

Milan University's Involvement in Correctional Facilities

Stefano Simonetta

(Milan University)

DOI: 10.54103/st.227.c431

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3004-4755>

Abstract

This chapter describes the framework of the experience at the centre of the present book. It focuses on Milan University's Prison Education Programme – by far the biggest in Italy and one of the largest in Europe – a programme the author has directed since it began in 2015.

Keywords: Education; rights; inclusion; pedagogical methodology; equal opportunities; prison education project.

The project described in this volume – though unique – is one of several cultural activities (courses, seminars, photo exhibitions, poetry competitions, stage plays, documentaries, round-table discussions, conferences and book signings) endorsed by Milan University, to let people know about prison life. Since 2015, these initiatives have been implemented at the university and in several prisons across the city – with the help of those who live there. That year, thanks to my intervention, a framework agreement was signed between the University of Milan and PRAP (the regional board for prison administration), for which I am a representative. One of the provisions of this agreement is that Milan University organise a series of educational activities at our Prison University Centres in Milano-Bollate and Milano-Opera prisons. In addition, some initiatives were also set up at the “Cesare Beccaria” Youth Detention Centre and, recently, at the detention facility of San Vittore.¹

¹ As previously happened in other Prison University Centres in Italy. See V. Friso and L. Decembrotto eds., *Università e carcere. Il diritto allo studio tra vincoli e progettualità*, Guerini

The model proposed by the leaders of the workshop *Romeo Montague: Innocent or Guilty?* is a perfect example of the spirit which from the very start informed the university programme. The space allotted for my contribution in the present volume gives me the opportunity to give an account of what our work has meant for prisons in Milan in the four years since the agreement was implemented. First, I think it necessary to make something clear: the University of Milan, represented by the teachers leading the project, as well as students who every year take part in the workshops, are not on a charitable mission, nor do they want to commiserate and pity those who are inside. Their goal is to restore the rights (which, as the law decrees, shall not be infringed, nor compromised) of the people detained because they have committed a crime. They aim to make sure that art. 27 of the Italian Constitution, which states that “the punishment for a crime shall not be contrary to our sense of humanity,” be respected. To this end, prisons should rehabilitate people who have committed crimes, so that they can be reintegrated into the social system from which they have been separated for violating the social pact that underlies it. All of our work aims to make prisons “not places where you end up but rather places where you can start over:”² facilities which are not intended to mortify the body and mind of those inside but can rather be of service to them.

We are attempting to restore an incarcerated individual’s right to study and have a proper education, and also all the rights that incarcerated individuals have as students:³ the right to carry out scientific research, the right to culture, the right to dialogue and to share ideas⁴, the right to socialise and interact with others, and to keep contact with the outside world, the right to

Scientifica, Milano, 2019, and F. Giordano, F. Perrini, D. Langer and L. Pagano eds., *Creare valore con la cultura in carcere. 1° Rapporto di Ricerca sulle Attività Trattamentali negli Istituti di Pena a Milano*, EGEA, Milano, 2019.

- 2 L. Castellano-D. Stasio, *Diritti e castighi. Storie di umanità cancellata in carcere*, il Saggiatore, Milano, 2009, pp. 13-17, 95.
- 3 See A. Sbraccia-F. Vianello, “I poli universitari in carcere. Appunti e note critiche a partire dalle esperienze in corso”, in *Università e carcere*, cit., pp. 133-4 and F. Prina, “I processi di implementazione delle norme: dai diritti di carta ai diritti sostanziali”, in A. Cottino (ed.), *Lineamenti di sociologia del diritto*, Zanichelli, Bologna, pp. 299-336.
- 4 To find out more about prison as a place to foster critical thinking and a positive intellectual debate see S. Simonetta, “Vecchi compagni di strada: filosofia, utopia e carcere, da Atene a Ventotene”, in S. Simonetta (ed.), *Utopia e carcere*, Editoriale Scientifica, Napoli, 2015, pp. 7-11 and S. Simonetta, “Raccogliere la chiave gettata via. Lezioni di filosofia

make use of their talents (prisons, especially the ones where young-adults are housed, are full of raw talent and untapped potential) and to develop new skills. These things are also made possible by letting incarcerated people share their experiences with others.

