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## “People Like Me Don’t Belong in Places Like This”: Creating and Developing a Community of Learners Beyond the Prison Gates

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**Abstract:** *It is widely accepted that individuals with criminal convictions experience multiple disadvantage and deprivation, and, as a result, are considered least likely to progress to higher education (Unlock, 2018). The risk-adverse nature of higher education application processes further compound such disadvantage, even though there is no evidence to suggest that screening for criminal convictions increase campus safety (Centre for Community Alternatives, 2010). Drawing upon ethnographic data, the discussion critically reflects upon the development of one situated Learning Together initiative based within a University in the north-west of England. In doing so, the discussion highlights a series of emerging opportunities and competing contradictions that span over three key developmental areas: creation, progress and maintenance. We anticipate that the findings will go some way in opening up a wider debate about the sustainability of initiatives that seek to create dynamic educational partnerships between the higher education sector and criminal justice system more broadly.*

**Keywords:** *Higher education, criminal convictions, risk, widening participation*

Although education has been identified as a pathway to rehabilitation and resettlement (Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Prisons, 2014) there appears to be limited opportunities—on a local and national level—for those who have a criminal conviction to access higher education. This may be due to unspent criminal convictions (Unlock, 2018), limited confidence and self-esteem (Champion and Noble, 2016), a lack of previous educational attainment (Prison Reform Trust, 2017) and/or presence of risk-averse bureaucratic admission processes (Bhattacharya et al., 2013). The actual and/or perceived nature of the higher education sector subsequently hinder opportunities (directly and/or indirectly) for people with criminal convictions to connect with, and learn from, prosocial peers (Runell, 2015), strengthening visions of a crime free future (Maruna et al., 2004) and improve employment prospects (Ministry of Justice, 2018). This is a significant issue for the sector (and society more broadly), providing a stark contrast to the rhetoric associated with the widening participation agenda.

The widening participation agenda is a strategic priority and socio-political position taken by recent UK Governments to restructure the higher education sector, based upon the notion of equality (Armstrong, 2008). The aim of the agenda is two-fold: to offer opportunities to individuals who are traditionally under-represented in higher education and address discrepancies in the take-up of higher education opportunities between different socio-economic groups (University of Edinburgh, 2018). In doing so, the widening participation agenda claims to pay particular attention to those who are from lower socio-economic groups and/or considered to have limited participation in schools and local neighbourhoods (University of Edinburgh, 2018). Along with mature and first-in-family students, people with criminal convictions typically share characteristics that Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS), and Government call “disadvantaged” (Unlock, 2018). As a result,



such individuals are not only considered least likely to progress to University, but, routinely under-represented within the higher education sector.

Although the widening participation agenda is intended to demonstrate the sectors commitment to “open up” higher education, it would seem that such efforts have been applied in a piecemeal fashion. In 2018, UCAS outlined plans to remove the criminal convictions disclosure box from University application forms in time for the 2019 admissions cycle (Weale, 2018). The Prisoners Education Trust (2018) suggest this is an important step that will prevent the “chilling effect” of the disclosure box, which can deter people with criminal convictions from applying to University, and go some way to address some of the arbitrary and unfair admission practices that have prevented individuals from reaching their full potential through higher education. Although a step in the right direction, such endeavours do not necessarily mean that access to higher education will naturally improve for people with criminal convictions. Rather than eradicating the criminal convictions screening process, UCAS have merely displaced the process. With responsibility now firmly placed at the door of each individual higher education institution.

In addition to macro socio-political discussions about widening participation and access to higher education for people with criminal convictions, we must also engage with grassroots attempts to better understand the needs and experience of current higher education students with criminal convictions. According to Armstrong (2008) students from non-traditional backgrounds find it difficult to access and engage with higher education in a meaningful way. Indeed, the limited overlap between non-traditional students lived experience and the traditional customs, norms and values of higher education can make University life more challenging for those from disadvantaged and under-represented groups (Kahu and Nelson, 2018). If the sector is to demonstrate a genuine commitment to widening participation, efforts ought to extend beyond seemingly positive rhetoric and political discussions about access, towards a genuine attempt to engage with the complex, multifaceted issues that face people with criminal convictions who wish to engage in higher education (both before and during their journey through higher education).

In an attempt to illustrate some of the challenges and rewards that stem from working alongside students with criminal convictions in higher education, the following discussion will critically reflect upon the development and progression of one situated Learning Together (LT) based within a University in the north-west of England, United Kingdom. In doing so the authors will explore three key developmental areas: *creation*, *progress* and *maintenance* over four separate but inter-connected sections. The first section explores some of the guiding principles that underpin the *creation* of a community-based LT initiative. The second section outlines the methodological approach, and the penultimate section critically reflects upon the initiatives *progress* to date. To conclude, the final section explores how such initiatives can *maintain* momentum and meaningfully engage with wider socio-political debates about the sustainability of educational partnerships between the higher education sector and criminal justice system more broadly.

