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March 5, 2021

To Whom It May Concern:

We are very pleased to share this follow up report on our findings from our case study of the 2016-17 season of Shakespeare in Prison at Women's Huron Valley Correctional Facility.

As noted throughout, more detailed information is readily available on request. A table of contents follows.

Please do not hesitate to contact us if you would like additional information.

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“Once you conquer the impossible, you
know that anything is possible.”

*Self-Efficacy, Empathy, and Community: the long-term
benefits of Shakespeare in Prison involvement*

March 5, 2021

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Introduction

Shakespeare in Prison's mission is to empower incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people to reconnect with their humanity and that of others; to reflect on their past, present, and future; and to gain the confidence, self-esteem, and crucial skills they need to heal and positively impact their communities. In practice, this encompasses an ensemble of incarcerated participants engaging in a months-long process of putting together a play by Shakespeare. The program also offers support and connection to alumni post-release.

Through a series of formal interviews with 11 alumnae of the women's ensemble in the summer of 2020, we found that the Shakespeare in Prison (SIP) experience appears to have at least three long-lasting effects on ensemble members. Namely, participation in SIP seems to 1) enhance participants' sense of self-efficacy, 2) develop their capacity for empathy, and 3) cultivate a positive sense of community.

This report details these outcomes, extending the research we began with our 2016–17 case study of the women's ensemble. Where that study was focused on identifying the process through which Shakespeare in Prison acts on its participants, this follow-up aims to identify the long-term effects of SIP involvement on those participants.

The process outlined in the case study is crucial to understanding the context of our recent findings, so this report opens with a description of that study's results. A more detailed report of the case study is available upon request.

The SIP Process - Results from the 2016–17 Case Study

The goal of Shakespeare in Prison has always been to empower its members through reading, grappling with, and performing plays by Shakespeare. If “empowerment” refers to the recasting of one’s narrative identity in empowering terms, then the success or failure of SIP’s program is defined by the extent to which it offers an environment and ethos conducive to the development of empowering narratives within individual people—moving from “I am broken” and “I can’t do it” to “I am strong” and “I can do it.”

There is very little academic research that adequately explains what many people have noted anecdotally: that prison arts programs often seem to provide dramatic benefits for their participants. So during SIP’s 2016–17 season, we set out to accurately and rigorously describe the actual work that goes on in our ensemble. We wanted to document the process through which SIP affects the members of the ensemble, rather than relying on downstream consequences (such as reduced recidivism rates) or side effects (such as fewer behavioral infractions) as the only measures of success. Our research centered around a single question:

How does one season of Shakespeare in Prison impact the ensemble member’s sense of identity in the correctional context?

We assumed that SIP involvement changes the identities of ensemble members as part of an intricate process, and we framed our understanding of that process in terms of Narrative Identity Theory and Reader Response Theory, described in detail in the case study and summed up here:

Narrative Identity Theory asserts that a person creates their sense of identity by telling their own story—the narrative of their memories of the past, their experience of the present, and their anticipations for the future. In other words, people are the story they tell

about themselves. The theory derives from the human instinct for making meaning out of stories. Telling a story is naturally an act of singling out and interpreting events: a person gives more weight to some memories and less to others, invests some events with negative meaning and some with positive meaning, changes how they envision the future based on present circumstances. Taken together, these acts of interpretation constitute a person's narrative identity. Crucially, the meaning of that narrative, like the meaning of any story, is changeable. A shift in interpretation can make the difference between a person's overall sense of capability or incapability, agency or powerlessness, self-worth or worthlessness.

Reader Response Theory makes two assumptions: First, that each reader will view a text through the lens of their own unique perspective and identity. Second, that a text can, at the same time, influence the reader's perspective and identity. The theory tends to define "text" broadly, including not only literature and other written material, but any subject matter that someone might interpret, so the case study assumed that Reader Response Theory operates in the realm of performance. In telling a fictional character's story through performance, a person may also tell their own story—and in so doing, they may change their interpretation of that story, which is their narrative identity.

