

# From Claimant to Contributor: How Humanist Entrepreneurship Supports Social Inclusion and Effective Rehabilitation

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*The gap between rich and poor grows inexorably wider not through lack of resources, so much as a failure in philosophy (Corcoran & Carr, 2019). Economic policy and society objectify ex-offenders building almost insurmountable barriers to their reintegration into society. High levels of recidivism are inevitable if employment prospects are no better than sub-Saharan Africa. Through the lens of Amartya Sen's "Capability Approach", which challenges economic orthodoxy, "critical pedagogy", which argues for a more learner empowered approach and "what works in rehabilitation" literature, this article examines Phoenix, a highly successful programme that rehabilitates ex-offenders and the long-term unemployed through enterprise.*

*Keywords: social justice, capability approach, entrepreneurship education, rehabilitation, desistance, Utility Theory*

## INTRODUCTION

It is a shocking truth that people just released from British jails stand no better chance of finding employment than those in the world's most poverty-stricken countries. Despite huge sums spent on the Prison Education Framework and employability programmes, just 17% of ex-offenders secure paid employment within a year of release (Ministry of Justice, 2018, p. 3) – equivalent to the formal employment rate in Malawi (DTDA, 2019), piii). Yet some social enterprises are doing remarkable work, bringing the most marginalised into the mainstream and transforming claimants into contributors. So, what is the secret of success? The answer is surprisingly simple. By helping people sell their skills directly to customers, they *reauthor their selves* (Holland, et al., 1998) by *changing roles* (Veysey, et al., 2009) to developing a symbiotic relationship with society. This hardly represents some earth-shattering revelation. This high-level simplicity belies deeper forces at work, forces that only became apparent in researching this case. Success relies on 3 factors that turn accepted wisdom upside down. The first of these is the underlying socio-economic theory on which so much policy and business practice is based. The second is our approach to learning and the foundations of our system of education. The third is our view of poverty and the way we set about relieving it.

*“the appellation human waste, marginalised, and troublesome has been appended. Ideologically and economically-driven decisions made at, and imposed from, the upper reaches of the socio-symbolic ladder deposit adverse effects as they tumble with gathering speed towards the bottom of the slope.” (Lloyd & Whitehead, 2018)*

This article follows 3 cohorts through Project Phoenix, an enterprise education intervention that grew out of an ESRC funded knowledge exchange partnership between the University of Bristol’s new Centre for Innovation and Entrepreneurship and Grow Inspires, a small non-profit venture working for social inclusion through enterprise. The original hypothesis was that enterprise education would benefit “survival entrepreneurs” (those forced into it by lack of formal employment opportunities (Neild, 2017) and that bringing it to those who could not normally access it would improve success in self-employment. During the course of the study, the hypothesis was partially supported, but of more interest was why. To fully understand how and why Phoenix worked while so much of Transforming Rehabilitation clearly does not (see (Corcoran & Carr, 2019) for a stinging critique of TR), required learning from those far more schooled in economics, teaching practice and the psychology of criminology. In the telling, this case study aims to throw new light on the process of offender rehabilitation and in particular fill a gap in the criminology literature regarding how some successful approaches achieve their outcomes. The study follows a combined ethnography and auto-ethnography method. The author is a phenomenologist acting as both observer and facilitator as well as researching the literature to understand why. The data collected combines observation and participant testimony collected through written reviews of the programme and its effects on them. Where quoted, participants have given permission for use of their first name and agreed that this provides sufficient anonymity.

*“HM Inspectorate of Probation and HM Inspectorate of Prisons did not encounter a single prisoner who had been helped into employment” (Commons, 2016, p. 4)*

