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Literacy learning and changing social practices in a community art project for women with experience of the criminal justice system

Abstract

This article seeks to understand what a group of women with experience of the criminal justice system learned through taking part in a community art project, particularly in terms of their literacy. It draws on an ethnographic study of a community art project carried out by the Collectif Art Entr'Elles which took place in a halfway house in Montreal (Canada) where prisoners can apply to complete their sentence and prepare for their social reintegration. Using a non-linear narrative structure, the collaborative sound work produced sought to break down prejudices by making these women's voices heard in public space. Drawing on Lave's (2019, p. 8) theory of social practice that comprehends learning 'as changing participants engaged in changing participation in everyday changing practice', we explore in more detail the experience and learning journey of one of the women involved. Our analysis indicates that non-formal education, especially when it takes the form of community arts projects, can play a positive role in the diversification and enhancement of literacy practices that are key to the social reintegration and wellbeing of women with experience of the criminal justice system. As such, non-formal community arts education can be an important vehicle for social justice.

Keywords

women with experience of the criminal justice system; non-formal education; literacy as social practice, community art; learning

Sustainable Development Goals: SDG 4: Quality education; SDG 5: Gender equality; SDG 10: Reduced inequalities

Introduction

Internationally, although women account for less than 10% of the prison population, their numbers are growing (ONU, 2020). The situation in Québec (provincial prisons: sentences of two years less a day) and Canada (federal penitentiaries: sentences of two years or more) is fully in line with this trend (Chéné & Chouinard, 2018; Public Safety Canada, 2022). Overall, women with experience of the criminal justice system tend to have a lower level of formal education and be less integrated into society and the workplace than the average: factors generally associated with low literacy levels (Public Safety Canada, 2022). The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) considers education to be the most productive activity to do in prison (De Maeyer, 2019), but access may be hampered by factors such as staff shortages, length of sentence or, in recent years, the COVID-19 pandemic. In Canada, prisoners can apply to complete their sentence in a halfway house, where they prepare for their social reintegration and can take part in various formal, informal, and non-formal education programmes (Société Elizabeth Fry du Québec, 2024).

Non-formal education is ‘embedded in planned activities that are not explicitly designated as formal education and do not usually involve credentialing, yet still contain a substantial learning element, which is intentional from the learner's point of view’ (Gal, Grotlüschen, Tout, & Kaiser, 2020, p. 384). Non-formal education contributes to the development and acquisition of literacy among adults (Papen & Thériault, 2016). It is also particularly suitable for people who have had negative experiences at school, as is the case for many people in prison or the justice system, who tend to reject learning methods that are too close to those associated with school (Windisch, 2016). One way of avoiding this is to include the arts (e.g. music, theatre, painting) in non-formal education programmes offered to people in the justice system.

Based on a case study in Scotland, Tett et al. (2012) found that arts projects with male prisoners had multiple benefits such as: improved interpersonal relationships, enhanced self-esteem and self-confidence, better communication and social skills, and an increased willingness to participate in other educational activities subsequently. These findings have also been confirmed by other studies drawing on different artistic forms (Littman & Sliva, 2020). Most of the studies pertaining to art education in prison or transition concern male prisoners (Littman & Sliva, 2020). There are relatively few studies conducted with women with experience of the criminal justice system on their experience of art education programmes (but see Caulfield & Wilson, 2010;

Lazzari, Amundson & Jackson, 2005; McAvinchey, 2020; McVicar & Roy, 2022; Silber, 2005; Woodland, 2016; Hinshaw & Jacobi, 2015), and even fewer reporting on the literacy learning and practices in such activities during the transition stage after incarceration promoting social and professional reintegration (Ben-Yosef & Pinhasi-Vittorio, 2008; Pinhasi-Vittorio & Martinsons, 2008, Pinhasi-Vittorio, 2009).

The aim of this article is to explore what women with experience of the criminal justice system who took part in a community art project learned, particularly in terms of literacy. For this purpose, we analyse a community art project carried out by the Collectif Art Entr'Elles, offered in a halfway house in Montreal (Canada) for women with experience of the criminal justice system. The community art project was developed through a process of creative collaboration and group reflection between seven women who were attending the halfway house, two professional artists and the halfway house coordinator. The aim was to develop a collective sound work organised around seven personal contributions, the structure of which was discussed and determined by the group. With the support of the coordinator and the professional artists, each of the seven women was asked to create a digital self-portrait or short story exploring: significant events, self-perceptions, ways of presenting themselves to others, current situations (e.g. relationships with family and society) or feelings. The collaborative sound work was displayed in two parts: an artistic installation *in situ* and an exhibition on an online platform. Using a non-linear narrative form, the collaborative sound work sought to make these women's voices heard in public space.