It is worth noting that, as far as we know, no other researcher has combined these two theories into a single, unified framework. This fact is perhaps natural, given that the theories arise from disparate fields of study. But we encourage researchers to explore the intersection of these ideas more fully.

We also posited that there are two distinct processes at work during a season of Shakespeare in Prison: the theatrical process and the operational process.

The *theatrical process* arises from the performative, literary, and analytical part of the program. It includes analysis of the text and characters, creation of the imaginary world of the play, identification with characters and situations in the text, identification with other ensemble members' interpretations, and everything else that is related specifically to stagecraft, performance, and intellectual/emotional inquiry based on the text.

The *operational process* arises specifically from membership in the ensemble and collaboration with other members. It includes perseverance, conflict management, supporting other members, identifying with other members, attending meetings, collaborating within the ensemble, overcoming the fear of performing in front of peers,

and meeting the challenge of memorizing lines and learning stage movement.

We had assumed that these processes would operate more or less independently of one another. But, in the study, we found that both operate in every participant, and that they affect each other. This understanding has formed the basis of our self-study ever since.

Important as the case study was, its scope was limited. It analyzed only a single season of SIP involvement, focused only on the correctional context of participants' lives, and was primarily interested in defining the process through which SIP involvement changed participants' narrative identities, not in evaluating the outcomes of that change.

The rest of this report looks beyond a single season, beyond the correctional context, and beyond the process: it is focused on evaluating the long-term results of SIP involvement.

The 2020 Post-Release Study

The 2016–17 case study refined our understanding of how Shakespeare in Prison works, but it did not answer one crucial question: what are the tangible, long-term effects of the change in narrative identity facilitated by the theatrical and operational processes in SIP?

In 2017, we were unable to measure long-term outcomes due to a Michigan Department of Corrections (MDOC) policy prohibiting us from communicating with alumni after their release from prison. This changed in 2018, when we began Shakespeare Reclaimed, our post-release program. The ability to track and contact alumni has allowed us to follow up on the case study by asking a new question:

How has the Shakespeare in Prison experience affected the ensemble member's sense of identity beyond the correctional context?

We conducted formal interviews with 11 alumnae of the women's ensemble; some of them were also participants in the 2016–2017 case study, but not all. These interviews focused on a series of questions about their narrative identities in terms of their past, present, and future selves. We also asked participants a few Reader Response Theory–inflected questions relating to Shakespeare and their experience of performing and reading.

The most prevalent themes to emerge from the interviews were the development of *empathy*, *community*, and *self-efficacy*. Each person had a unique path to these outcomes, but everyone we interviewed described these themes' evolution from their past to present selves, as well as their vision of their future selves.

These three themes flow and intermingle, enabling and nurturing each other. For many, the development of empathy depended on their sense of community: when others expressed empathy for them, they were able to express empathy for others. The “safe space” created by this tight-knit community encouraged each ensemble member to engage with the text, find empathy for the characters—and, finally, for themselves. As they moved from a sense of powerlessness and worthlessness to that of being supported, valued, and even necessary, they developed a sense of self-efficacy.

It is important to note that this report draws on a small sample size and that participants were self-selected. However, they are broadly representative both of Shakespeare in Prison’s female ensemble members and the population of Women’s Huron Valley Correctional Facility (WHV) at large. The average age of interviewees at the time of their last participation with SIP was 35 years old, compared to 34 in the women’s ensemble generally and 38 in the prison as a whole, according to a Michigan Department of Corrections 2018 statistical report, which is the most recent record available at the time of writing.

In terms of race, too, the group was representative. Seven of the interviewees (64%) were white, which closely tracks with SIP’s female ensemble members (63% white), and the population of WHV (59% white). MDOC does not publicly report statistical data by race, except to distinguish white from nonwhite. But all four of our nonwhite interviewees were black, which is not unusual in Michigan. *Black* and *white* are the only race categories with higher than 5 percent representation in SIP, according to our records, or in Michigan’s prisons overall, according to MDOC.