## GENESIS

Although Phoenix started with the Knowledge Exchange partnership described above, its genesis was the life-changing experiences of its 2 directors, Mark and Eleri. Mark’s education was in engineering and business; his professional experience in management consulting. Only recently did he start to see the world through a non-scientific, non-business lens. To gain experience for a coaching qualification, he volunteered for Grow Movement, a charity supporting survival entrepreneurs in sub-Saharan Africa over Skype. Expecting to *rescue* (Karpman, 1968) “poor Africans” from the poverty portrayed in charity appeals, he found himself working with Douglas, a keen, intelligent and committed young man from Kenya trying to build an e-commerce venture in Rwanda. He had all the skills needed to deliver his product but was struggling to package them into an attractive customer offer. Tempted to advise on quick-win marketing tricks, he paused, wondering briefly about the market in Kigali. Knowing little more about Rwanda than news of the genocide a decade earlier, instead, he opted to coach Douglas to co-create new products with customers and discover the marketing techniques that worked in the local context. Between them, through experimentation, they “validated” Douglas’ idea (Ries Eric, 2011) soon realising that Rwanda’s low Internet penetration meant that opportunity was not there. Far from being a disaster, Douglas immediately recognised the value of avoiding the slow-motion car crash of promoting a product nobody wanted. It was insight he wanted to pass on because it went against all that he had been taught about business. Abandoning his e-commerce venture, Mark helped him organise Kigali’s first Startup weekend to share this experience with others. 5 years on he is a highly respected figure in the East African business community. Mark learned even more. His legitimacy as a senior UK management consultant meant nothing to Douglas whose ingenuity and determination made working together as equals the obvious thing to do - no poor little African here, nor indeed with any of the 4 clients, culminating with Bella in Malawi who quadrupled her sales of charcoal using the same approach (Neild, 2017). This laid

the foundation for coaching the UK socially excluded, most of whom had similarly huge potential, just waiting to be unlocked.

*“...a real belief in me, that I, Naomi was good enough, that I could achieve and do things and that I was worth something much more than just being labelled a no hoper ex-offender loser black girl from East London.” (Testimonial from Naomi, 2019)*

Eleri was a self-made multi-millionaire, partner in a city law firm and recovering alcoholic who lost the lot to fraud ending up in prison for a crime she did not commit. Her rapid descent from go-getter to social pariah was life changing enough, but experiencing the total lack of support for those leaving prison, especially those with the skills to rebuild their shattered lives was particularly shocking. She left prison with no home, no source of income and just £43 in cash. Advised that waitressing was her best option, this was proof positive that social capital (Bourdieu, 1986) is blind to potential and capability. Her experience is echoed in 4 video interviews with others in similar positions (LE, 2018). The parallels with Douglas were striking. Here again were motivated and capable people whose potential was constrained by their lack of access to the bare resources necessary to start a business.

Eleri and Mark met at a “BIG FIX” event where Eleri was pitching a FinTech venture for fellow entrepreneurs to share growth tips. The ESRC grant application explained how despite the skills gained in prison and subsequent employability training, few secured work, largely due to employer prejudice. Unlike employers, customers do not care about CVs or disclosures, but they do care about the value of the products they buy. The task, it seemed, was much the same as attempted with Douglas and achieved with Bella, to package skills into an attractive product and identify the right customers to buy it. In theory, by providing best practice entrepreneurship education delivered in a highly practical way, our cohort of ex-offenders would create their own jobs. That is largely what happened, but not in the way expected.

“These considerations require a broader informational base, focusing particularly on people’s capability to choose the lives they have reason to value.” Amartya Sen

## **THE WRONG INFORMATION BASE**

A big challenge with rehabilitation and helping the long-term unemployed back into contributing is that we go about it in the wrong way – not wilfully or maliciously, but because the prevailing socio-political ethos conditions us to the wrong way of thinking. One of the key lessons from the experience in both Africa and Bristol is that poverty and social exclusion are not about money. Contrary to popular belief, the primary motivation for self-employment is less money (Cromie, 1987), (Mitchell, 2004), but more independence and the achievement of their potential. Phoenix participants fit that mould too with several expressing frustration with the absence of opportunity for people like them, eloquently expressed in the quote from Naomi above. None of our participants fitted the descriptions popularly attributed to benefit claimants. They were not lazy, scroungers or stupid. Grace’s eloquence in describing her “dancing taste buds” homemade chilli sauce named after a slow dance from her ancestral home of Cameroon, Simon’s uncanny ability to read people’s tastes and design graphics that appeal without redrafts, Craig’s dazzling designs for home décor (Phoenix3, 2019), Imran’s gift of the gab when it comes to selling (Phoenix 2, 2019) – none of these people lacked ability, what they lacked was the opportunity to express and make a living from their talents and thereby contribute to society, they had the wrong label, a point that is further explored in more detail later.