### **Creating a Community of Practice**

According to Lave and Wenger (1991), a community of practice consists of a group of people who share a craft or profession. It can evolve naturally due to participant’s experience of a particular area, or be deliberately created with the goal of gaining knowledge related to a specific field of study (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Communities of practice are formed by and for people who wish to engage in a process of collective learning (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2015). It is through the process of sharing information and lived experiences with the group that members learn from each other and have the opportunity to develop both personally and professionally (Lave and Wenger, 1991). This form of learning has existed for as long as people have been sharing their experiences through storytelling and is rooted in Peirce’s concept of community of inquiry (Shields, 2003) and Dewey’s principle of learning through occupation (Wallace, 2007).

The authors were keen to create a community of practice, within a University, in an attempt to open up higher education (albeit on a small-scale, local level) for people with criminal convictions. Demystify stereotypes and preconceived ideas about “who” engages in higher education and what University life consists of. As well as work towards the provision of more flexible and accessible pathways to higher education for people with criminal convictions. Since September 2016, the authors have designed and delivered a University-based

initiative for males and females who have personal and/or professional experience of the criminal justice system, and postgraduate students from the criminal justice programme at the host institution. The initiative consists of 15 two-hour sessions taught across the academic year from October to April. Each taught session explores a contemporary penological issue through a series of accessible questions such as “how do we explain crime and criminality” and “why do people stop offending”.

Although flexible, the authors aim to engage no more than 20 students per academic year. Ten from the postgraduate community (from within the host institution) and 10 from local criminal justice services (including both practitioners and service users). All interested parties must apply via a bespoke application form that explores an individual’s motivation for participation, hopes and fears. Applicants from outside of the institution are also required to complete a criminal convictions screening form, co-created by the authors and head of legal and student governance. All applications with unspent criminal convictions are considered at a bespoke criminal convictions screening panel which is made up of the authors, representatives from the host institutions student and legal governance department and LT student representatives (with lived experience of the criminal justice system). The panel aims to mirror institutional policies and practices whilst at the same time, create a process that is transparent and progressive; rooted in discussions about applicants as people, with qualities and potential, rather than a catalogue of criminal convictions with a name.

The fundamental aim of the initiative is to create a safe space for criminal justice academics, students, service users and practitioners to come together and work towards the creation of a community of practice where scholarly activity, life events and professional experience are recognised, applied and practiced within and beyond the classroom. As the initiative has grown, the authors have recognised how community engagement, as a pedagogical framework, holds the ability to reduce cultural distance between academic researchers and the communities in which they work (Rubin et al., 2012) whilst at the same time enriching learning and strengthening communities (Power, 2010).

Community engaged pedagogy embraces a form of experiential education that encompasses both curricular and co-curricular activities, where learning occurs through a cycle of action and reflection as both students and teachers seek to achieve real objectives for the learning community, as well as a deeper understanding of skills for themselves (Brandy, 2018). It provides a way in which academic insight and lived experiences may be integrated to create organic teaching and learning opportunities, whereby students, staff and community services are all educators, learners and generators of knowledge. Community engaged pedagogy is an important tool for LT as it provides a way in which the traditions, norms and expectations of the academy can be stretched and diversified to reduce sociocultural incongruity (Devlin, 2011) and alienation (Mann, 2001) amongst and between non-traditional students. Thus, creating a more dynamic, community-focused teaching and learning experience. Although initiatives such as LT create a series of opportunities for the sector, we must also recognise that as the conventions of pedagogy are stretched and standardised academic practice are challenged, a series of competing contradictions begin to emerge. The authors have utilised the terms: scope, transparency and endings to encapsulate such challenges. Each of which will be revisited in the penultimate section of the article.

### **Methodology and Methods of Data Collection**

The authors employed grounded theory as a methodological and analytical framework given its inductive nature and emphasis on the continuous interplay between data collection and analysis (Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Dey, 1999). Grounded theory holds the assumption that it is essential to gain familiarity with the setting under study (Wells, 1995; Egan, 2002) so that rich interpretations of reality can be generated to explain and understand a particular setting or group of people (Anells, 1996). As research guided by grounded theory do not begin with a precise question (Charmez, 2006), the researcher can employ an array of data collection techniques to study ordinary events and activities within the setting in which they occur, in an effort to understand what ordinary activities and events mean to those who engage in them (Fetterman, 1998).

The authors utilised fundamental principles and prescriptions of grounded theory to develop and sustain a longitudinal ethnographic study alongside two cohorts of LT students. Ethnography places a strong emphasis on exploring a particular phenomenon; has a tendency to work with unstructured data and employs an analyt-

ical strategy that involves an explicit interpretation of meaning (Atkinson and Hammersley, 1994; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). Ethnographic approaches provide a way in which researchers, having identified a problem or issue worthy of investigation, can begin to collect data that is typically unstructured (Lett, 1990; Barnes, 1996). Reflectivity is a significant component of ethnographic research. According to Ruby (1980), to be reflective researchers must systematically reveal their methodology and themselves as the instrument of data collection and generation. The ultimate goal of reflectivity is to create a balance that dissolves the distinction between the ethnographer as a theoriser and the participant as passive data (Bakhtin, 1981; Bruner, 1993).