There was one way in which interviewees diverged substantially from SIP and WHV numbers. On average, they had served shorter sentences than SIP ensemble members or the other women incarcerated in the state. Interviewees served an average of 4.5 years in prison, where the average female SIP participant is serving a 5.9-year sentence. The average sentence for all women in Michigan is 7.1 years. This discrepancy is expected and, to some extent, unavoidable: Ensemble members serving long sentences are, of course, less likely to have been released in the past few years than their colleagues with short sentences. Women serving life sentences are, by definition, excluded from this study, though some in-prison SIP participants are serving life sentences (several of them were included in the 2016–2017 case study).

Despite their short sentences, the interviewees' criminal convictions ran the gamut. They do not represent only so-called minor crimes, nor are they all "nonviolent offenders." Convictions included not only financial crimes and narcotics, but also armed robbery, carjacking, and homicide. Only one had a crime defined as "violent" by the State of Michigan, but five of them were convicted of crimes that involved physical violence or the threat of violence, which is the common understanding of "violent crime."

There was also significant diversity of SIP involvement among the interviewees: Among them were representatives of all eight of our yearlong seasons, but individual women had been part of SIP's in-prison program for as short as one season and as long as six seasons (the average was 2.3 complete seasons). Some were released only weeks before the interviews, and some had been home for more than five years. Many of them weren't even in prison at the same time. Unlike during the case study, we did not attempt to control for any of these factors.

What we may have lost in rigor by our decision not to homogenize our group of interviewees, though, we gained in perspective. It is striking, given the group's diversity, how similar their responses were. Every interviewee described her past self as having lacked empathy, community, or self-efficacy; some said they lacked all three.

Many interviewees noted that when they first joined SIP, they thought of themselves as separate from those with whom they were incarcerated. "I'm not like these people," one woman remembered thinking.

One participant described herself as having joined SIP with the feeling that "these women are like me, but they're not like me." As the season progressed, though, she found herself "seeing the inmates not just as inmates, but as people." Another, who joined SIP already equipped with a healthy sense of self-efficacy, said she was shocked to discover a new sense of belonging to a community. That sense was enhanced by her observation that facilitators did not judge any ensemble member, regardless of crime or background, and encouraged her to do the same. As she more fully opened up to her peers and the facilitators, she grew not only to respect the group's unconditional empathy and strong sense of community, but to actively (and vocally) engage in it.

This last example raises an important point: the facilitators play a crucial role in helping ensemble members achieve these outcomes. SIP's entire endeavor is premised on centering our work on the voices and experiences of our incarcerated and formerly incarcerated ensemble members, and we have resisted any narrative that shifts focus to facilitators because, fundamentally, SIP is not about us.

But if we are to follow the lead of our ensemble members, we must examine the role of facilitators in the SIP process—not only as part of the community of ensemble members, but also as a special case. We’ve included that examination under the rubric of “Community,” since that is what it is, but we have separated it from the more general sense of community that is built by the ensemble as a whole.

Self-Efficacy

Interviewees reported marked growth in their sense of capability and purpose, and that growth appears to have continued after (sometimes long after) their in-prison participation with Shakespeare in Prison ended. They reported feeling more self-reliant, better able to set and meet goals, and more likely to attain long-term dreams. The term for this sense of personal ability is *self-efficacy*.

Self-efficacy, according to the APA Dictionary of Psychology, refers to “an individual’s subjective perception of his or her capability to perform in a given setting or to attain desired results.” It is a core element of modern psychology and has become a standard measure of psychological wellbeing. In dozens of peer-reviewed studies over the past few decades, self-efficacy has been associated with positive outcomes in personal and [professional](#) life, and its impact on [motivation](#) and [work performance](#) (higher) and [substance abuse](#) (lower) are especially well documented. People who report high self-efficacy also are more likely to [self-regulate](#) and [set ambitious but realistic goals](#), and [less likely to inflict self-harm](#).