(Dejaeghere & Baxter, 2014) provide an excellent description of their study of young entrepreneurs in Tanzania. Their definition of entrepreneurship education neatly describes what Phoenix is trying to achieve: *Programmes that promote self-reliance and opportunity seeking through training and skills development.* It also accords with Phoenix participant Osman’s description:

*“Phoenix Project was a hope, an eye opening opportunity where we have been given the tools and knowledge to explore our potential talent and skills in order to develop a Business Idea.” (Testimonial from Osman, 2018)*

Both of these definitions draw attention to aspirational behaviours rather than imparting of knowledge, a point discussed further in the next section, but note the absence of economic outcomes. Bar one ex-offender who was recalled to prison in the first 2 weeks of the first programme, none of the others have reoffended, which compares well with average recidivism close to 50% within a year of release. Although difficult to prove, a strong proposition is that Phoenix participants are enjoying freedoms far more than the absence of bars. They are enjoying the freedom to live a life that they value (Sen, 2001) and it is this that stops them reoffending and helps them re-engage with the world of work and business.

To corroborate this proposition, Sen’s *capability approach* (2001) provides a lot of evidence as well as a critical indictment of much of the basis for social policy and economic practice. Economics Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen argues that the dominant socio-economic approaches that have informed policy makers over the preceding century need to be evaluated through their “informational bases”. Only then can their relative merits and limitations become clear (p85). In his examination of utilitarianism, *the most influential theory of justice for much over a century* (p58), he argues that measuring aggregate well-being completely ignores the distribution. So utilitarian policies that improve the average well-being of the population may well be evaluated as successful even if a substantial minority are significantly disadvantaged by them. Put another way, *the approach justifies the infliction of a very miserable life on an underclass* (Nussbaum, 2011). Furthermore, Sen points out (p62) *the utilitarian approach attaches no intrinsic importance to rights and freedoms, is not very robust...and can be deeply unfair to those who are persistently deprived*. Putting this in context, the dominant socio-economic theories enable the political elite to justify policies like austerity at an aggregate level, completely ignoring the severe damage done to those at the opposite end of the socio-economic spectrum. Readers can draw their own conclusions as to the extent to which this was intended or simply a by-product of the wrong information base.

Both Sen and Nussbaum highlight how misleading measuring perceived well-being can be if deprived communities become conditioned to their lot by sheer necessity. (McGarvey, 2017) states:

*in poorer communities there is a pervasive belief that things will never change that those with power or authority are self-serving and not to be trusted. (p48)*

But does the fact that the poor accept their lot make poverty acceptable? Even as utility theory has evolved into rational choice theory in an attempt to overcome its limitations, the homogenisation of humanity creates further difficulties. In particular, the assumption that real income is a good indicator of well-being overlooks such key factors as additional expenditures required by those with special needs, or the poverty premium whereby the poor pay on average £422 more a year for the equivalent services as the rich (Davies et al, 2016) and the distribution of income within family groups (Sen, 1999, p. 71). This has particular relevance for the 27% of ex-offenders that come from families with drug or alcohol problems (Williams, 2012) or the impact of “proceeds of crime orders” that remove all assets leaving ex-offenders with literally nothing to fund their start-ups. Access to credit severely limited the options for Phoenix start-ups; despite approaching 4 different ventures that purport to fund the socially disadvantaged, not one funding offer was made. These arguments raise serious questions about defining the challenges faced by ex-offenders purely in relative or absolute financial terms or homogenising their needs into group generalisations. It also undermines a fundamental assumption in rational choice theory that different people value the same standard of living (however objectively measured) in the same way, particularly where policy exacerbates marginalisation.

To give Nussbaum the last word,

*“There is a great difference between a public policy that aims to take care of people and a public policy that aims to honour choice” (p56).*

Instead of *focusing on the means of good living*, Sen argues (p73), we should *concentrate on the actual living that people manage to achieve* or better still, *the freedom to actual livings that one can have reason to value*. This strongly argues that more recognition needs to be given to the unique circumstances of those facing significant barriers to reintegration with society. The prevalent assumption that the most marginalised only merit a homogeneous approach needs to be replaced by a recognition that the higher the barriers, the greater the need for accommodating choice in how people overcome them.