Since the inception of LT at the host institution, the authors have sought to build meaningful dialogue and reflexivity into all teaching, learning and research endeavours that take place amongst and between LT participants (staff and students alike). Given the infancy of our programme, the authors sought to blur conventional boundaries between teaching, research and civic engagement. Choosing to see each activity as interconnected yet mutually exclusive. Before our LT programme began, the authors obtained full ethical approval from the University research ethics committee. During the first taught LT session, the authors explained their aspiration to develop understanding, insight and pedagogical practice for students with criminal convictions in higher education. The authors also explained how they intended to collect data throughout the duration of LT, reassured students that participation in the research was voluntary and provided an opportunity for questions. All students were provided with informed consent forms to read, sign and return if they wished to participate in the research.

During the first year of LT, the authors decided to employ informal methods of data collection, such as informal discussions, participant observation, and reflective practice, only. Informal discussions and participant observations were recorded as field notes after each LT session (usually within 24 hours), kept in a locked filing cabinet in the author's office and subject to manual thematic analysis once the course had ended. In addition, all LT students were given notebooks so that they could record their thoughts, feelings and experiences. The authors explained the role of reflexivity as a teaching, learning and research tool so that all students fully understood why they were asked to keep a reflective journal during their studies, and why their diary entries could provide an important source of empirical data.

At the end of the course, 10 students provided consent for their reflective journal entries to be included in the research. Each of which have since been transcribed and subject to a thematic analysis via NVivo: a software programme used for qualitative and mixed-methods research (Kent State University, 2018). Typically used for the analysis of unstructured text, audio, video and image data, including but not limited to interviews, focus groups, surveys, social media and journal articles (Kent State University, 2018). As the second year of LT approached, the authors were keen to create more opportunities for LT participants to engage in peer-to-peer dialogue and reflexivity. A small pot of funding was obtained from the host institution for two LT students to undertake paid internships, with the authors, one day per week, over a period of four months. The aim of the internship was to provide an opportunity for LT students to design and deliver a one-off focus group with their peers to explore how LT participants made sense of their higher education experience. Three LT students volunteered to participate in the focus group. Focus group recruitment took place via email, with a generic email sent to LT students institutional email address. Upon reflection, this method of recruitment may not have been the most appropriate and limited participation in the focus group—particularly amongst students who were new to higher education—given that many LT students openly discussed their inability and/or reluctance to engage with the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE).

The forthcoming discussion is based upon a series of findings from a variety of methods of data collection (informal discussions, participant observation, reflective journals, the authors own reflective practice and focus group data) that have been subject to either manual or NVivo assisted thematic analysis. This analytical process has produced five over-arching themes (vulnerability, risk, authenticity, (un)belonging, and critically reflective practice) that will be discussed in the following section. Although the aforementioned approach to data collection and analysis have allowed the authors to open up the subject area, it is important to recognise that the gains offered by ethnographic research are met with certain limitations. Such as characteristically small sample sizes, the inability to generalise findings to a wider population with confidence (Gray, 2009), the relatively long period of time ethnographers spend in the field and fundamental questions surrounding the reliability and validity of ethnographic research and its subsequent findings (Hammersley, 1990; LeCompte

and Goetz, 1982).

Despite such limitations, as ethnographic fieldwork employs an array of research methods over an elongated period of time—that provide an opportunity for continual data analysis and comparison to refine constructs and capture participant reality (LeCompte and Goetz, 1982)—the authors felt that this was an appropriate way to open up the subject area. The grounded nature of ethnographic fieldwork allowed the authors to organically unravel and experience the *creation, progress* and *maintenance* of LT, as and when it unfolded. Undertaking research in “real time” as the LT project developed meant that the authors relied upon the voice and experience of LT participants to shape the narrative of LT within our host institution. Although the findings cannot be generalised beyond the time, setting, place and people involved, the forthcoming discussion provides an interesting insight into the challenges and rewards that surround working with “non-traditional” students involved in a non-traditional project within one situated higher education institution.

### **Moving Beyond Edgework: Stepping Stones and Stumbling Blocks**

From an early stage in the development of LT, the authors realised that the initiative sat on the periphery of both higher education and criminal justice policy and practice. Upon reflection, it would seem that although higher education institutions and local criminal justice services perceived the initiative as a “good thing” there was a lack of clarity surrounding what the initiative was actually trying to achieve and why. With this in mind, the authors made a conscious decision to embrace a fluid approach to the creation and development of LT, opting to utilise participants lived experience of the programme in “real time” to steer and direct the overarching aims and objectives of the initiative. This approach to teaching and learning required the authors to invest a considerable amount of time in understanding what LT meant to its participants and why:

“You can always get the grades but that doesn’t mean that you have really learnt something does it?” (Participant 1).