The work of the departments at Milan University involved in this project is part of the so-called “first mission:” their teaching goal. Yet, this mission is not only about providing people in prison with a good education, but also about giving them a chance to grow, and to make plans for their lives. This can only be achieved if they change the way they think about themselves, other people, and the outside world.⁵ This transformation is encouraged by fostering a positive interaction with other citizens during educational activities. This gives incarcerated individuals the possibility to reconnect with the outside world, which is often seen as bewildering, staggering and inexplicable to those who receive these “visits.”

Here lies a second aspect of the educational activities we organise in prison: the involvement of the university in these institutions was formally established by including the hours teachers spend there in their official timetable, by opening these courses to all students enrolled and by including them in the academic calendar and also giving attending students certified ECTS. By doing so, we wanted to make clear that these activities are not to be seen as volunteering (as noble and useful as it may be), but rather as a commitment which does not depend on individual goodwill or the positive relationship between teachers and prison staff.

We also deemed it important to allot some rooms at these facilities for teaching and study purposes: places which would be managed by the university, so that when incarcerated students used them, they would feel like they were really attending a university class. Some of these areas were turned into theatres, so that incarcerated people who are interested in these activities would see them as something apart from the prison for the entire duration of the class.

From what we’ve learnt so far, the activities carried out by Milan University at these penal institutions do not have a corrective purpose. As much as they can contribute to the rehabilitation of incarcerated persons,

entro le mura delle carceri”, in C. Cappelletto (ed.), *In cattedra. Il docente universitario in otto autoritratti*, Cortina, Milano, 2019, pp. 283-312.

5 See Decembrotto, *Educazione, carcere e diritti* cit., pp. 77-84.

this should not be their main function.⁶ The ultimate goal is, indeed, that of allowing those people who have been convicted to exercise their rights, no matter how serious the crime they have committed. The right to study should not be impinged by the criminal proceedings, nor should it be discretionary. These rights should be granted to all those who meet the requirements, irrespective of their behaviour while in prison. The right to study should not be a prize for good behaviour, nor should it depend on the crime committed, the criminal charges that led to the arrest, or the length of the sentence. Nobody who is taken into custody (a beautiful expression which means: entrusting someone with something precious) should be left to “rot in prison.” We must ensure none of the teachers (and likewise none of the students and the administrative staff) who take part in this project see their teaching programme only as a means to rehabilitate the individuals in prison. They must be prevented from believing that these activities are only intended for those who really “believe in the cause,” while those who enrol simply to have an opportunity to leave their cells, do something different or meet someone different, should be left out.⁷ It’s not unusual that incarcerated people who start studying as a diversion or to escape a tense situation end up really liking it. These students might find a model in Socrates or Shakespeare and embark on an unexpected journey (even a rehabilitative one). This is why, from the very beginning, we tried to involve in our activities not only an elite group of incarcerated individuals who are already highly educated, but also all those who are potentially interested in studying. This way, we reach a wider audience and help them develop new knowledge and skills. To this end, we also encourage incarcerated people to help each other out, in and outside the classroom. In many cases, those who have engaged in our activities before completing their secondary education have been so captivated by our university that they chose to enrol after finishing school.

One last feature makes the workshop *Romeo Montague: Innocent or Guilty?* fully and pragmatically part of the teaching activities available in prison within the Milan University prison education project: the methodology

6 A. Di Martino, ““Rivoltarsi nella feccia di Romolo”. Lessico di legge, situazioni di stallo, aporie del “trattamento”, in *Utopia e carcere*, cit., pp. 82-7.

7 F. Vianello, “L’istruzione in carcere, tra diritto e privilegio”, in E. Kalica and S. Santoriso (eds.), *Farsi la galera. Spazi e culture del penitenziario*, Ombre corte, Verona, 2018, pp. 100-10.

used. The mock trial of Romeo Montague, performed on the stage/law court of the theatre by the incarcerated minors at the Youth Detention Centre, Milan University students and actors from the Puntozero company, follows the same procedures we've used for other prison activities. I'm thinking, for instance, of the compilation *Classics vs Dike*, performed at the Bollate Detention Institution in May 2018 at the end of our philosophy workshop *Rethinking Justice*. Workshop participants were divided into small groups. Each group, then, worked on a famous lawsuit found in myth or literature (Antigone, Sisyphus, Socrates) and built a case around these stories' protagonists. Another example is *The War of Words*, which the Conference of Italian University Rectors (CRUI) recently promoted. On this occasion, college students and incarcerated individuals faced each other in a panel discussion at the San Vittore Detention Facility. Here, they debated the impact of public opinion on our contemporary society, arguing for or against this tendency.