A huge benefit of the Capability Approach is that it makes it harder to just go through the motions. Its *irreducible heterogeneity* (Nussbaum, 2011 p35) is extremely important as is its quest to understand which capabilities are most valuable. Human nature tells us what is potentially possible but is silent on what is important to individuals. Instead, we need to think in terms of dignity, *of protection of areas of freedom so central that their removal makes a life not worthy of human dignity* (p31). But what is dignity? It is easy to say what it is not – like removing benefits from our participants and forcing them through an incredibly degrading process to prove entitlement. But how do we evaluate whether an environment or intervention nurtures such freedoms? In short, we need to look at *functionings*, (what people can actually do) as well as their *capability set* (the opportunities available to them). Phoenix can be evaluated in both ways. Every single person who completed the programme became economically active. They were able to create opportunities that were previously not open to them and make use of them. The remaining sections explain how this happened, starting with the empowering programme delivery and culminating with the socio-psychological impact that it had on our participants.

*“The people have to be seen, in this perspective as being actively involved - given the opportunity- in shaping their own destiny, and not just passive recipients of the fruits of cunning development programs” (Sen, 1999 p53).*

## RETHINKING TEACHING

While the previous section challenged the policies and assumptions around the marginalised and made the case for giving them choice, this section develops this theme further arguing that standard teaching practices exacerbate exclusion. As mentioned previously, the original proposition for Phoenix was simply to provide access to best in class enterprise education, (The Centre for Innovation and Entrepreneurship was awarded Best HE Enterprise Educator in 2018 and a Collaborative Award for Teaching Excellence in 2019). The profound impact on the outcomes for participants of the way the teaching was delivered only emerged through the knowledge exchange.

On day 1 with the first cohort, it was shocking how confused the participants were by the agency accorded them by the programme. In most schools and Colleges and particularly prison education, participants are passive recipients of centrally deigned curricula delivered in a standardised way. The whole notion of the “National Curriculum” and “Regulated Qualifications” for adult education epitomises this approach. Phoenix broke with that approach because it was the best way to enable participants to act, not to conform to the tenets of *Critical Pedagogy* (McLaren, 2002) which only became known to the tutors later. Entrepreneurship is hard enough; why make it even harder by failing to understand and play to people’s unique strengths? Researching further, it seems that paternalism is rife in society’s dealings with marginalised members of society. Mcgarvey’s (2017) analysis of the underclasses in Glasgow emphasises this point.

It very quickly became clear that there was a lot more going on than teaching. In the first session, it was hard work coaxing out participant’s answers to what they wanted to achieve by the end of the course - they had become entirely unused to having a say. They were unprepared for people believing that their thoughts mattered so institutionalised had they become. Yet their ambitions were paramount. Without understanding *your why* (Sinek, 2011), it is hard to sustain motivation when things get tough. Explaining

that as business owners, they were now the boss and needed to take responsibility for their decisions also appeared to be a novel and somewhat frightening concept that took a while to get to grips with. In the first cohort, Anthony was forever talking a good game, but never followed through with action. In the third cohort, it took 6 sessions and feedback from the whole group before John realised that his constant excuses were fooling him but nobody else. Phoenix was not about regurgitating facts for an assessment, it was about changing behaviour. The role of the tutors was to provide a framework for making decisions, but not to make the decisions for participants.

Authenticity is another key aspect. The most successful entrepreneurs play to their strengths (Flynn, 2016), Phoenix tried to pull out what was important to each individual and which particular skills they could deploy to achieve their goals. Most of them had business ideas, but when challenged to think critically about how they had chosen them and how well they fitted with their aspirations and strengths, it became clear that although they liked the idea of their chosen business, they had never been encouraged to think through the practical implications of setting it up. No longer were they the objects of the teaching process, but rather the subjects (Giroux, 1979) This was no longer some simulation or case study where all the answers could be found in the text, there were no objectively right or wrong answers, only the best fit for their particular case. The context made it entirely subjective.

