

Institution: University of Northampton
Unit of Assessment: 29 – English Language and Literature
Title of case study: Alan Smith’s ‘Philosophy for Prisoners’
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>This case study focuses on the prison writing of Alan Smith, Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing (2005-), at the University of Northampton (UN), about his experiences of teaching philosophy and English at Her Majesty’s Prison (HMP) Wellingborough (1998-2012). Beneficiaries have included prisoners and their families, public institutions, charities and media providers. Smith’s teaching and research programmes have impacted on individual prisoners’ lives and on the general public by informing civic debate and influencing policy makers’ thinking. His publications have stimulated an awareness of the importance of education in the prison environment, and encouraged sustained reflection about rehabilitation among prison staff, third sector organisations, and the Ministry of Justice.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>Smith writes socially engaged, self aware and entertaining narratives about teaching in prison by drawing on his creative writing background, and adapting to non-fiction many narrative techniques honed in his literary thrillers, <i>Big Soft Lads</i> (3.1) and <i>What About Me?</i> (3.1). He began by using embedded, practice-based research and by 1998 was recording in ‘Reflective Sketchbooks’ observational processes, interviews with prisoners, drafts of stories, and notes of events. This writing resource was the basis for a play written about incarceration in asylums (3.2); research papers for <i>The Philosopher’s Magazine</i> (3.3) and <i>Theoretical Criminology</i> (3.4); a series of newspaper columns for the <i>Times Educational Supplement</i> (5 June 1998), <i>The Scotsman</i> (5 July 2000) and the Education section of <i>The Guardian</i> (3.5, 10 April 2001 - 8 April 2013) and recently a memoir drawing on his prison experiences (3.6). While Smith notes sociological and empirical detail, his methodology remains rooted in his creative writing practice, in which he ‘performs’ authorship by combining a prison teacher persona with a “bleeding heart liberal” (3.7, p. 118). This reflective process of authorial performance, designed to engage a wide, non-academic audience for research findings, is best developed in Smith’s journalism, particularly his columns for <i>The Guardian</i> (3.5). Underscoring his playful approach which stylistically refines and lightens the serious, socially challenging content, Smith says, “<i>I am not unconcerned with truth but I have to acknowledge that my concern for impact, dramatic effectiveness, the aesthetic form and language are often my foremost considerations.</i>” (3.7, p. 119)</p> <p>Smith’s experiential research, developed during his time as a schoolteacher in comprehensive schools and in his work as Advisory Teacher for English (Northants Education Authority, 1990-1991), advanced the social perspectives and widened the scope of the pedagogic techniques which informed his teaching practice in prison. It also made possible the intellectual and empirical framework required for commentary and critical reflexivity. Similarly, his formal research training in Philosophy of Education established the mode of critical self-appraisal employed as a keystone of both his literary fiction and journalism. This multidisciplinary research methodology was embedded in his work at HMP Wellingborough, his lecturing at the University of Leicester (1998-2000) and in the writing workshops he convened for Corby Social Services Mental Health Unit (2001).</p> <p>Smith was an invited panellist in ‘Perspectives on Prison’, at the 2010 British Association of Criminology conference (3.8), while regular conference presentations in America confirm the wider relevance of his model of ‘prison narratives’ and the international status of his scholarship as recognised through peer review: attendances at three SW/Texas American Popular Culture conferences (3.9) were funded (each at £1300) by UN. Subsequently, Smith was awarded by Rollins College, Winter Park, Orlando, the scholarship, TP Johnson Visiting Distinguished Artist/Scholar (\$5000 plus travel and living expenses, 22 October - 1 November 2012); and by the University of Central Oklahoma \$5000 to deliver the keynote address, ‘Telling Stories about Prison’, and to give guest seminars to English/Journalism students in the University’s ‘Passport to</p>

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England Programme' (2 - 23 November 2012).