More generally, for our philosophy workshops in prison, we've adopted a pedagogical methodology similar to the one applied at university since the 12th century (but also at the first law schools, and nowadays in many law firms in several English-speaking countries). I'm very well versed with this methodology since I'm a Medievalist. I'm talking about the *quaestiones disputate*, a teaching and learning model which saw students at different stages in their education challenging each other in a sort of academic joust. They would discuss, under the supervision of their teacher, a tricky case which was usually drawn from books on the syllabus. As they were busy challenging each other's arguments, students were invited to switch sides to better understand the *pros* and *contra*, the strengths and weaknesses, of the arguments used during the debate. Our activities in prison often mirror this mediaeval methodology. The key factor we've inherited is their ability to raise doubts and question traditional and established beliefs. As a result, all of those who take part in this collective knowledge-building experiment – whether they be people living behind bars or people coming in from the outside – undergo a transformation: when they leave, they're less confident but more human.



52



53

Logbooks

I learned to put myself out there and to work in a team. This workshop taught me to exceed my limits, to see above and beyond appearances and stereotypes. This experience has helped me look at things from a different perspective, which I'll certainly make good use of in my life.

I've met new people who've made me like the project even more and have shown me that being different is amazing.

Martina Fisichella, 1 December

Even though I don't fully grasp the complexity and the contradictions of the juvenile criminal system, I've had the chance to see how humane these young men are. Beppe and Lisa's commitment, persistence and devotion really are part of a "mission" and are nothing, but impressive. It's only by seeing what the starting point of this project is, the one we witnessed during the chaotic first meeting inside the blue room, that I could really grasp the transformative power and quality of this initiative. Seeing Kristian put his heart into this project, knowing that he started from "ground zero," is really satisfying for those who walked this path alongside him, not ahead of him.

Mirko Preatoni, 3 December

I didn't think I would get so emotional.

I didn't think I would grow so fond of them.

I've had so many mixed feelings from the first moment I stepped into the prison, with its dreary and overly colourful corridors, to the last one, when we all hugged goodbye, and I felt proud: proud of the project, proud of the people that made all of this possible, and proud of me too.

I'm also left with a bitter aftertaste because, in the end, while I sit here writing these lines, those boys keep looking at the sky through their barred windows. The only thing that makes me feel better is knowing they lived this experience as something more than just an activity they did in prison. I hope this will be a starting point, or even a turning point for them because no one should be defined by their past actions.

Giorgia Leone, 1 December

It's already December 1st, and the crazy thing is that I'm not freaking out. I've always been afraid of being judged by others, but this time is different because I'm not alone on stage. By my side, there's a group of people I've come to know and appreciate for their amazing talent and kindness. I am so grateful that out of all the workshops at my uni I chose this one because it not only did it teach me a lot, but it was also fun. I mean, I got to sing, paint, freely express myself, improve my writing skills and my social skills. It was a well-rounded experience, and I enjoyed every single moment of it. I'll cherish even the most stressful ones, because they made the challenging moments even greater. For example, preparing the press materials for the deadlines was extremely hard because we, the media people, were working as a team, but at the same time we did not have the opportunity to meet and work together 24\7, so it was a non-stop exchange of thousands of checked and proofed emails that were never quite right, no matter how hard we had worked on them. At one point, I thought I was going mad, but our hard work paid off.

I felt so proud and fulfilled when several journalists decided to write about our project and, especially on the night of the premiere, when I saw the theatre filling up and said to myself, "We did it!" People came to see our play on Saturday night. I hope that at least one of them will leave the show thinking that people deserve a second chance, especially young people.

Everyone deserves the chance to make up for what they have done. Indeed, we're not perfect, but we can improve and learn from our mistakes.

Marta De Tomasi, 1 December