Some research has even been done on self-efficacy in prison programming. In 2013, researchers [measured positive shifts in self-efficacy](#) among incarcerated students enrolled in college courses modeled on the Inside–Out Prison Exchange Program model (the non-incarcerated students saw no such shift).

The development of self-efficacy is most clearly seen in terms of narrative identity development—by comparing participants’ descriptions of their past, present, and future selves. In interviews, the women reported increased self-efficacy in the past, originating during their

time in Shakespeare in Prison. That self-efficacy continued to affect their perceptions of themselves in the present, and it allowed them to envision future selves that were capable, healthy, and in control.

It is important to note that we neither anticipated nor prompted responses related to self-efficacy. In fact, we were only passingly familiar with the concept of self-efficacy at the time of the interviews. We came to the term through analysis of the interview recordings: We identified a clear trend in participants' responses and then sought out a social-science framework that best described that trend. Self-efficacy fit our observations perfectly.

Past Selves

Most interviewees described themselves as having been passive in the past. They often sought efficacy in other people, especially men, or recalled feelings of futility and helplessness. One woman said she was always “looking for a savior from a man.” Another remembered that “I didn’t even really know what the future could look like for me—I had stopped hoping.”

Every interviewee cited involvement with SIP as a turning point in her development of self-efficacy in the past. “On the inside,” said one participant, “I wasn’t for sure about myself.” Participation in SIP, she said, “gave me a more hopeful outlook on where I *can* go and what I *can* do.”

Many women described the program as revealing aspects of themselves that had been dormant. “There was a lot I didn’t realize,” said one woman, “about the talents I have.” Another woman said, “It brought out things I didn’t know were in me.” All of the women who spoke on this theme spoke of SIP uncovering previously existing strengths, not as giving them new ones.

A number of the women said they joined SIP with the hope of finding a sense of purpose and self-worth. Others had no such specific intention. But all of them said they developed self-efficacy through their work in SIP. “[Shakespeare in Prison] helped to tear down a lot of the ideas that I had about myself that were standing in my way,” one interviewee said. She went on,

And sometimes, when you’re going after a goal, that’s really the biggest thing; that voice in your head that’s telling you that you can’t. And SIP kind of shut that [voice] up... I had that real bad—that little monkey on your shoulder that’s always like, ‘No, you can’t do it!’ Yeah, no, that’s, like, *gone* now.

For most, the development of self-efficacy began with the theatrical process. When their contributions to the play’s analysis and staging were heard, valued, and implemented, their self-conception shifted. “My voice was heard,” said one interviewee, “it gave me confidence and a voice.”

Seeing their own, direct impact on the theatrical production often led to ensemble members taking charge of one or more aspects of the group’s operational process. One woman, who went from seeing herself as a passive member of SIP to being a theatrical and operational leader of the ensemble, said she learned a talent for “leadership, which I didn’t think I could do [before].” Versions of this woman’s experience are not uncommon. Four of the interviewees said they took on a major role in one or more plays—even if it scared them—as a direct result of increased confidence in their own capabilities, and all of them said they had carried their increased self-efficacy into life after prison.

Present Selves

All interviewees described themselves currently as having greater self-efficacy than in the past, though the terms of those descriptions differed in degree. Some women saw themselves as

having already attained their desired level of competence; they spoke about what they have accomplished since release from prison and their pride in those accomplishments. Others focused on a growing feeling of capability and confidence: they were still learning to navigate the challenges of life post-release, but felt far better equipped to succeed in that realm.

One thing held true regardless of the women's perceived stage of self-efficacy development: they universally saw themselves as being more independent and capable than their past selves. "In prison," said one woman, "I really downplayed what I could do, and when I got out here and realized what I could do and who I was, truly, I thrived. I mean, I just thrived. ... I did everything without very much help, financially. I did it all alone. And I was so proud of that." Another, who started a business and bought a car on her own within a year of release, put it simply: "I am excelling at life."