As part of Art Entr'Elles' activities, the participating women are called 'community artists', a title that distances them from the stigma associated with their criminal past and empowers them. As Darlene Clover (2011) remarks in her 'feminist arts-based participatory research project' with homeless women, their designation as artists enabled them not to be identified solely as 'homeless'. Being recognised in public as artists was key to challenging negative stereotypes and prejudices about these women. In this article, we have decided to use the term 'community artists' alongside the more general terms 'women' and 'group of women'.

This paper first offers a definition of community art and introduces the Art Entr'Elles collective. Next, a concise literature review of research combining literacy, arts, and women with experience of the criminal justice system, particularly in transition from incarceration, is presented. The following section is concerned with outlining our conceptual framework in which we endeavour to understand how literacy, practices, and learning are intertwined. Then, an overview

of the ethnographic study on which this paper is based is provided. The next sections introduce our findings about the women's experience and learning throughout the Art Entr'Elles project. The experience and learning of one of the participants, Zoé, is explored in more detail to grasp her learning journey in the project. As a concluding discussion, we examine women's learning throughout the Art Entr'Elles project, with a specific focus on literacy. Our approach is guided by Lave's (2019, p. 8) view of learning, which portrays it 'as changing participants engaged in changing participation in everyday changing practice'.

Community Art

Community art can be difficult to grasp, since it goes by different names — engaged art, collaborative art, activist art — and encompasses a variety of artistic practices. Community art refers to artistic practices that involve at least one professional artist and non-artists in a community working together on a common creative project (Lee & Fernandez, 1998; Lamoureux, 2009; Majeau, 2016). It generally has a political or activist dimension insofar as the content or themes of the artistic initiative stem directly from the concerns of the members of the participating community (Leduc, 2012). Community art differs from cultural mediation and art therapy in that it fosters the development of a space for social critique that is generally absent from these practices (Leduc, 2012).

Created in 2009, Art Entr'Elles is a not-for-profit arts collective founded by women with experience of the criminal justice system following their participation in the *AGIR par l'imaginaire* community art project developed in detention and in the community between 2007 and 2011 by a community-based organisation for 'women in conflict with the law' (or at risk of it), the Société Elizabeth-Fry du Québec, and an independent, not-for-profit arts organisation funding artistic initiatives that foster social change, Engrenage Noir/LEVIER. Art Entr'Elles carries out community art projects involving the participation of professional artists and community artists in a process of co-creation. This is a collaborative, non-hierarchical process in which each person, regardless of their level of experience, contributes their know-how following the principle of mutual enrichment (Art Entr'Elles, 2022). Community art is used as a tool for individual and collective change that promotes the social reintegration of people with experience of the criminal justice system (Art Entr'Elles, 2022). Art Entr'Elles prioritises the creation of artistic works that reflect social justice to which all the artists involved devote themselves with a professional attitude.

The artistic works produced are intended for dissemination in professional artistic contexts, they are signed by the women in collaboration with the professional artists involved, and they are not monetised (Genevois, 2021).

Research has been carried out in the field of social work and law on previous projects by the Art Entr'Elles collective. Fiset-Tremblay (2019) and Leduc (2011; 2012) found that community art is a space for redefining the social identity of women with experience of the criminal justice system, and for building recognition and social transformation. Vernus's research (2022), which takes a feminist perspective and draws on theories of care, looked at community art as a possible alternative to the criminal justice system, while questioning practices aimed at achieving justice. However, existing studies have not focused on the learning achieved by the women taking part in the community art projects of the Art Entr'Elles collective, whose activities have not been studied from an adult education and literacy studies perspective.

Literacy, arts, and women with experience of the criminal justice system

As stated above, a relatively large body of scientific literature indicates the benefits of artistic activities (e.g. theatre, creative writing, music, painting, etc.) addressed at people with experience of the criminal justice system. Yet few studies focus on the intersections between literacy, the arts and learning in non-formal education contexts for women in the justice system, especially when they are in the transitional stage towards social reintegration. The closest work we found combining these themes is a study conducted with a group called the Theatre for Social Change, part of an organisation called College and Community Fellowship, for women in transition from prison in the United States of America (Ben-Yosef & Pinhasi-Vittorio, 2008; Pinhasi-Vittorio & Martinsons, 2008, Pinhasi-Vittorio, 2009).

Pinhasi-Vittorio and Martinsons (2008) explain that the Theatre for Social Change, for which they acted as facilitators, included primarily Latina and Black women, referred to as fellows, who were working as social workers and were attending college or graduate school. Since most of them had been attending this group for several years, they were described as experienced writers (Ben-Yosef & Pinhasi-Vittorio, 2008). The aim of the group was to create a theatre production that would incorporate acting, poetry recital, and singing.