“My perceptions were all from like academic textbooks and doing essays (...) but to actually hear it first hand was really interesting” (Participant 2).

Maybe they were thinking that people in academia would be judging them but hopefully after this they have realised that no, not everyone is. Not all society is marginalising you or treating you that way. That there is a bit of acceptance in society and that’s given them a bit of hope. (Participant 3)

I’ve never really got theory but one of the non-MA guys, after a lecture on theory, said to me ‘I wish I’d know that 18 years ago.’ It was like he was rewinding back through the whole of his life, due to a theoretical lecture. He was able to make connections after a lifetime of going in and out of the criminal justice system. (Participant 4)

The discussions also made me question some of the perhaps, lazy, assumptions that I make. My views are based on the experience of working in prisons for over 20 years. However I’m aware that I have a lot of anecdotal knowledge. A lot of local knowledge but I don’t have an overview nationally and I certainly don’t have opinions and views that are based on evidence-based research. I realise that the more I think and talk about crime, then the less I actually know. (Participant 5)

“She said I had potential (...) that really made me believe in myself” (Participant 6).

Although insightful, attempts to adopt such a flexible approach were however, challenging. Upon reflection, it would be fair to say that the authors readily embraced both personal and professional uncertainty as they embarked upon their LT journey; simultaneously negotiating discussions about innovative practice and risk management. Although this was an intellectually stimulating position to be in, creating and developing

a LT initiative within a higher education setting, required the authors to take steps and/or risks that extended beyond the remit of their typical, day-to-day duties. Existing literature on community-engaged pedagogy provided a way in which the authors could make sense of their efforts to reduce socio-cultural distance between academic researchers and their local community. Although invaluable, the pedagogical literature on “belonging” in higher education does not extend to critical discussions about how to negotiate and merge cultural borders between higher education and criminal justice service provision.

In an attempt to make sense of our endeavours, the authors drew upon the work of Lang (2005) who devised the term *edgework* in an attempt to explain why people take risks as part of leisure activities. Traditionally, the term *edgework* describes how crime can provide a means whereby people can get a thrill or pleasure by engaging in risk-taking behaviour. Going right to the edges of acceptable behaviour, challenging the rules of what is acceptable and exploring the edges that exist along cultural boundaries. Albeit in a different context and for different reasons, the authors identified with the notion of *edgework* as they were going to the edges of acceptable or traditional practice in higher education whilst at the same time exploring cultural boundaries between our host institution and local criminal justice service provision. In using this phrase, the authors are, developing the work of Lang (2005) through an attempt to make sense of, and communicate how, initiatives such as LT can take academics to the edge–periphery of institutionally recognised and embraced endeavours, whilst at the same time provide a way in which traditional–longstanding practices are challenged and risks can be taken.

Scholars such as Rooijen (2018) suggest that taking risks is imperative for achieving innovation in higher education settings. This is because risk taking can be helpful when working through and attempting to solve differences in ideas, reaching a consensus in thinking and making informed decisions (Koh et al., 2015). Academic risk taking consists of learners assessing familiar and unfamiliar outcomes of a learning activity (Pierre, 2018; Robinson and Bell, 2013). Learners (including both staff and students) can choose to become involved in an activity based upon the possible benefits and consequences of what will be learnt and/or gained as a result of participation (Robinson and Bell, 2013). Although the notion of risk taking is uncommon in higher education, it is an important concept (particularly in a pedagogical sense) given its ability to increase motivation and academic achievement amongst students (Clifford, 1991). According to Dewey (1916) during the thinking and learning process, a level of personal, pedagogical and professional uncertainty arises. Beghetto (2016) suggests that there is good uncertainty and bad uncertainty. Bad uncertainty results from learning experiences that do not include necessary supports and structures. Whereas, good uncertainty provides students opportunities to engage with the unknowns of a challenges in an otherwise supportive, well-structured environment (Beghetto, 2016).

In the context of classrooms, educators often replace uncertainty with over-planned learning experiences (Beghetto, 2017). There are benefits in doing so beyond maintaining a sense of consistency, calm and control; students can and do learn from routine problems and assignments (Lee and Anderson, 2013). However, the key limitation to these types of learning experiences is that they do not give students opportunities to engage with and learn from uncertainty (Beghetto, 2017). The role and function of *good* uncertainty within the teaching and learning process supports the idea that learning environments—such as Universities—should create learning environments where all participants can take risks (Dewey, 1916). The authors suggest that initiatives such as LT—situated within higher education institutions—provide an opportunity for educators and students alike to invite *good* uncertainty into the classroom and embrace personal, professional and pedagogical risk taking.