For many, current self-efficacy was expressed at least in part in a drive for professional development and entrepreneurship. One woman said she sought out nonprofit social services work as a result of her experience with SIP—she is now executive director of a housing nonprofit in West Michigan. Another developed a goal of running a production company, which she has founded and incorporated as a 501(c)(3); she ascribed her professional success in part to skills she learned in SIP. A third, who was released recently, said she felt that she was finally able to articulate clear professional goals and overcome the obstacles to pursuing them. Greater professional ambitions, job retention, and workplace performance are well documented hallmarks of high self-efficacy.

Another life outcome linked to high self-efficacy is reduced substance abuse. One woman spoke directly about the effect of SIP involvement on her sobriety, saying plainly that the program

“gave me the tools to live out in the world sober that I probably wouldn’t have gotten if I hadn’t been in Shakespeare.”

It is important to emphasize that, for this group of women, self-efficacy was often expressed in terms of independence—both financial and emotional—from other people, and especially from men. “Being walked all over,” said one who described her past self as dependent on male romantic partners, “is not an option.” Participants most often cited theatrical causes for this shift, rather than operational ones. One woman, who also described herself as subservient to men in the past, said that seeing “women playing men’s roles, me myself playing male characters—it just showed me that women are able to do anything they put their minds to.”

Asked which character in Shakespeare she most identifies with right now, one woman said she saw herself in William Shakespeare himself: “He is the author. ... And I feel like I am the author of this story, and I am going to determine how it ends, how it plays out. Redemption is possible if I want it to be possible. The decisions are all *mine*.”

Future Selves

Interviewees’ visions of their future selves tended to be both specific and attainable, grounded both in healthy self-efficacy and realistic assessment of the challenges facing them. Those who have already attained much of what they envisioned for themselves described the ways in which they would continue to build on their goals. Those who have not yet begun concrete work on fulfilling specific goals were nonetheless confident in their ability to succeed; some already had fairly detailed plans in mind.

An independence built on self-efficacy was a hallmark of interviewees' envisioned futures. "I can take care of myself," said one, "I have a home, I have friends and family, and all my bills are paid, and I'm staying my ass out of trouble." Another, who said her plan had been to "sell crack" before prison, was able to envision a path for herself that didn't involve the drug trade, in which she wants (and can obtain) "everyday things."

Many also saw themselves pursuing dreams and creative ambitions as a result of SIP involvement. "I never thought I could ever do anything that I was interested in," said one woman. "Shakespeare [in Prison] was the first time I ever was like, 'Fuck, I can do whatever I want! I can do this. If I put my mind to it and really try to be the best—do your best, you can actually make it.' And I didn't think that before." Another said simply, "Now I can do what I was *gifted* to do."

All of the women interviewed described an increased sense of agency; they see themselves as determining their own futures, where, in the past, they had seen their fates as largely dependent on the decisions of others. Shakespeare in Prison "allow[ed] me to believe in myself that I could do [the things I want to do]," said one woman. "It gave me an option of, like, 'You know what? You could be this, or you could have this.'"

Another woman, the one who identified her present self with Shakespeare, said that her future self is like "William [Shakespeare], again. Good old William." She went on: "His characters are not in control. ... Shakespeare is in control. He's writing their story. ... And *I* want to be the one that makes things happen in *my* life."

Empathy

Shakespeare in Prison appears to foster greater empathy for oneself and others in its participants, and that effect seems to extend long after direct involvement in the program has ceased.

Interviewees reported feeling less alienated from, more understanding of, and more compassionate towards others—and, ultimately, themselves.

Empathy is a core principle of psychology, defined (in part) in the APA Dictionary of Psychology as “understanding another person from his or her frame of reference rather than one’s own.” It is understood to be crucial in forming healthy relationships and avoiding antisocial behaviors, which is especially notable in the context of working with incarcerated people.