Pinhasi-Vittorio and Martinsons (2008) explain that, on a weekly basis, the group would meet up to free write a range of texts (e.g., songs, poems, fiction). Afterwards, the fellows and

facilitators would read aloud or sing those texts to each other, prompting intense discussions and ideas for new topics to write about (e.g., guilt, race, and the criminal justice system). They describe the approach adopted by the group as critical literacy, drawing on the work of Sylvia Scribner and Paulo Freire. The use of the free writing method, according to Pinhasi-Vittorio and Martinsons (2008), let the group not only overcome writer's block but also build trusting relationships between them. The type of texts created allowed the women to express their emotions more freely. They further explain:

The fellows have strengthened their writing, organizational, and speaking skills. Yet, this goes far beyond development of basic skills. Through the development of critical literacy, where one is able to critique, question, and evaluate what he/she reads or listens, the women are gaining more self power and developing the vision that makes for change in their own lives and in their own community. (Pinhasi-Vittorio & Martinsons, 2008, p. 35)

Pinhasi-Vittorio and Martinsons (2008) do not explain how the fellows further developed their literacy skills. They mention, however, that, as facilitators, they did not put emphasis on editing or proofreading. Pinhasi-Vittorio (2009) explains that the critical literacy approach helped each woman to recognise their voice as being valid, to take ownership of their lives and past experiences, to take pride in their writing, to transform the way they were perceived by themselves and others and to 'use language in a powerful manner, as a tool to voice her thoughts.' (p. 22) Also, according to Pinhasi-Vittorio and Martinsons (2008) the transformation that the group brings about in the women can positively impact their various domains of life: family, community, school, work.

Although this writing group involved women with higher levels of formal education and at a further stage of social and professional reintegration than those of the Art Entre'Elles project, we find this example particularly insightful. It points the way both to fruitful literacy-related activities with women with experience of the criminal justice system who are in transition from prison and to the potential benefits of such activities for them. The non-judgemental approach adopted by the facilitators and the group meant that the women felt confident to write about emotionally charged topics and share their work with others. On the articulation of literacy practices and learning, although not explicitly mentioned, it is possible to assume that by taking part in this project and its various activities (e.g. free writing, reading aloud in front of the group, performing in a theatre piece, singing in front of an audience), the women engaged more frequently

and over a longer period of time with a diversity of literacy practices. We also retain the idea that writing allowed the women to change the ‘conventional’ narrative about them; to project a different image of themselves in this liminal space of transition.

Interweaving literacy, practices, and learning

In this paper, our understanding of literacy goes beyond a skills view that puts emphasis on what people can or cannot do with reading and writing. Following the work of the New Literacy Studies we view literacy as social practice, meaning as:

- a process rather than a thing to be possessed and exchanged
- part of social practice, embedded in collective action and the creation of everyday worlds
- an identity resource, the making of meanings and persons
- constantly re-invented in different material forms, from carving on stone, to printed on paper to digital screens. (Barton & Hamilton, 1998/2012, p. xxix)

The term ‘literacy’ encompasses more than just reading and writing activities understood in a traditional manner (e.g. to read a book), but also the various semiotic modes (e.g. emojis, objects, pictures, oral speech) that are part of it or surround it in a wide variety of media (paper, computer, television, skin, traffic signs, etc.), and contexts (home, work, schools, leisure, cityscape, etc.).

In their seminal book *Local literacies: reading and writing in one community*, Barton and Hamilton (1998/2012) state that:

Related to the constructed nature of literacy, any theory of literacy implies a theory of learning. Literacy practices change, and new ones are frequently acquired through processes of informal learning and sense making as well as formal education and training. (p. 12)

Interestingly, this idea that practices change and evolve is also supported by studies adopting a quantitative approach. It is however important to note that the term ‘practice’ is understood and captured differently (i.e. as practice engagement or skill use), as the social and cultural aspects of literacy practices cannot be fully apprehended quantitatively. Despite this limitation, these studies offer useful information for understanding how these changes operate. For example, according to Reder’s Practice Engagement Theory (PET), when individuals engage in literacy and numeracy practices frequently, over time and in different domains of life, this leads to improved literacy and numeracy proficiencies, which in turn increases their inclination to

engage in such practices (Reder, 2009; Reder, Gauly, & Lechner, 2020). Drawing on the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) dataset, Lechner et al. (2021) also found that people can improve their literacy and numeracy skills in adulthood, sometimes over short periods of time. Moreover, Wicht et al. (2021), based on their analysis of the German National Educational Panel Study (NEPS), note that reading practices (captured through the number of books at home) can positively impact the literacy levels of people with low literacy. They explain that ‘stimulating environments to engage with reading practices pay off in terms of literacy gains.’ (Wicht et al., 2021, p. 126).