Although there are various forms of prison-university partnerships, our initiative is the only University-based initiative that brings together criminal justice academics, students, practitioners and service users. With this in mind, the notion of *edgework* provides a useful way in which we can begin to make sense of the design and delivery of LT within a community context as opposed to a prison context. The term *pedagogical edgework* provides a way in which we can begin to explore cultural boundaries between higher education and criminal justice, demystify actual and/or perceived boundaries between members of the student population, and, break down boundaries between service providers and service users (whether that be in the criminal justice or higher education sector). Indeed, the notion of pedagogical *edgework* provides a way in which individuals (who may not necessarily know each other) can confidently explore vulnerability and uncertainty within

and beyond the classroom, whilst working towards the achievement of a common goal.

Although saturated with uncertainty, pedagogical edgework allows both staff and students to explore personal and professional vulnerability in a safe, reflective and open fashion. In an attempt to integrate principles of community-engaged pedagogy into our teaching and learning practices, whilst at the same time, respond to the needs and demands of all LT students, the authors made a conscious decision to design and deliver an *organic curriculum* coupled with *collective teaching practices*. Both of which were new ventures in the authors teaching career. Rubin et al., (2012) suggest that the process of developing and implementing an organic, responsive curriculum encourages the creation of a teaching approach that embraces co-learning and co-production. With this in mind, the authors drew upon the principles of co-learning and co-production to develop an organic curriculum that was authentic and responsive, directed by the needs, skill set and experiences of those participating in LT.

The processes involved in the design and delivery of an organic curriculum highlight just one of the ways in which the authors embarked upon pedagogical edgework. This is because students and staff were attempting to work together to create meaningful course content, discussing appropriate teaching approaches, designing learning activities and developing assessment strategies. To help facilitate this process and establish a truly organic curriculum, the authors drew upon the co-operative learning literature (see Fink, 2003; Hattie, 2009; Biggs and Tang, 2011) to inform both formal and informal methods of teaching and learning methods, and enhance staff–student and student–student interaction (Mills and Cottell, 1998; Johnson et al., 2007; Mills, 2010). Existing research suggests that creating and developing an organic curriculum helps to foster a sense of camaraderie and shared purpose (Reckson, 2014; Cook-Sather, 2017). Both of which are important components of a community of practice within a higher education setting.

The authors also embraced *collaborative teaching practices*. Collaborative teaching practices take place when two or more people share responsibility for educating some or all students in a classroom (Villa et al., 2008). It involves the distribution of responsibility amongst a group of people for the planning, instruction and evaluation of a classroom of students (Villa et al., 2008). There are four different models of collaborative teaching which include: supportive teaching, parallel teaching, complementary teaching and team teaching (National Centre for Educational Restructuring and Inclusion, 1995). Supportive teaching takes place when one teacher takes the lead instructional role and the other moves around the learners to provide support on a one-to-one basis as required. Parallel teaching takes place when two or more teachers are working with different groups of learners simultaneously in different parts of the classroom. Complementary teaching takes place when co-teachers do something to enhance the instruction provided by the other co-teacher(s). Team teaching is when two or more teachers plan, teach, assess and take responsibility for all the students in the room, taking an equal share of responsibility, leadership and accountability (Nevin et al., 2007).

The literature on collaborative teaching practices helped the authors decide to take a flexible teaching approach that involved all four forms of collaborative teaching models, in one way or another. The authors decided to revisit decisions about teaching and learning approaches on a weekly basis, taking into consideration session content, attendance and emerging classroom dynamics. In addition, when guest speakers led a session, the authors would assume the role of facilitators—asking questions, prompting student involvement, challenging ideas and so on. After each session, the authors (alongside guest speakers where and when appropriate to do so) reflected upon the effectiveness of their approach in relation to session content and student engagement. This required staff to engage in conversations that questioned and critiqued traditional practices (Hart et al., 1992; Odeh et al., 2010). Although such reflection is an important component of collaborative teaching practices, intended as a mechanism of support and personal growth, for the process to “work” a degree of trust and authenticity is required between and amongst those involved in the process. Without trust and authenticity, reflective practice (particularly critical reflective practice) could (and probably will) fall short of achieving its aims and ambition.

Pedagogical edgework (such as the creation of an organic curriculum and collective teaching practices) require a feeling and/or sense of authenticity between and amongst staff and students involved in the process. Indeed, it is the authenticity of emotion and experience that helps to create a dynamic community of practice (within a higher education setting) between a diverse group of people who have chosen to come together to think, learn and be challenged on a personal and professional level. This sense of authenticity is a

vital ingredient in the creation and development of a tight-knit community of learners as it facilitates and enhances the sense of commonality amongst and between participants, which subsequently creates a feeling of belonging:

“I don’t feel judged or anything. I’m free, to just learn and be myself. No messing about, no bullshit, just learn” (Participant 7).

As Learning Together progressed, I was struck by the varied and interesting contributions from different students and I feel that such a diverse group of people bring nothing but expertise and also a not-wholly conventional approach, which is wonderful to be a part of. (Participant 8)

“I feel like this is a safe space, away from work, to discuss how I feel” (Participant 9).

