



Art in prisons

Prison art classes can offer significant and long-lasting benefits to prisoners, prison life and the outside community, as Scott Donnelly, art lecturer at HMP Durham, explains

Just how important is art? Well, for those detained at Her Majesty's Prisons (HMP), it can be very important. Art classes can have a settling effect on an inmate, who through developing a genuine expression of feelings can experience improved levels of patience, understanding and communication. Furthermore, being able to see a job through to completion are important attributes when relocating outside of prison.

In addition, one of the many things evident in art classes at HMP Durham is the marked improvement in consideration for others. Sharing materials becomes an opportunity for dialogue without having to demonstrate dominance or perceived weakness.

At Durham, for instance, two groups use the art room. Tables are cleaned down and the room is hoovered at the end of each session in readiness for the next class – a relatively unique experience where an inmate makes an effort towards someone he may never meet.

From the viewpoint of being an artist teacher, this improved classroom atmosphere makes for a rewarding experience all round. A good working dynamic is harder to disrupt when a new learner joins the group if it's evident that existing class members are participating in and enjoying the sessions. This facilitates better group work as well as helping to build a different level of conversation and engagement.

Above
Alan, Acrylic, HMP Durham permanent exhibition

Top right
The Long Road Home, Billy, Pencil drawing, shown in the Shelter Exhibition, Sage

Above
Nigel, Pencil drawing, HMP Durham permanent exhibition

Middle
London City, Lee, Mixed Media, shown in the Shelter Sage exhibition

Right
Drawing by Keith

This year, HMP Durham's art department made exciting developments. With support from the housing charity Shelter, the inmates' work was showcased at The Sage, an international music venue in Gateshead. With a subject title of *Home*, the exhibition allowed a general external audience to see the learner's work and, more importantly, to comment upon it. Cards were made available so that learners would receive feedback on their work from those outside of the Criminal Justice System (CJS).

At the initial meeting with Shelter it was put forward that the learners not only had the opportunity to sell their work but to discuss how sales would be divided. It was decided that proceeds from any sale of work would benefit Shelter, thereby giving those who had experienced problems with homelessness the opportunity to support the charity. The learners were also adamant that there should be a contribution made towards Victim Support.

The Shelter exhibition was deemed a great success, bringing together an exciting and varied selection of work. The show was given a public preview in the daily regional newspaper (*Newcastle Journal*, 29 January 2014), showing colour images of the work across three pages.

The newspaper article changed the mood of the class dramatically.

The learners were noticeably proud of their efforts and read the article avidly. In the words of one of the learners the exhibition had 'given them a voice'.

Since the exhibition, there has been renewed enthusiasm for the subject. The art class at HMP Durham has progressed to a Certificate Qualification for all new learners (made up of four units as opposed to the previously offered single unit). In addition, there is now also an option to move onto a Level Two qualification, giving more capable learners an opportunity to develop their art further and help encourage them to continue making artwork upon release. ■

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The National Alliance for Arts in Criminal Justice is the national body for the promotion of arts in criminal justice. It represents a coalition of arts practitioners and organisations working in prison and the community to support men, women and young people to lead crime free lives.

For more information visit artsincriminaljustice.org.uk