These studies allow us to understand the virtuous circle associated with engaging in literacy practices: both engagement and proficiency increase. However, to understand the actual learning process that occurs and allows for these changes to happen, we need to turn back to the NLS. Barton and Hamilton (1998/2012) explain that learning:

[...] takes place in particular social contexts, and part of this learning is the internalisation of social processes. It is therefore important to understand the nature of informal and vernacular learning strategies and the nature of situated cognition, linking with the work of researchers influenced by Lev Vygotsky, such as Sylvia Scribner, Jean Lave and colleagues (Scribner 1984; Lave and Wenger, 1991). For this it is necessary to draw upon people’s insights into how they learn, their theories about literacy and education, the vernacular strategies they use to learn new literacies. (pp. 12-13)

As stated in this quotation, the work of Jean Lave has been influential in the field of literacy and numeracy studies, and learning more broadly, from the 1980s, following her work on situated learning. For Lave (2019, p. 3), learning both happens in social practices and as these practices change: ‘learning in and as changing practice’.

Lave rejects a dualist vision of education that distinguishes formal and informal education. According to her, this ‘formal/informal model of education’ (Lave, 2019, p. 136) necessarily implies an analytical perspective that contrasts how informal education differs from schooling, instead of considering the richness of the learning happening in everyday life. A theory of social practice, according to Lave (2019, p. 8), illustrates how: ‘[...] people engage in “learning” (that is, as changing participants engaged in changing participation in everyday changing practice) – [...] do inhabit possibilities for transformative social change.’ Lave (2019) believes that it is through everyday practices that social change can occur.

In her book *Learning and Everyday Life: Access, participation, and changing practices* (Lave, 2019), she gives an example of a non-formal educational setting that enabled such transformative learning: a ‘production school’ for young people aged 15 to 25 who had experienced difficulties through formal schooling in Denmark. She explains that the young people attending the production school engaged, under the guidance of skilled craftspeople, in a range of workshops (e.g., wood shop, print shop, gardening, catering, etc.) over a period ranging from a year to a year and a half. Through her observation Lave (2019) noted visible traces of the learning process taking place. For example, a whiteboard listed the health and safety certificates that each participant had acquired, representing a visual reminder of what they were now able to do in the woodwork shop. Also, the disengaged attitude of the newcomers differed greatly from that of the ‘old-timers’, the enthusiastic young people who had been attending the school for a while, a sign of the ‘transformative power of the production school’ for Lave (2019, p. 107). In the production school, literacy was embedded in all activities, especially those related to book-keeping and computer skills. Lave noticed that the literacy tasks were done collaboratively with no expectation of performance thus avoiding triggering embarrassment in the learners.

Based on the literature explored above, we note that frequent engagement in literacy practices has a positive effect on proficiency and further engagement in such practices. Yet, mere exposure to literacy does not automatically lead to learning (see Kalman, 2005). It is through active engagement with evolving literacy practices that a person can transform their participation, and themselves. The constructive support and guidance of others, whether experts or peers, are central to this process.

In this paper, we have identified the Art Entr'Elles project as a form of non-formal education. Following Lave (2019), we believe that observing the social practice, especially the literacy practices, that occurred during the project will inform us about the learning and social transformation it potentially fostered for the group of women who had been marginalised, made invisible, and might have internalised negative perceptions of themselves as writers, readers, and learners.

Materials and Methods

Our paper draws on an ethnographic study conducted by Marie Michèle as part of her *Fonds de recherche du Québec – Société et culture* (FRQSC) Postdoctoral Fellowship, for which Virginie

acted as a supervisor. The activities of the Collectif Art Entr'Elles were carried out with the support of the Société Elizabeth Fry, and this organisation supported Marie Michèle's postdoctoral research study.

The fieldwork covered the entirety of the project, starting in April 2022 and ending in April 2023 with the exhibition of the installation *in situ*, comprising a total of approximately 170 hours of participant observation with the group of women. The Art Entr'Elles project, a collaborative work of sound art, was undertaken by seven women aged between 30 and 65, four of whom had served federal sentences (sentences of two years or more) and three provincial sentences (sentences of under two years). There were two racialised women in the group and at least two women who claimed Aboriginal origins, a status that was not verified. Most of the women in the group (5 out of 7) had reached secondary education level (completed or not), while two others had a university degree. Four women in the group had children. One of the women had already taken part in a previous Art Entr'Elles project.

The fieldwork was divided into four main phases: 1) creative process, 2) fine-tuning and recording of the sound pieces, and group reflection on the scenography 3) individual interviews with some women, and 4) final exhibition, and interviews with the artists and the coordinator.