Strayhorn (2012) defines the concept of belonging as perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by and important to the group. Asher and Weeks (2014) offer a similar definition of belonging as a feeling of comfort and security based on the perception that one is an integral part of a community, place, organisation or institution. According to Cook-Sather (2017), feelings of belongingness have two key components: a sense of valued involvement (the feeling of being valued, needed and accepted in the system or environment) and a sense of fit (the person’s perception that his or her characteristics are shared with or complementary to those present in the system or environment).

Communities of practice, such as LT, facilitate deep connections between staff and students, which leads to enhanced learning and motivation amongst all involved in the learning community (Healey et al., 2014). Cook-Sather and Felten (2017) describe learning communities as liminal spaces within which partners engage in a balance of give and take. Developing a sense of belonging through relational processes underpinned by an ethic of reciprocity (Cook-Sather, 2017). Such spaces and opportunities nurture experiences and relationships that contribute towards a sense of belonging. Staff and students who participate in such communities, engage in a process of reciprocal reaching, that turn actual and/or perceived differences from divides into possibilities for more life-affirming human connection (Cook-Sather and Porte, 2017).

“I’ve made a genuine friend for life” (Participant 10).

Prior to working with probation, I was a prison officer for a number of years. In our session “does prison work?” it was difficult for me to listen to some of the criticism of the work that I did for many years. I know I strived to do a good job, but could we have done things better? It is only since working in the community with those subject to prison licences, that I have truly realised the impact of things like recall. And yet, only in recent weeks have members of parliament began to speak openly again about the impact of short term prison sentences, not just for the prisoner, but potentially their family, partners, children and employers. To what purpose does a 4-week custodial sentence serve? (Participant 11)

“Life in education doesn’t always go right—in no way am I comparing University students experience to being on license—but it can be confusing. The rules and expectations often change and are open to interpretation” (Participant 12).

The reciprocal reaching that takes place amongst and between students involved in LT may be described as a form of personal and/or professional edgework as they explore new boundaries, manage uncertainty and engage in discussions that they may not have experienced if it was not for their involvement with LT. The presence of reciprocal reaching—edgework not only helped to foster a strong sense of belonging amongst and between those involved in our community of practice, but helped to turn potential sites of division into means of cohesion. Rather than dividing members of the LT community, the authors found that dis-

cussions about “difference” (whether actual or perceived) provided a way in which students bonded, engaged in honest, authentic conversations about themselves as individuals (rather than students) and disclosed (for the first time) feelings of un-belonging in higher education. The reciprocal reaching–edgework that takes place between students involved in LT highlights how complex and multifaceted the notion of belonging within a higher education context actually is. Particularly within higher education institutions that are already occupied by a varied student population. As LT unfolded, and students (particularly those from the institutions postgraduate community) felt able to talk freely about their lived experiences, the authors learnt that there was, in fact, a sense of *belonging uncertainty* amongst all students involved in the initiative. Wilson and Cohen (2007) suggest that belonging uncertainty can create a sense of doubt as to whether one will be accepted by individuals in a social environment.

“People like me don’t belong in places like this” (Participant 13).

“I don’t think that I will like students” (Participant 14).

“I don’t know what it is about Learning Together but there’s something different about it (...) Its real life. It’s made me realise that I don’t fit into a box and I don’t care that I don’t” (Participant 15).

“I’m the first in my family to come to University, this is a big thing for me to even be here doing this” (Participant 16).

Perhaps naively, the authors believed that students who were new to the host institution would be more likely to grapple with belonging uncertainty given that LT was a completely new experience for them, taking place within an unfamiliar setting. In addition to the belonging uncertainty amongst students who were new to the institution, focus group data illustrated how belonging uncertainty was just as prevalent (if not more so) amongst students from within our postgraduate community.

At times, I felt excluded [*during mainstream study*]. I am not sure whether that’s my own insecurities because I’ve always been kind of, not fearful, but anxious about going into a classroom because of my background. When I am in class [*outside of Learning Together*] I feel like I’m just sat at the end of a table. I’m not an ex-offender or anything but I feel more like them, than an MA student. I study this area purely because of life experiences, not because I was academic or the brightest in the classroom but because of situations I’ve seen people go through. (Participant 17)

“In class [*outside of LT*] I feel like I can’t speak about my personal experiences without thinking how is he going to take that” (Participant 18).

I remember coming back after Christmas and someone said to me that they thought that I had left. There was nothing to motivate me, to get up in the morning, there was nothing that excited me. But Learning Together was a real motivator to get up and out of bed because I thought ‘right OK, if I am going to turn up to class on Wednesday [*for Learning Together*] then I am going to have to go to class on Tuesday because I can’t just show up on Wednesday. I enjoy my modules now. They all tie together but I never really realised how they all worked hand-in-hand before but this [*Learning Together*] because I wasn’t motivated to come to university. (Participant 19)

The presence of and reasons for belonging uncertainty amongst postgraduate students involved in LT illustrate how important it is for those working, studying and leading the higher education sector to engage in edgework. Although the findings are limited in breadth and depth, they hold the potential to illustrate how innovative pr-

actice within higher education are not only able to open up, but address and engage with emerging issues for the sector as it attempts to widen participation. Additionally, emerging findings raise three fundamental questions about LT initiatives (based within prison and community settings) that are typically unanswered or under-explored. Firstly, is the uptake of LT amongst students in higher education about more than we (as educators) realise or appreciate? Secondly, are higher education students who engage in LT seeking a sense of belonging and connectivity that higher education fails to provide? Thirdly, are higher education students looking for an alternative to mainstream pedagogical provisions that are more able to foster a sense of commonality amongst and between learners?

