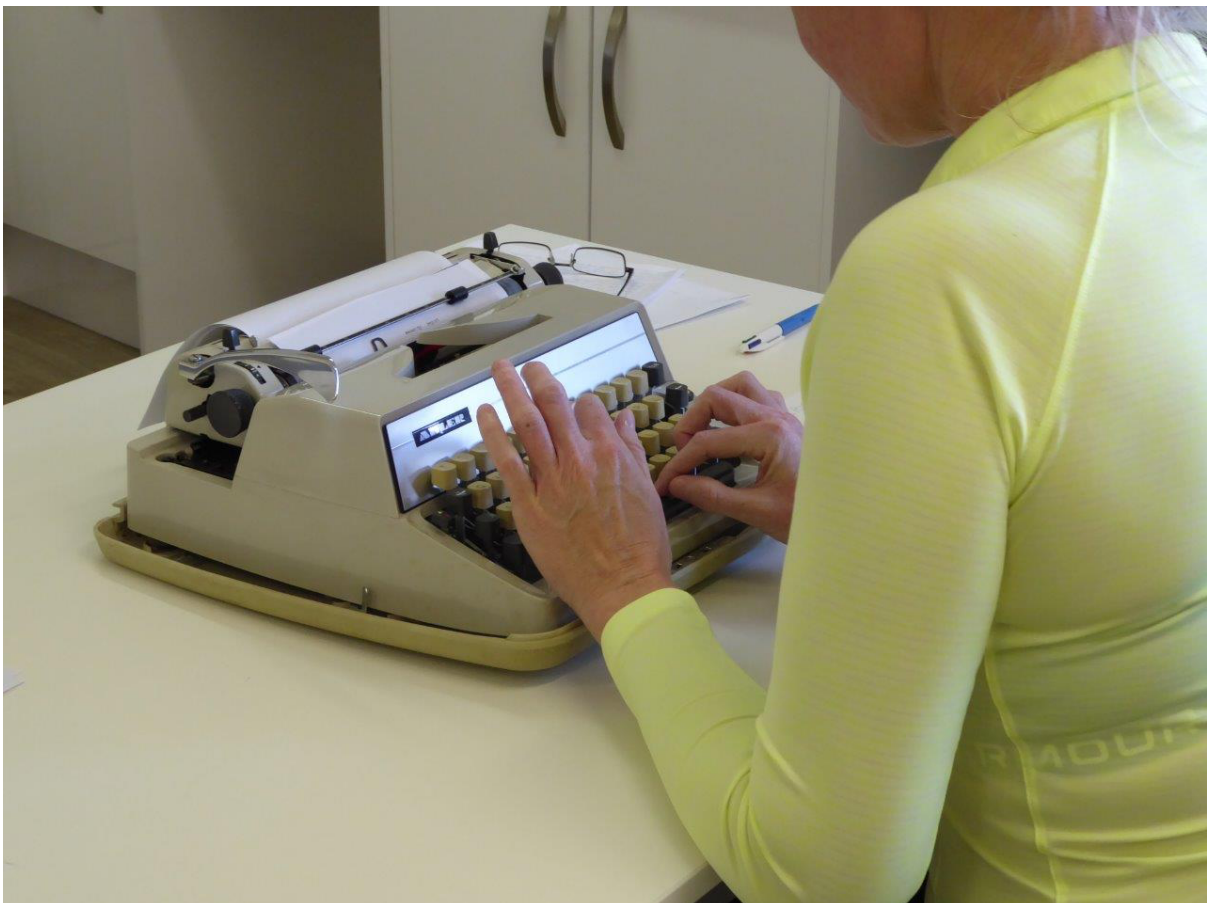
in some of the writing, as well as occasional glimpses of hope and good fortune. The final catalogue is currently under preparation with a view to a short run publication later this year. All prison participants will receive a hard copy in the style of an auction house catalogue, and a PDF copy will be available for download in due course. Furthermore, the catalogue will be included in a new exhibition at the NJM, *Ingenuity* (due to open in Spring 2023), which uses these objects as a starting point for an exploration of the role human creativity plays in coping with imprisonment.

The response from prisoner participants was overwhelmingly positive. 17 of total of 18 respondents reported the workshop had a positive impact on their mental health. Examples of qualifying statements included,

“Making new friends and being away from my cell, and having creative expression, helped to lift a weight off my shoulders”

“It has been the best five days I have spent in prison.”

“Being creative is always a brilliant outlet and it allowed me to engage in lives that were possibly in the same position as me years ago”



Prisons are challenging environments within which to work. Artists working in prisons have to develop a range of coping skills not least of which relate to the frustrations that come not from working with prisoners per se, but more from working inside ‘a regime’. The regime is

what governs life in the prison. It's the routine. It is also the thing that can enable or disable a project. Over the course of the three weeks spent in prison on this project, the team encountered many of the issues that make working in prison hard; poor communication, lack of consistency, security concerns, privatised education provision, and a participant group with considerable unmet physical and mental health needs. Student Laura Hayward details some of these in her blog about the project here.

[\(https://our.warwick.ac.uk/reflections-on-prison-workshops-with-rideout-in-collaboration-with-the-national-justice-museum/\)](https://our.warwick.ac.uk/reflections-on-prison-workshops-with-rideout-in-collaboration-with-the-national-justice-museum/)

Whilst frustrating, the ability to plan for and cope with these difficulties is a core skill and one that arguably is transferable to settings beyond the prison wall. All students involved reported they had found working in prison to be beneficial for their learning. Some reported they had gained a much greater awareness of the needs of prisoners whilst others talked more generally about wanting to do more work in the area:

“It has left me with a desire to be mindful of the change that needs to happen in the current criminal justice system and the importance of supporting the voices and choices of vulnerable people through creativity.” Laura Hayward, MA Applied Theatre student

“In terms of how this has benefited any future work, I feel like I have a broader experience now in terms of groups that I have interacted with. After this experience, I applied for a role with a theatre company who work within prisons, and I was invited to audition, so the experience opened doors to other opportunities and experiences, and without this I may not have been considered by an employer. I feel that I would be open to further work within the criminal justice system in an arts context, which is not necessarily something I may have considered for myself before.” Emily Townsend, MA Applied Theatre student

“In terms of my learning, I gained confidence in working in prisons. I saw how important art was to helping prisoners to feel they could do something positive and there were people who would work with them in a gentle caring way. They obviously appreciated being treated as individuals... I was saddened to see how many of the prisoners had special educational needs that were largely ignored. We came across dyslexic, autistic inmates and those suffering from ADHD.

I am very grateful to Rideout and Warwick University for allowing me to be part of this project. I have learnt that I would like to do more work in prisons and it is such important work.” Lucy Pitman-Wallace, MA Applied Theatre student



As a company, Rideout was really happy with the way the students worked on the project, and as noted above, they brought considerable added value to the workshops. The application of their learning in a real world setting has been invaluable. Of course, none of this would have been possible without the support of IATL, and for this we are extremely grateful.

For further information on this project and/or the MA in Applied Theatre, contact Saul.Hewish@warwick.ac.uk