

The National College of Art and Design (NCAD) Fine Art Programme in Portlaoise Prison: Historical Chronology

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Origins of the Project

The security risks associated with the prisoner population in Portlaoise had meant that from 1979-1984, prisoners' primary engagement with educators in the prison was with the National Coordinator of Prison Education. From 1984 the prison first opened up to individual teachers and thereafter to VEC provision, and to other educational bodies and institutions, such as the Open University and NCAD.

In 1981, the Arts Council initiated the "Writer in Prison" Scheme. This involved occasional visits to the prison by writers and poets to speak about their work and to run writing workshops with prisoners. In 1985, the artist Brian Maguire was invited by the Arts Council to develop a pilot project in Portlaoise Prison along the lines of the well established and successful "Writers in Prison" Scheme. Maguire's engagement took the form of an 8 week program of 1.5 days per week. Maguire participated in this scheme over a period of two years. After a successful pilot project the "Artist in Prison" scheme offered an intensive workshop engagement in the visual arts to students in prison. Usually this took place over 2 weeks of the year, however at times more than one workshop per year took place, and sometimes it was extended over a longer period of time. This was a successful venture and the level of interest and engagements of students in the prison and the evaluation by key figures involved in delivery of prison education meant that Maguire was supported when he sought to develop through the NCAD a more comprehensive and long-term programme, modeled upon existing Fine Art provision at third level.

The National Coordinator of Prison Education, Kevin Warner, along with other key stakeholders like Maeve Ruane (Arts Council) William Reilly (Governor), Noel Sheridan (NCAD) and Frank Dunne (Department of Justice) and later Campbell Bruce (NCAD), Bill Carroll (Library (later School) Officer) and Sean Wynne (Head Teacher) were instrumental in providing the support required to enable the introduction and development of the NCAD Fine Art Programme to Portlaoise Prison.

The Project

In 1987, the NCAD, funded by the Department of Justice and under the aegis of the Director's Office in the college, began a project that built on the learning from the original Arts Council initiative. It offered a course in Fine Art over two semesters of 10 weeks apiece, from October-December and from January-May. This allowed for the evolution of ideas and practice over time, continuity of engagement in learning, trust to develop between tutor and student, and for the provision of ongoing feedback over the long-term. The Programme offered an experience of art-making to people in prison that was equivalent to that offered in Third Level. It was based on principles and practices of art education within the College and informed by an ethos of adult education which encouraged self-determination, self-expression and critical reflection. The ethos and principles underpinning education in prison would eventually be formalized in the 1990 Council of Europe document "Education in Prison". Practicing artist/teachers offered workshops to different groupings within the prison environment, teaching painting, sculpture, and media (in particular, film). This ensured that the students would be exposed to the diverse forms of practice that they would encounter in any Fine Art programme. The theoretical and art historical component was provided through access to Open University modules.

The project evolved and extended as different groups within the prison became involved and the nature of the prison became more complex. Furthermore, certain prisoners sought to deepen their practice. The Programme offered the opportunity for different forms of engagement with practice; some prisoners participated as would a full-time student, whilst others attended other classes offered in the prison. The Foundation Course, offered first in 1987, had up to twenty participants in a single class, with classes offered to two groups: the first one was made of students aligned to the Provisional IRA; the second included both prisoners aligned to the INLA and non-aligned prisoners. Given the complex nature of Portlaoise Prison, eventually classes would be offered to 9/10 different groups by the 1990s. This included ordinary or social prisoners; i.e. those who did not have *de facto* political status. These included the 'Defaulters', prisoners who were involved in a failed kidnap and escape attempt at Mountjoy Prison, and who were then transferred to Portlaoise, where they were held in extremely restrictive conditions. It has been noted how important it was that teachers from both the NCAD and the VEC began to work with this group.

Maguire remained a consistent presence in the prison through much of the Programme and was Coordinator at its closure in 2010. It employed a wide range of practitioners with 3-6 artist-teachers involved in any year. These include: Mick O'Dea, Ed Bereal, Jonathan Cummins, Eithne Carr, Levant Tuncer, Lucas Johnson, Declan McGonagle, Theresa McKenna, Billy McCann, Julie Shiels, Maggie Deignan, Robert Armstrong, Chris Maguire, Pat Moran and Natasha Fischell and Joe Comerford. The Programme was important in terms of the learning experience for the student in prison, and because it encouraged a symbiotic relation between teaching and research for a number of the artists involved; an example of good practice as underlined by contemporary research in education. It demonstrated the importance of inter-institutional collaboration, as is currently underlined by the Charter of Arts in Education, with collaboration between institutions from three different Government Departments: Department of Education and Skills, Department of Justice, and the Department of Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht.