“I did criminology. He is a criminal [*brother*]. Same background. Raised the exact same way. It’s ironic that we are in these parallel worlds” (Participant 20).

I remember someone saying to me “you’re on the other side”. This was in the library when we were discussing the presentations and I was like, “well you don’t know me” and I told them that our worlds were probably pretty closer than you could ever imagine. (Participant 21)

Although LT may provide an opportunity for students to generate a sense of belonging and connectedness within the classroom and amongst those involved in the initiative, there is little to suggest that such feelings are transmitted beyond the classroom. Within the host institution and indeed, the higher education sector more broadly. Our LT occupies a small, discrete corner of one department within a local University. As the authors cannot extend the institutional reach and scope of LT, knowledge and understanding of the initiative remains somewhat limited. Within a higher education setting, this is a substantial obstacle for LT and its participants. Without an institutionally recognised framework or policy that all staff and students are aware of, there is a real potential for LT participants (who are not familiar with higher education) to fall through the LT safety net at some point during their studies:

Learning Together was nearly over for me before it begun. When I was asking the receptionist where it was, and she didn’t have a clue. She looked at me like I had two heads and wasn’t helpful at all. I nearly walked right back out again to tell you the truth. (Participant 22)

“I told them I was here for Learning Together ... in the end I just said that I was coming in to see you. They knew who you were, so they had that” (Participant 23).

Although the authors have engaged in numerous events to raise the profile of LT, we cannot ensure widespread staff “buy in” and/or support, nor can we create institutionally recognised policies, procedures and frameworks that support and encourage such endeavours. There are systemic complexities both within higher education and society that hinder the creation and development of LT, which result in a rather typical outcome. The feeling of un-belonging and marginalisation amongst students with criminal convictions. In addition to the archaic nature of higher education policy and practice, we must also recognise that LT initiatives within higher education settings are restricted, shaped and limited by the criminal justice system and society more broadly. Digital literacy amongst people with criminal convictions (particularly those with extensive experience of imprisonment) provides just one example of this.

The Centre for Social Justice Studies (2017) found that digital exclusion is felt more by individuals who are experience multiple social disadvantage. The growing centrality of digital skills and knowledge means that people, who are digitally excluded, will often be socially and economically excluded and so unable to fulfil their potential. Right from the beginning of LT, it became apparent that engaging students (with criminal convictions who were new to the host institution) in a meaningful way would require authors to diversify their practice and standard methods of communication. Many students (with criminal convictions who were new to the host institution) found emails and VLEs complex and tedious, which somewhat dampened their enthusiasm to regularly check email and/or participate in on-line discussion boards. This had a subsequent im-

pact upon the author's ability to communicate with some students between taught sessions and keep them engaged with university life beyond the classroom.

Although we continued to prioritise the use of our VLE, the authors made a decision to send a weekly group text to all students with lived experience of criminal justice. Initially, we planned to ring each individual on a weekly basis, but nobody would answer calls from a withheld number. Such experiences (and indeed, our reactions to them) were important learning curves for the authors as they illustrated the cultural power and authority assumed by both criminal justice and higher education policies and practices. For example, rules, regulations and standardised practices re: digital engagement within one system (the criminal justice system) can negatively influence how one negotiates and engages with another system (higher education). Yet no attempts have been made (until recently) to reflect and rectify such policies and practice. Indeed, a further example can be found within the academy itself and how homogenised communication has become between staff and students. With those unable to respond to such method deemed to be unable and/or unwilling to engage appropriately with higher education.

The emerging findings from LT illustrate the need for higher education staff to engage in more critically reflective practice. Given the emphasis placed upon reflective practice throughout the duration of LT, it is unsurprising to find that students involved in the initiative did not just reflect upon their own experiences and practices. They also reflected upon how the authors engaged with the cohort and presented themselves within and beyond the classroom:

"I noted that the lecturers are non-judgemental. Open responses facilitate confidence amongst the students and allow everybody to feel that their views and contribution are valued" (Participant 24).

"I think to be able to be a teacher [*on LT*] you have to have the experience and confidence to be able to teach" (Participant 24).

"[*name removed*] handles him well when he is on one. Trying to show off and that. You can tell they [*authors*] know what they're doing like, it's reassuring for us to watch" (Participant 25).