3. References to the research

- (3.1) Smith, Alan, *Big Soft Lads* (London: Headline Review, 1997); Smith, Alan, *What About Me?* (London: Review, 1998).
- (3.2) Smith, Alan, 'Billing Road (Play and Author's Foreword)', *Critical Engagements*, 1:2 (2008): 7-25.
- (3.3) Smith, Alan, 'Captive Audience', *The Philosopher's Magazine*, 60:1 (2013): 89-93.
- (3.4) Bennett, Peter, Ben Crewe, Alan Smith and Jason Warr, 'The Emotional Geography of Prison Life'. *Theoretical Criminology*. Available online: <http://tcr.sagepub.com/content/early/recent> First published: 11 September 2013. Accessed: 07.10.2013.
- (3.5) Smith, Alan, Selection of 'Philosophy for Prisoners' *Guardian* articles. Articles for the period, 2005-2013 are available online: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/series/philosophy-for-prisoners?INTCMP=SRCH> Accessed: 29.05.2013.
- (3.6) Smith, Alan, *Her Majesty's Philosophers* (Sheffield: Waterside Press, 2013). 216 pp.
- (3.7) Smith, Alan, 'Prison Narratives or Don't Let the Truth Spoil a Good Story', in Benjamin Marks and Dahia Messara (eds.) *The Captivity Narrative: Enduring Shackles and Emancipating Language of Subjectivity* (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), pp. 117-122.
- (3.8) British Association of Criminology Conference Programme (The University of Leicester, 11-14 July 2010): <http://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/criminology/documents/fullprogramme.pdf> Accessed: 29.05.2013.
- (3.9) Smith, Alan, 'What is prison like?' Paper presented to SWTX PCA/ACA 31st Annual conference (Albuquerque, New Mexico, 10-13 February 2010); Alan Smith, 'Prison stories what they mean', Paper presented to SWTX PCA/ACA 32nd Annual Conference (San Antonio, Texas, 20-23 April 2011); Alan Smith, 'Oh green chilli sauce'. Invited presentation to SWTX PCA/ACA 33rd Annual Conference (Albuquerque, New Mexico, 8-11 February 2012).

4. Details of the impact

Educational Impact

The educational impact of Smith's prison writings is measurable in the precedent they have set for revising prison curricula, addressing prison staff attitudes, and considering issues of prisoner rehabilitation. The Education Manager at HMP Wellingborough concurred that the prestige gained by inmates appearing in Smith's writings enhanced the reputation of Arts and Humanities teaching in HMP Wellingborough, helped external dissemination of information about its educational work, reinforced positive standards of prisoner behaviour and encouraged education in rehabilitation (5.1).

In an environment of emotional toughness dominated by masking and controlling emotion, Smith's classes provided prisoners with an important respite: "*discussions of religion and politics took place between prisoners with wildly different perspectives without tension or reprisal.*" (3.4, p. 14) His pedagogical aim -- "*to create a space within his classroom that was as un-carceral as possible*" (3.4, p. 6) -- increased prisoners' self-esteem and helped them survive prison life. Many completed Open University modules in prison; some, upon release, studied at Bath Spa University, Coleg Harlech, University College Falmouth, and Oxford Brookes University. One has lectured at Manchester University. Although the impact of Smith's programmes cannot be quantified (he has been discouraged from maintaining contact with former prison students by the Ministry of Justice), qualitative data testifies to their profound significance. For one inmate, his *Guardian* articles altered his family's perceptions of prison, helping his readjustment to life after release: "*The fact*

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that ... I know that people like Alan exist and are trying to tell that story helped get me through ... a knock back or a 'no' from an employer or society." (5.2, testimonial 20 July 2012) Another who will complete his University of Cambridge doctorate in 2013 says: "*Smith has been both an innovator in the field of prison education and a source of encouragement and inspiration for many prisoners who may not have had much success in traditional education.*" (5.2, testimonial 18 April 2013).

Smith's research has gained recognition through the concept of 'prison narratives', or rehabilitation through narrative as creative practice, instigated at the 'Prison Narratives' colloquium he convened at the UN (June 2010), where criminologists and prison educationalists spoke to approximately 30 students, staff, criminologists and members of the Writers in Prison Network (5.3). Further educational impact is measurable through another UN public event arranged in collaboration with the then writer-in-residence at HMP Leicester and the Project Manager of the The Anne Frank Trust Prison Project, attended by 18 (5.4). Smith's prison-based practice has also been adopted by a UN PhD student, who works on performance-based projects with male and female prisoners via her organisation, The Ministry of Untold Stories.