Critical pedagogy is best described as a tradition or movement that explores the relationship between the curriculum and agency to act, *pedagogies of hope and possibility* (Vossough & Guiterrez, 2016). Instead of viewing education as transferral of information from teacher to student, the focus is on acts of cognition, a dialogical process in which *students, who in turn while being taught also teach* (Friere, 1970). There are strong parallels with the capability approach described earlier - which is less concerned with what people have or know so much as what it enables them to do with it. Entrepreneurial education designed explicitly to enable its recipients to create their own futures conforms to the principles of critical pedagogy even though Phoenix emerged without any knowledge of it.

At this point, it is worth pausing to elaborate on the key distinctions between a critical and traditional approach to pedagogy. QAA Guidelines on enterprise education in HE distinguishes between learning *about* entrepreneurship and learning *through* entrepreneurship (QAA, 2017, p. 14). In the former, tutors examine case studies of successful businesses, their owners and dissect the key components of business plans assessing students' knowledge acquired in the process. This very much accords with traditional pedagogy on which most regulated qualifications rely. Contrast that with learning through entrepreneurship. Here, students will establish their own ventures and learn through the experience of overcoming the challenges that present themselves along the way. The obvious distinction is that the latter is experiential, but traditional teaching can be experiential too. There are 2 connected distinctions.

The first is *prolepsis* best understood as *a nascent experience of the future in the present* (Cole, 1998, p. 184)). The early stages of Phoenix include visioning exercises both to elicit areas of strength on which to build a business and also to build motivation towards a goal that is likely to be tough to reach. These techniques are both well practiced in the world of coaching and NLP – see for example (Knight, 2009, p. 256). Prolepsis is also present in *reciprocal teaching* (Daniels, et al., 2007, p. 330) where participants become the expert on their business as they get more engaged in its creation. Unlike engineering, there are no definitively right or wrong answers, but some things work better than others. The role of the tutors, changes from instruction to asking participants to prove (and in the process critically analyse) that their proposed model will work. Effectively they learn by teaching the tutors (who ask searching questions) about their proposed business.

Picking up the point of there being no right or wrong answers elicits the second distinction, which is *praxis*. If prolepsis is a *formative anticipation of a possible future* (Vossough & Guiterrez, 2016 p139), praxis is the means of plotting a route to get there. Success in entrepreneurship and innovation requires incentivising customers to switch from what they currently do to new and better things. If what is offered is not better than customers will see no reason to switch. Because these better things do not currently exist, there is no learning resource to provide the correct answer. Instead participants need to engage in a transformational dialogue with customers to identify the gaps and adjust their product trajectory with each fresh insight. Friere (1970) frequently describes subject-subject dialogue in which people communicate as

equals and *praxis* which is a cycle of action and critical reflection which informs the next action. This is exactly the process used to discover and act upon new entrepreneurial opportunities. In traditional pedagogy, existing knowledge is transferred to students. In critical pedagogy and entrepreneurship, it is socially constructed. It is this process of social construction that brings about rehabilitation, which is further discussed in the next section.

Friere (1970) regarded the traditional practice of education as oppressive because the curriculum is defined by those in power for the explicit purpose of subjugating learners. Indeed, using a narrow view of “attainment” to segregate the less academic out of the professional job market disbenefits anyone whose skills fall outside that narrow view. And of course, what constitutes attainment is defined by an elite minority in power which hardly reflects the diversity of society. So, there should be little surprise that so many disengage from traditional education.

Mark’s experience of the Longford Scholar he mentors in prison illustrates this point. This young man, who struggled to gain any meaningful qualifications at school is now scoring over 90% in his OU business degree assignments. The critical distinction lies in agency. Rather than being told what you must know, critical pedagogy is culturally situated; a world in which students add to their store of knowledge by contextualising their own experience in the language of learning. Tyreke’s comments show this very well:

*“My main concern was that the program would provide basic information on things that I already knew. In all honesty, it felt like that in the first two sessions. But, by the third session, when most of us were past the basic level of running a business started to really give me what I needed to push my business forward... Then, each workshop became more centered around each person’s individual business... As a result, the course became a lot more informative, which delivered in concise chunks that were easy to absorb. Thus, they gave me the free will to make my own decisions, and not force me into these circumstances, until I was ready to move forward with it.” (Testimonial from Tyreke, 2019)*

Instead of writing off people who fail to engage with algebra or poetry couched in terms like “you will never amount to much”, helping people to commercialise the skills they have is incredibly empowering. It brought about a visible transformation in many Phoenix participants. It is this transformation that is the subject of the next section. Critical Pedagogy explains why Phoenix works even though it played no role in its design. But it begs the question, how can a field of study half a century old play so small a role in today’s educational policies and practice (McLaren, 2003)?