The Programme evolved in line with the changing context and conditions of the prison, and as new practices developed in contemporary art. The mid-1990s saw a shift in the political climate and in attitudes towards prisoners. This affected education as increasing emphasis was placed on security, and the political and public discourse about prisoners became more negative. The 1998 Good Friday Agreement, which led to the release of the majority of political prisoners, also transformed the nature of engagement with education within the prison context. The Fine Art Programme responded to these changes by developing different pedagogical strategies to suit the increasingly diverse needs and interests of students, including the needs of individuals who were not aligned to any paramilitary organization, social prisoners and those in segregation. It had an annual intake of between 25-35 students. (This should be compared with the traditional annual intake of Fine Art students in the NCAD from 100 to 175 by 2010.) The full economic costing of the entire programme was roughly equivalent to 1-1.5 VEC tutors.

Students in prison were encouraged to show work in different institutions, and also were successful in the highly competitive, open call for submissions to exhibit in the International Biennial, EV+A, in Limerick. Work has been exhibited in Kilmainham Gaol, Dublin City Gallery (The Hugh Lane), Dublin Castle, Project Arts Centre, the NCAD Gallery, City Arts and Limerick City Gallery.

Methodology

The difference between the Programme and similar initiatives such as the Artist-in-Prison scheme offered by the Arts Council was that it allowed for a considered relationship to practice to evolve over a sustained period of time, and it enabled the student to experience a third level approach to education through a studio-based approach to classes and tutorials which emphasized the

importance of self-determined research. This was complemented by other forms of educational provision and by the short, intensive workshops offered by the Arts Council.

The Programme was initially modeled upon foundational level courses at the NCAD. Students who expressed interest and showed commitment were given the opportunity to deepen their practice, whilst others preferred to engage as would a student in the Continuing Education faculty in NCAD. It sought to be responsive to the diverse interests and capabilities of the students, and to offer an inclusive student-centred approach to teaching. Courses offered were in Painting, Sculpture and Media, however tutors had expertise in a wide range of areas of contemporary art practice including: socially engaged and participatory art practice, performance, film-making, photography, installation, and print. As in Third Level institutions, students were expected to determine their own lines of enquiry and research, to develop capacity in working in at least one specific medium, to have an understanding of contemporary art practice and an understanding of the history of art, and to develop a capacity to critique both their own work and that of other artists.

Staff also delivered lectures to trainee Prison Officers in Dublin and later in Ballad House, Portlaoise. Training was also offered to VEC teachers.

The opportunity to have access to a continuum of education and to continuity of access to teachers, where appropriate, is particularly important in the case of students in prison. The educational relationship was continued in a number of cases beyond Portlaoise Prison to other prison environments, the Training Unit and to life outside, with some prisoners opting to pursue studies in NCAD, other cognate courses and/or to develop an independent art practice. These relationships offering support in continuing engagement with art practice and/or education were developed formally and informally, and were based upon good practice in the Irish Third Level context. Relationships were developed with a range of practitioners, curators, artists, critics, lecturers and institutions.

Evaluation

Although the NCAD did not offer formally accredited courses, formative and summative assessment was offered to all students each semester. The primary emphasis, as in the art college, was on a singular and qualitative evaluation of each student's engagement with, and progression within, the Programme. This practice is known as the 'crit' or 'critique' in art college and is an important source of formative feedback to support practice. This suited the constraints found in the prison environment where students have sentences of considerably different length and classes often include students involved in the course over a number of years alongside those newly imprisoned. It also allowed for a review of work that responded to the individual interests, practices and capabilities of students. These were offered to each individual student to support formative learning. In order to support learning and to support continuous evaluation of, and critical reflection on, teaching, the Coordinator of the Programme discussed each individual student with each teacher on a regular basis, at least once a semester and in some cases on a monthly basis. An annual review of the course took place each May. This involved the National Coordinator of Prison Education, the Coordinator of the Programme, the Head Teacher in Portlaoise Prison, NCAD tutors, and the Director of NCAD. Comprehensive narrative reports leading to critical evaluation and a continuous assessment and review of the Programme were instrumental in tailoring it to the needs of students whilst maintaining a third level approach to art education that complemented other forms of educational provision. The primary form of evaluation was qualitative, premised upon an 'action research' approach to practice and pedagogy, premised upon continuous reflection and dialogue, that informed the evolution of the Programme, set objectives and targets for the forthcoming year, and included input, feedback and assessment from students.