Policy Change and Third Sector Impact

Smith's writings on prison have reached UK prison policy-makers and third sector organisations, and contributed to individual and institutional thinking about attitudes to prison education, thereby increasing public engagement. The Prison Education Trust (5.5) has cited his writings, notably his assertion of the case for education rather than training in prison. According to a representative from the Ministry of Justice, journalists have read Smith's articles or are directed to read them by her department; a Labour government minister (2007-2010) read them, "*whenever they appeared and appreciated their unique insight into the prison world.*" (5.6) For the *Education Guardian* editor, Smith sets, "*a high example to journalists through the power of his story telling and characterisation.*" (5.6) Equally, the Project Manager at the Anne Frank Trust Prison Project, whose activities are mentioned in Smith's column, 'Prisoners need a space in which to be themselves' (*The Guardian*, 4 July 2011), said he "*used this article alongside our own publicity material at meetings with prisons.*" (5.7)

Public Engagement

Smith's newspaper columns have also reached global readerships through *The Guardian* website (monthly impressions are estimated at 528,293,401). For examples of how his liberal agenda has provoked readers' opinions and increased public visibility of prison issues, see responses to 'The prison philosophers debate their right to vote' (*The Guardian*, 21 February 2011, 10 comments); 'In prison, food is all about self-esteem' (*The Guardian*, 18 June 2012, 79 comments) and 'In prison, education is a route to self-respect' (*The Guardian*, 8 April 2013, 10 comments). Smith's growing eminence among US audiences is evidenced by his interview on Oklahoma City Public Service Radio on 25 October 2012 (5.8). Furthermore, the impact of his work is sustainable beyond the REF census date. He was interviewed for North Carolina Public Radio (5.9, a Top 5 'Most Popular Stories' online the week following its 5 August 2013 broadcast), addressed the Saint Louis University Prison Education Programme, which provides educational opportunities to prison staff and prisoners in Missouri (October 2013), and plans to adapt his prison memoirs into a Hollywood film.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

5.1) Testimonial on file: Education Manager, HMP Wellingborough (04.10.2012).

(5.2) Testimonial on file: Former Prisoner HMP Wellingborough (20.07.2012); Testimonial on file: Former Prisoner HMP Wellingborough (18.04.2013).

(5.3) Smith, Alan with representatives of the Writers in Prison Network and The Cambridge Institute of Criminology, 'A Colloquium on Prison Narratives' (The University of Northampton School of the Arts, 28 June 2010).

(5.4) Smith, Alan with the Writer-in-Residence at HMP Leicester and The Project Manager at The

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Anne Frank Trust Prison Project, 'Storytelling in Prison' (A University of Northampton School of the Arts Public Outreach Event, 18 June 2013).

For a University of Northampton report on this event

see: <http://researchsupporthub.northampton.ac.uk/2013/06/28/school-of-the-arts-summer-show-successes-and-angry-planet-commemorative-booklet/> Accessed: 29.06.2013.

(5.5) To see Smith's writing on the Prison Education Trust website, search Alan Smith:

<http://www.prisonerseducation.org.uk/index.php?id=688> Accessed: 29.05.2013.

(5.6) Testimonial on file: Ministry of Justice Chief Press Officer, Prisons and Probation (03.07.2012); Testimonial on file: Education Editor, *The Guardian* (15.08.2012).

(5.7) Testimonial on file: Project Manager, The Anne Frank Trust Prison Project (02.07.2012).

(5.8) Smith, Alan, 'Spotlight on the Arts: Interview with KCSE Radio' (Oklahoma: KSCE Radio, University of Central Oklahoma, 25 October 2012). To see details of this interview:

<http://nectar.northampton.ac.uk/5258/> Accessed: 29.05.2013.

(5.9) Smith, Alan and Dick Gordon, 'Her Majesty's Philosophers', North Carolina Public Radio, 08 May 2013, <http://www.thestory.org/stories/2013-05/her-majestys-philosophers> Accessed: 29.05.2013.