

Philosophy because the world matters

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Published version

REEVE, Hester (2018). Philosophy because the world matters. Teaching Artist Journal, 15 (3-4), 169-173.

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Philosophy – Because the World Matters

I taught creative arts at HMP Lancaster Castle between 1999 and 2003. Many of the prisoners I worked with were frequent returners, in for drug related offences. Soon after I joined the education team, two enlightened officers set up a dedicated drug rehabilitation unit. They invited me to devise sessions that would encourage each individual to find their voice and gain confidence in contributing to group discussion as preparation for the demands of the 12 Step Programme.

I decided to base my weekly sessions on the ideas of key philosophers following a hunch that the world might not matter very much to someone caught up in addiction and locked up in jail. I also wanted to test whether an engagement with abstract meaning could affect an individual's capacity to feel alive, irrespective of educational background and current situation.

I would start each session by writing "Philosophy – Because the World Matters" on the white board and then pass out copies of a double page spread from a famous philosophical treatise which we would take turns to read out aloud. From that point I would facilitate a group dialogue with an emphasis on a free flow of thinking and questioning with no designated goal other than to consider the reading and the slogan on the wall as a starting point for a group journey.

I was extremely taken by how most prisoners took keenly to complex and ontological issues. I was often so moved by the wisdom that they found themselves expressing that I started to make annotated drawings after each session to document the learning which I would then photocopy and give out to the group the following week. Some men kept the drawings in their rehab folder and would come back to them once the programme had started, others put them up in their cells but many liked to send them out to their family with a little boast "Look – I know Heidegger" sort of thing.