During Phase 1, Marie Michèle carried out participant observation (Guest, Namey & Mitchell, 2013) during the 18 research-creation workshops (out of a total of 20) organised twice a week between April and June 2022. The three-hour workshops were led by the two professional artists involved throughout the project—a sound designer, and a scenographer—and the coordinator. Five collaborating professional artists, whose work focuses on narration, also led two workshops each: a poet, a sound designer, a filmmaker, a scriptwriter, and a storyteller. The workshops enabled the women with experience of the criminal justice system to familiarise themselves and experiment with these different disciplines. The community artists also discovered artistic genres and techniques, as well as preparing their individual stories and reflecting as a group on the structure of the collective work. One week in June was devoted to making progress on writing their individual stories and to an initial reading of the works as a group. The women also took part in three recognition of prior learning workshops led by an external organisation. During all the workshops, Marie Michèle observed how the activities unfolded in practice, noting the composition of the group, the level of participation, the role played by the different people

involved, the interactions between them, the contextualisation of the content, the use of literacy, as well as the creative processes and the procedures leading to the artistic choices made.

Phase 2 took place between mid-August and mid-November 2022. In total, 11 workshops were held to fine-tune the preparation of the individual pieces, prepare their interpretation, and reflect on the scenography of the on-site sound installation. Marie Michèle also attended the recording sessions of the women's individual narratives, which took place in a professional studio, as well as the listening sessions where they selected takes for the editing of their piece.

In Phase 3, carried out from November 2022 to January 2023, all the participants were asked to take part in an individual research interview at the organisation's physical premises. Five semi-structured interviews lasting between 60 and 120 minutes were conducted with the community artists participating in the project. The aim of these interviews was to find out more about their motivations and their involvement in the Art Entr'Elles project, their experience including the process of developing their artwork and what they have learned, as well as the impact of the project on their lives. Two women did not respond to the interview request.

Phase 4 was completed in April and May 2023. During that time, the coordinator and the professional artists worked with a technical team to develop the artwork *in situ*. Marie Michèle took part in their team meetings and studio listening sessions. She arranged research interviews with the coordinator and the two professional artists involved throughout the project after the opening of the exhibition. The aim of these interviews was also to find out about their career path, their integration and role in the Art Entr'Elles project, their experience with it, including their observations on the creative process and on what the women have learned, and the impact of this community art project. In addition, Marie Michèle observed the final exhibition and collected reactions and comments from people who had attended it.

The research project was approved by the ethics committee of Université du Québec à Montréal. Prior to meeting the group of women, Marie Michèle discussed her role with the coordinator and the two lead artists. It was determined that the community artists might be reluctant to have a researcher present during the workshops, especially if she were to take on the role of an observer from the sidelines. According to them, that situation could have reproduced experiences that the women had had with representatives of the judicial and prison authorities. As a result, Marie Michèle decided to take on an active role throughout the various activities. For instance, she gave her opinion when asked and responded to specific requests for support from the

community artists (e.g., taking notes, rereading a text of a non-native speaker, providing a secondary voice in a recording). At the first meeting with the women, Marie Michèle presented the research study, answered the women's questions about it, and collected their informed consent, which was then reverified at different points in the study. To respect the participants' confidentiality, we use pseudonyms to refer to them. All the excerpts used in this paper have been translated by us from French.

For the purposes of this article, we carried out a content analysis (Gibbs, 2008) of the ethnographic data (i.e., verbatim interviews and observation notes) in relation to the concepts of literacy as social practice and learning, as conceived by Lave (2019). Our initial analysis of the interviews led us to identify Zoé as a particular case for in-depth analysis. She was identified by several, particularly the coordinator and artists, as one of the participants who had significantly changed and seemed to have learned the most during the project.

The women's experience and learning

Although the parameters of the Art Entr'Elles project were defined, i.e. the creation of a collective sound work comprising seven individual pieces presented in virtual form and *in situ*, all the parameters remained to be defined by group. The first few weeks of workshops were devoted to developing a shared artistic culture centred on storytelling and sound creation. The community artists familiarised themselves with different media such as sound composition, podcasting, and the job of sound recordist in film and television, as well as experimenting with an immersive sound work. They also took part in workshops led by professional artists, who also introduced them to works of art, artistic practices and new techniques and technologies. The women sometimes felt a little disorientated by the flood of information and the pace of the workshops. As the coordinator explained, the project brought them back into a state of mind conducive to work after a period of institutionalisation inherent to incarceration.

As part of this sound art project, literacy quickly became essential through the activities carried out in the workshops. The community artists had to write a text that would later be recorded, and to which various sounds would be added to create a chosen ambience, with the help of professional artists. Initially, the coordinator and lead professional artists were concerned that some of the women would struggle with the writing tasks, as they had low literacy levels. In fact,

some community artists avoided writing at the beginning because they made a lot of spelling mistakes. As the coordinator explained:

Not everyone can write to the same standard, and they're afraid. They feel insecure about their schooling level. They have the impression that they're rubbish, so you have to deconstruct that [...] Zoé, she talked to me about it a lot. She said to me: 'I've written you something, but there are too many mistakes...' And I was like: 'But I don't care about the mistakes...'.