“individual-level change including shifts in cognitive thinking, education... are likely to be more effective than opportunities that increase opportunities for work” (National Research Council, 2008)

## **REMOVING THE LABEL**

Earlier in this piece Naomi described “*being labelled a no hoper ex-offender loser*”. This section focuses on the label metaphor arguing that Phoenix works most effectively by removing that label. Prison moves offenders out of society and into a *deviant role*, a label that is almost irreversible (Erikson, 1962). Stigma and discrimination rob ex-offenders and the long term unemployed of choice. A society that believes in rehabilitation cannot pursue policies that continue to segregate ex-offenders in the “public interest” or discriminate against those who have been out of work for a prolonged period. Several participants reported that the only way to get job offers was to lie about their past or risk rejection with well-worn phrases like “*you were well qualified, but the other candidate was better*” (Testimonial from Lisel, 2018). Phoenix addresses poverty, in the social rather than economic sense echoing philosopher Georg Hegel who, a century ago argued that there is an obligation on society to create the right

conditions to sustain everyone or risk a *rabble mentality*, a feeling of alienation from and oppression by society ((Brooks, 2015)).

John from cohort 3 exemplified this. He had disengaged from the norms of society and was resigned to live on benefits because he simply did not identify with the way the world works. Simon was similar, drifting in and out of homelessness and living in a caravan during the Phoenix programme. This situation is common enough in the Job Centre to attract its own label “furthest from work”. To describe such behaviour as mental illness is similar to the labels attached to homosexuality a few decades back, but now considered socially unacceptable. The temptation is to try to force “these people” to conform to norms that they neither identify with nor need as Mcgarvey (2017) describes:

*“Much of the work carried out in deprived communities is as much about the aims and objectives of the organisations facilitating it as about local needs. And notably, the aim is rarely to encourage self-sufficiency. Rather the opposite. (p80)*

This rapper’s tale could easily be dismissed as polemic, but for the evidence. It exemplifies the experience of Imran in applying for funding for his barber kiosk that intended to help ex-offenders monetise the hairdressing skills commonly taught inside prison. Applying to a “community business fund” intended to support businesses that benefited their community, the application was rejected on the grounds that the community had not been sufficiently engaged in forming the venture. Clearly the lived experience of an ex-offender counted for nothing without the evidence of some sort of survey conducted by middle class trustees. Indeed, such experience is rarely considered worth paying for (*The road to rehabilitation from an ex-offender’s perspective: Academy for Social Justice Evening Event, 2019*). Accounts of exploitation of the vulnerabilities of those so labelled are easy to find. Three of our participants were threatened with eviction through no fault of their own. Of course, in theory there are protections against this sort of behaviour, but to assert their rights, ex-offenders need knowledge, agency and the resources to mount a challenge against an automatic presumption of guilt entirely at odds with the legal principle that “*a person is only guilty if the state can prove his guilt beyond reasonable doubt*”. Even the Government seems to forget (Justice, 2011) There are plenty of other examples in the literature including (Lloyd & Whitehead, 2018) and (Yarborough, 2019). It seems little has changed since Erikson’s observations over half a century ago. The label that legitimises exploitation from outside has a strong influence within too.