The aforementioned findings illustrate how initiatives such as LT provide an opportunity for those involved in higher education to engage in more reflective, person-centred, outward-looking practices. It would seem that innovations, such as LT, provide a stark contrast to current higher education policy and practice, which choose to reflect an economic conception of the University and reinforce a consumer model of student identity. Indeed, LT could help higher education reconnect with the classic idea of a University; found in the seminal works of John Henry Newman, Wilhelm Humboldt, Karl Jaspers and Michael Oakshott (Milburn-Shaw and Walker, 2017) that envisage the University as a place for the education of the whole person, rather than a provider of vocational skills and professional accreditation (Ibid). Although a return to the classic idea of a University may be welcomed by some, the ability of such ideals to be scaled up and integrated into a neoliberal higher education marketplace, at a time of great socio-political uncertainty, are questionable.

## Conclusion

For the author's and staff involved in delivering the LT programme, the results have been extremely rewarding on both a personal and professional level, as we have witnessed the growth of individual students development and bonds being created among those who previously would have had little contact with each other. In developing this community-based model of LT, we sought to develop a new, innovative community of practice within the local criminal justice landscape. For practitioners, we hoped that it would provide a safe space to discuss work place issues and occurrences. For criminal justice service users, we hoped it would be a new place and space to practice and embrace a new and/or different identity to those forced upon them by society. For those students on our postgraduate programme, we hoped that it would enhance their experience of higher education and understanding of the lived experience of those subject to criminal justice sanctions.

Adopting edgework as an approach and conceptual framework to create inclusive, yet diverse learning spaces has helped to increase and inform the authors understanding of how people engage with higher education. It has opened up new lines of conversation with students about belonging and identity and allowed us, as academics, to engage in more frequent and genuine conversations about how they feel about higher education. Preliminary findings suggest that every lecturer who has been involved in the project has “thought differently” or “thought more” about the session that they delivered to LT students (Gosling, 2017). Although this is something that we are still exploring, the authors are left wondering what this means and whether such findings raise fundamental questions about how “we” as teachers or lecturers or academics, view, define and engage with those that we teach on a day-to-day basis.

The edgework that is associated with LT (in a higher education setting) supports conversations about “who” students are. How they came to be involved in higher education. Their motivations for doing so and rationale for continued engagement—particularly when a sense of belonging and affinity with the sector is lacking or challenged. LT may provide a safe, supportive space for students to engage in discussions and activities that support reciprocal stretching but such practices are the exception to the rule (in higher education and criminal justice more broadly) rather than the norm. This therefore means that those involved in the design and delivery of LT, particularly within a higher education setting, have a responsibility and indeed duty to manage expectations, incongruity and vulnerability to the best of their ability. This pedagogical brokerage extends beyond the day-to-day work with students involved in LT to include higher education institutions themselves and criminal justice services involved in LT.

Although there are similarities between higher education and criminal justice service provision, there are a series of cultural differences and competing agendas that one must navigate to ensure the creation and maintenance of a community of practice. For example, there were several occasions where criminal justice practitioners saw higher education as an inherently good rehabilitative opportunity for their clients. Whereas higher education practitioners, responsible for screening criminal convictions, did not hold the view that higher education institutions should, or could, be rehabilitative institutions. The cultural differences that emerged required careful navigation and negotiation, to ensure all interested parties maintained motivation and commitment to LT. In addition, it is also important to recognise that differing occupational cultures and priorities within Universities themselves can have an impact (both positive and negative) on the creation, development and growth of initiatives such as LT within a community setting. Furthermore, the abrasive properties of the criminal justice system combined with the standardised, bureaucratic nature of higher education creates a number of challenges as and when people with criminal convictions attempt to navigate “university life”.

For example, given that some students had spent considerable periods incarcerated where they would have had limited, or no access to technology, it is hardly surprising that engaging with the VLE is problematic. For LT to create a truly inclusive experience for all students in the community, we as academics need to give more consideration to how we (individually and institutionally) prepare students to develop these skills. It is also been the case that need for pastoral care has been much more intense as individuals embark on what can be a transformative but threatening personal journey. The capacity and capability of Universities to facilitate LT requires further consideration and development to ensure that LT within higher education settings are more than just a micro-community of learners for people with criminal convictions. The authors are currently working alongside key stakeholders within the host institution from departments such as admissions, outreach, student welfare and student governance to create institutional-wide support for both potential and current students with criminal convictions. In addition, the authors are working to create links with the host institutions foundation year programmes (a 12 month taught programme that provides a stepping-stone into higher education for individuals who do not have the qualifications to apply directly to a standard degree programme) for LT students who are looking to undertake a further programme of study in higher education. Although a welcomed addition and much needed step in the right direction, foundation years (within the host institution) remain limited in scope and choice. Providing a pathway into certain areas/disciplines within higher education only. Although specific and lacking in variety, foundation years within the host institution (at the very least), provide a pathway into higher education for many LT students. Although the creation of such pathways into higher education are positive, we must recognise that pathways out of higher education are just as important for LT students.

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