In her work with the women, the coordinator adopted an individualised approach to literacy to support them appropriately. For example, she used post-it notes as visual cues so that one of the community artists could restructure her narrative: "I really worked individually with [one of the participants...] I made post-it notes [...] 'we're going to refocus what you've written, we're going to take bits of text, we're going to reorder them'. You've got to [try different methods]." Her approach is not deficit-based, but rather helps the women to overcome their difficulties and apprehensions. The coordinator and one of the lead artists observed that over the course of the project, the community artists overcame their fears and surpassed themselves in relation to literacy. They were able to produce powerful and introspective texts. All the women stated that they did not write much in their daily life and that they had never written about themselves before the project.

As well as writing and editing texts, the community artists were asked to read and perform them in the studio with the support of a voice actor. As one of the project's lead artists pointed out, the women overcame their fear of being inadequate and developed the self-confidence to express what they wanted to say. The result is a work of art that achieves professional artistic standards. Some of the women mentioned that they were reading and writing more since the end of the project, like Zoé and France. The latter mentioned writing when she is experiencing strong emotions: 'Look, I never used to write, but then I found ways...[...] I write, but when I'm too full. When I'm emotional, when I'm enraged...'.

More broadly, some of the community artists in the group, such as Danielle, Annick and Zoé, said that their experience in the Art Entr'Elles project had enabled them to improve their communication skills and that they felt more comfortable speaking up in a group and sharing their opinions. As Danielle points out:

Well, I've learnt that I'm capable of giving my opinion, I'm capable of speaking out. I'm a bit less shy too. [...] And I've learnt to trust people a bit more. And to trust myself a bit more.

The project enabled them to step out of their comfort zone. Although the creative process was demanding and time-consuming, the community artists persevered and improved or developed new abilities. France and Danielle mentioned that they had improved their patience, confidence, and openness towards others. Zoé, France and Olivia also said that they were better able to recognise their skills after the project. For France, it was a 'rewarding' experience. When asked about their experience, the women involved also felt that they had learned a lot about technology and sound creation and had developed artistic skills and culture. To further deepen our analysis and understanding of the articulation of literacy, practice and learning, the following sections focus on Zoé's journey in the project.

Zoé's learning journey in the project

Zoé is a woman aged over 55, who has served a long prison sentence. She 'did not attend school for long'; having not completed her secondary education. She has the profile of a person with a lower level of literacy. She agreed to take part in the Art Entr'Elles project at the invitation of the coordinator, with whom she had a good relationship. She found the project interesting and already knew the other women involved because they all lived together at the halfway house.

At the start of the Art Entr'Elles project, she was 'not really open': 'I was all alone in my corner [and] I didn't talk much'. She described herself as a 'very shy' person, who feels 'intimidated' in group settings and generally dislikes taking part in this kind of activity. During the first few weeks, although she took part in the workshops and activities, she rarely spoke up to share her point of view and generally did not take written notes.

Because of her long incarceration, Zoé had little experience of new technologies. Certain media, such as podcasts, meant nothing to her: 'Technology has developed a lot these days.' Despite her limited knowledge of technology, she appreciated the presentation of a sound installation:

What impressed me was when [the sound designer] came with his microphones, headphones and all that. I was wondering where we were going with that! Then, what I

liked was his loudspeakers, where you could hear [spatialized sound] [...]. My God, that's interesting!

At the same time as the Art Entr'Elles project, Zoé was readjusting to life outside prison and had to familiarise herself with the many changes in technology. During the project, she acquired a mobile phone and gradually learned how to use it (taking photos, discovering its functions, using social media, etc.). The coordinator, the professional artists and the members of the group supported her in her process of getting to grips with new technologies. At times, this was overwhelming to her; she seemed resistant to change. For example, she felt unable to learn how to use online banking services and refused to take part in a workshop about new technologies, believing that she would not be able to learn anything.

Gradually, Zoé felt more at ease in the group, speaking up more, taking part and giving her opinion in discussions about the collective part of the work, as well as making jokes. She took part in the workshops and did the activities suggested by the guest artists (e.g., telling a story in front of the group, writing poetry, introducing herself and talking about the sounds she liked or disliked).

Overall, Zoé had difficulty with the more theoretical workshops, the long explanations and abstract instructions. As part of the presentation of a virtual tour, she felt she had 'understood nothing' because the artist was 'going into the elaboration of something we don't know, and then he spoke as if we knew about it, you know? [...] I detached myself because I didn't understand any of it'. Similarly, she stopped listening during the more technical discussions about the sound installation.

When the writing process began, Zoé, like the other women in the group, was not sure what direction her piece would take. Something clicked when the coordinator mentioned:

that we needed to do some soul-searching and find out what our ... our path, and what was going on in our lives at that time. So, I started writing in my room. And I started writing. It took a long time, you know. I'd take a sentence apart and turn it into another sentence, and that's when we got to work.