Entrepreneurship offers a surprising way out, a way to remove the label. The trick is to escape the institutions and communities of practice that perpetuate the label. As previously mentioned, customers don’t need to enquire too deeply into the identity of their supplier, they do not have to verify right to work or require disclosure of previous convictions. They simply need to believe that a product or service is worth buying. Effective entrepreneurs learn how to target the customers most likely to buy – not to exploit weakness, but to discover where the need for the product is most acute and the sales effort commensurately less. This trait favours those with alternative skills, there is no need to engage the mainstream, only those who value the skills on offer. For Julie, a female carpenter in a male dominated profession, her target was vulnerable women who were uncomfortable being alone in the house with men. They respected the need to fit work around childcare commitment, indeed some were glad that work had finished before they returned home with their own children. Having abandoned trying to get funding, Imran developed a plan to create a half-way house for those leaving prison. He partnered with a property owner looking to fill rooms in a new development. Imran would work with local authorities to get referrals and receive enhanced housing benefit from them, sharing the revenue with the owner. The council were happy because housing was in short supply and Imran clearly understood the challenges of the tenants and how to deal with them – his prior experience as a drug dealer worked in his favour.

Phoenix created the environment for a symbiotic and non-judgemental relationship with society. It tackled marginalisation by encouraging participants to mix with society as members of that society and with a stake in its success. The very subjectivity of this relationship is what gives it its power to rehabilitate – it is not some abstract and objective notion of “society” or “the public” in a them versus us



way as described by Hegel, but real people relating to other real people in all of their glorious irrationality. This aspect of Phoenix, encouraging participants out to see the world through their customers' eyes and sell to real people is notably absent from regulated enterprise qualifications. By doing what worked with Bella in Malawi, Phoenix revealed a solution that was widely predicted in the desistance literature.

For example, a US research finding that “*individual-level change including shifts in cognitive thinking, education... are likely to be more effective than opportunities that increase opportunities for work*” (National Research Council, 2008), echoes UK themes of the power of motivation and *increasing offenders personal and social capital* in desisting from crime (Farrall, 2012). Both of these refer to the “weak” form of social exclusion *altering people’s handicapping characteristics and enhancing their integration into dominant society*” (Veit-Wilson, 1998, p. 45). Instead of isolating individuals from society as a whole, it is possible to change the lens through which each perceives the other. And that is how Phoenix removes the deviant label.

Entrepreneurship provides the mechanism to swap the *figured world* (Holland, et al., 1998) of the ex-offender or long-term benefit claimant for that of the business owner. What Holland et al describe as improvisation from a socio-cultural perspective, Maruna (2011) describes as rituals in an anthropological sense. What happens is that participants reauthor their self. Or put more simply:

*Successful reintegration is a two-way process, requiring effort on the part of the former prisoner, but also on the part of some wider community* (Maruna, 2011).

Both schools of thought use Alcoholics Anonymous as an example showing how rituals support improvisation. But while Holland describes the process phenomenologically, Maruna sets out a tentative theory of how the rituals might be enacted including the following elements:

- Cathartic emotional contagion that transcends the mundane
- Repeated
- Involve community
- Focus on challenge and achievement
- Knifing off the past

*Highly emotionally charged rituals give feelings of motivation and confidence* (Maruna, 2011) – a key prerequisite of entrepreneurship, which is why building motivation fills a significant part of the early sessions. Working alongside other early stage businesses through Love Entrepreneurs (a membership organisation supporting nascent businesses) creates both a feeling of shared endeavour and acceptance into a non-judgemental community of other business owners. A key part of Phoenix is the social construction of value propositions in which participants work with prospective customers to develop their offers. Working with customers who don’t care about CVs or qualifications, makes it easier for participants to improvise as business owners. They eventually realise that customers see through the label and beyond their past to focus on the value they offer. This battles Veit-Wilson’s strong form of social exclusion. Participant’s first sale is highly symbolic and builds the confidence to grow beyond their past into a better future.

## CONCLUSION

Phoenix has been a remarkable learning journey over 2 years. The approach taken has evolved massively from cohort 1 to cohort 3. There is an abundance of literature that explains the phenomenological observations briefly set out in this paper of the power a humanistic approach to entrepreneurship lends to rehabilitation. This article contributes both to criminology and entrepreneurship pedagogy, providing a useful example and explanation of why it works. The small sample size of just 21, split between long-term unemployed and ex-offenders belies any claim to generalisability. It adds to a

growing body of evidence of what works in desistance from crime, most particularly by explaining why; a gap that needed filling.

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