To write her piece, she drew on the activities carried out during the workshops, and benefited from the support of the coordinator, who guided her throughout the process:

Well, it's because I was listening to each person, and at one point it just clicked for me to start writing a poem about myself, and the poem I wrote was the beginning of my work. I

went to see [the coordinator], and then I said to her: can you read this to see if I'm on the right track? She said to me: "You've got it now, you've got it!"

Zoé appreciated the openness of the professional artists and the coordinator, who let her choose the path she wanted to explore for her work. There was a desire in her life at the time, and in the work produced, to make up for lost time and experiences she had missed because of her incarceration. At first, she did not think that she would be able to write anything interesting about herself, as she did not normally write about personal things. She also liked the preparatory work she did with the actor before performing her text in a professional recording studio. Her experience in the studio was a real highlight for her. She described it as one of her favourite aspects of the project:

What I liked most about the whole project was when we went into the studio. [...] It was the first time I'd said to myself: 'I feel so important today, this day is a gift to myself.' You know, I kind of saw that as a big deal. I said to myself: 'Listen, this is the most important thing in my life right now'.

Zoé was also involved in working with the sound artist to select her best takes, which were used to create her personal piece. Zoé's work is introspective, telling her story through poetic passages and others that evoke reverie or memory. Looking back, Zoé felt that her participation in the Art Entr'Elles project was positive: 'Well, I learnt about technology and about myself. I have come so far, because I didn't think I could do that... to do something about myself, and then to be able to reveal myself.' Zoé felt that her participation in the project had had an impact on her as a person by enabling her to be more open:

It's like something that teaches you to know yourself, it's like something that liberates you, because it has really liberated me. As I told you, I didn't talk to anyone, and I never did things in a group because I was afraid of being judged, I was afraid, and it's like everyone supported each other, you know, everyone was there for everyone else.

At the launch of the *in situ* artwork, although she had not planned to speak, she spoke in front of the audience to thank them for coming and to say a few words about her work. She also listened to the collective artwork—which lasts around an hour—more than once. According to the coordinator this showed Zoé's effort to pay attention and concentrate. Zoé felt that, since the end of the project, she had changed her relationship with literacy. She also explains that the Art Entr'Elles project led her to reflect more deeply on her life:

Yeah well, first of all, before I hardly read at all, I didn't write. Now I write and read a lot. I think I'm discovering the person I could have been before. You talk about reading and writing, and all that, but when you don't know your body, when you don't know your perseverance in anything, you can't move forward. You stay at the same point because when you were incarcerated for [a long time] ... You think you're nothing, you're nothing. But here, you know, we learnt that there were things we could discover about ourselves that were more wonderful than that.

The changes mentioned by Zoé were also observed by the professional artists and the coordinator, who felt that the project 'revealed her'. The coordinator described Zoé's journey with literacy as 'breathtaking'. Reflecting on the Art Entr'Elles project, one of the artists said that:

[...] the project took on a more important dimension in terms of literacy. As you can see, there were big problems at the start. Can you imagine writing something this powerful for a Zoé? Just like that!

Through the workshops and the development of the sound work, the women, including Zoé, developed an artistic culture, practised literacy skills and became familiar with new media and technologies. In the process, they transformed themselves, developing new knowledge, practices and skills that merit further analysis.

Discussion and Conclusion

In this final section of the article, we reflect on the women's learning throughout the Art Entr'Elles project, particularly regarding literacy. The Art Entr'Elles project did not specifically aim at improving the community artists' literacy skills nor at increasing their engagement in literacy practices. Yet, our analysis indicates that the group of women engaged in a variety of literacy practices and that through them they improved their self-confidence and, to some extent, their literacy proficiencies. As explained previously, the community artists noted that prior to the project, they seldom wrote in their day-to-day lives, and that writing about their own experiences was a new practice for them. Some women mentioned that since their participation in the project, they were now reading and writing more (e.g., writing to express their overflowing emotions). These findings seem to confirm PET (Reder, 2009): the more you engage in literacy practices, the better you get, and, in turn, the more you want to do such practices.

Another interesting effect of the Art Entr'Elles project on the women's learning is related to their improved communication skills, as observed by the coordinator, the professional artists, and the women themselves. Several community artists noticed that they now felt more confident to speak in public and to give their opinion in front of others. As explained by Danielle, one of the women, the activities encouraged her to express herself without fear of judgement, which in turn helped her to learn how to trust herself and others. This finding links up to Pinhasi-Vittorio and Martinsons (2008) who also found that the writing group for women they observed had improved their communication skills, allowing them to regain control of the narrative about themselves. It also supports research conducted into previous Art Entr'Elles projects that suggested that community art helps to reconceptualise the social identity of women with experience of the criminal justice system and to foster recognition (Fiset-Tremblay, 2019; Leduc, 2011; 2012).

Lave's work (2019) allows us to deepen our analysis of the learning that took place during the project. As Lave (2019, p. 8) explains, learning can be understood 'as changing participants engaged in changing participation in everyday changing practice', and this was apparent in Zoé's case. Although these elements - changing participants, changing participation, and changing practice - are deeply interconnected, we were able to identify traces of all three of them in Zoé's example.

Several people involved in the project observed important changes in Zoé, and she also acknowledged changes in herself (*changing participants*). Similarly to the newcomer at the production school in Lave's research study (2019), Zoé was not too keen to participate in the project and was keeping to herself at first. As the project progressed, she realised that she 'was able to do' a lot more than she initially believed. For example, she spoke in front of an audience at the exhibition and listened to the sound work several times, demonstrating her improved self-confidence and attention span. Despite her difficulty in reading and writing, Zoé was able to produce a poignant written piece that she later read aloud and recorded for the sound installation *in situ* and online. This also challenged the perception that others, and herself, had of her as writer. The coordinator played a key role in emphasising that her writing, and that of others, was valid despite whatever mistakes it might contain. This echoes Lave's (2019) observations regarding the careful way literacy was integrated into the production school's activities so that the young people's difficulties were not emphasised. Like the facilitators in Pinhasi-Vittorio and Martinsons (2008), the coordinator also avoided mentioning the mistakes in the women's texts. Zoé's

experience allowed her to build a more positive sense of self as writer and learner, as well as to showcase some of her talents.

Change was also observed in Zoé's ways of participating in the project (*changing participation*). The group of women were encouraged to participate in a wide variety of workshops lead by professional artists. Zoé took part in all of them, despite her initial hesitation. Her participation gradually became more active and intentional. With the coordinator's support, she revised the first draft of her individual piece, despite her reluctance to do so at first. Zoé, like the other community artists, presented her work in front of the group and the group offered constructive criticism and appreciation. Pinhasi-Vittorio and Martinsons (2008) found that such activities were essential for building a trusting relationship between the facilitators and the group and between the group members. As part of the Art Entr'Elles project, the coordinator and the professional artists encouraged the women to take part and express themselves freely. Receiving the group's validation and reinforcement is likely to have encouraged Zoé's participation. She also mentioned wanting to participate again in an Art Entr'Elles project if the occasion arises. This supports the findings by Tett et al. (2012) who found that arts projects for people with experience of the criminal justice system increase their inclination to participate in educational activities.

Zoé's *changing practices* throughout the project are particularly apparent in relation to her use of new technologies. Like the other women, Zoé felt overwhelmed by the mass of information pertaining to the technologies used in the project. They were completely new social and literacy practices to her. Zoé could have attended a class to learn about new technologies, which had greatly evolved during the duration of her incarceration. However, she decided not to enrol in any activity that she deemed too formal or school like. As explained before, Zoé expressed her dislike for activities that were information heavy. The Art Entr'Elles project represented a supportive and less formal setting for her to familiarise herself with new technologies. Zoé was not ridiculed by her peers for her lack of experience with new technologies. On the contrary, the coordinator, the professional artists and the other women in the group created a supportive environment and encouraged her in her exploration of new technologies, both related to the project and her personal life (e.g., by discussing TikTok videos or helping her discover new functionalities on her smart phone). Zoé's new literacy practices and knowledge regarding new technologies will undoubtedly be very useful in her social reintegration process.

The traces of 'changing participants engaged in changing participation in everyday changing practice' (Lave, 2019, p. 8) that we have been able to identify in Zoé's case, as well as in the words of the other participants, confirm that rich learning occurred throughout the Art Entr'Elles project. Its nature is similar to that of the learning identified in other studies about arts projects for people with experience of the criminal justice system (Pinhasi-Vittorio, 2009; Tett et al., 2012): the women have more self-esteem and self-confidence, they have improved their communication, can build trusting relationships with others, and have taken ownership of their voice and experiences. In this paper, we have also showed how literacy learning occurred through profound changes in the participants, their participation and their practice. Non-formal education settings, like the production school observed by Lave (2019) and the Art Entr'Elles project, provide compelling intermediate spaces where individuals can reclaim certain practices and assert a sense of themselves as learners. With the support of peers (some experienced, others not) and experts (e.g., master craftspeople, the coordinator, professional artists), learners are presented with opportunities to engage in a wide range of new and familiar practices. Despite having been overwhelmed by new practices, the group of women participating in the Art Entr'Elles project, we believe, persevered because of the collective nature of the practices, the agency afforded by the project's flexible creative approach, the coordinator's ongoing support (during and between workshops), the encouragement of the other women, and the project's deep and personal meaning to them. We argue that non-formal education, especially when it takes the form of community arts, can play a positive role in the diversification and enhancement of literacy practices that are key to the social reintegration and wellbeing of women with experience of the criminal justice system. As such, non-formal community arts education can be an important vehicle for social justice.

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