Importantly, participants tended to state that the ability to be empathetic for others led to *self-compassion*, a related principle that involves the ability to hold negative or painful thoughts about oneself at a healthy distance, rather than internalizing them, and seeing one’s own faults as part of common human experience, rather than as isolating defects. [Recent scholarship](#) has linked self-compassion to *increased* [happiness](#), [helpfulness](#), and [personal initiative](#)—and *reduced* [racial bias](#) and [aggressive attitudes during conflict escalation](#).

(Interviewees, it should be noted, described a clear, two-way link between empathy and the sense of positive *community* that is the subject of the next section. We will address that connection there.)

Empathy for Fellow Prisoners

One of the most common responses when we asked interviewees to describe their past selves was a sense of separateness from—and superiority to—other incarcerated women. “I always thought of myself as somebody different,” said one woman.

But early in the program, many women described seeing what they had in common with their fellow ensemble members. “I went to prison,” said one interviewee, “and I was like, ‘I’m not like any of these people. I’m not like them.’ Well, I was.” Importantly, this sense of common ground was about not about learning to see themselves as lower or more abject; it was about realizing the full humanity of the other incarcerated women. One participant described a moment early in her first season of SIP: “I’m looking at these women and I’m, like, ‘These women are like me. ... They’re intelligent, ... they had a lot of great ideas and opinions, and they’d been through some—some shit. They’ve all been through just traumatic experiences, just like myself.” Another said that SIP helped her learn not to judge: “You never know what’s going on until you actually sit into that Shakespeare ensemble and learn about people and their weaknesses and the strong points.”

Empathy for Characters, Empathy for People

Interviewees described more general development of their empathetic capacity, and mostly in an explicitly theatrical way. The act of empathizing with a fictional character—an essential element of theatre—led to subsequent growth in the ability to empathize with people. “I didn’t ever want to be quick to judge a character,” said one interviewee, “because I don’t want anybody to be quick to judge me. And I think I learned to be more empathetic and open-minded and really explore people and their pasts before I make a decision about what type of person they are.”

This process of enhancing empathy by performing the role of a fictional character is core to our understanding of how Shakespeare in Prison works. Interestingly, [there is a body of research](#) to suggest that [merely reading](#) character-driven, fictional narratives [enhances empathy](#). Less research has been done on performance, which is why we had to combine theories from disparate fields—Reader Response Theory from literary theory and Narrative Identity Theory from social science—to describe the process in our 2016–2017 case study. But the words of interviewees bore out our proposed connection between Reader Response and Narrative Identity.

Sometimes, simply watching other women take on different roles enhanced SIP participants' capacity for empathy. Observing several women playing the same character differently, said one participant, “opened my mind more to [how] there's no one way to look at something. Everything has so many different perspectives.” Another remembered that SIP “helped me to be kinder to people that I don't understand. Because I had to understand. It wasn't a situation I could walk away from and just be like, ‘Meh. It's not my shit.’ It was everyone's shit.”

And, some interviewees said, working through each character's actions and reactions helped them handle the complexities of human interactions outside of prison. “Shakespeare made all these characters, and ... you can dive deeper into who they are as a being,” said one woman. She continued, in a nearly perfect encapsulation of the Reader Response/Narrative Identity connection: “Even if they're like, you know, a villain in the story, just being able to empathize with those people [in the play] and then see their side... [gives] the ability to really, truly try to understand someone else [in the real world] and their plight, and ponder upon what my reaction would be, should be, or how I should deal with the situation beforehand.”

Another woman recalled how important it was to carefully read the plays, looking for the intention behind each character's words. That standard theatre practice taught her to pay closer attention to what people in her life were actually trying to say: "[When someone says something to me,] I'm, like, 'Okay, what I'm hearing is——. Is that it? Is that accurate?' ... Because what is *said* and what is *heard* are usually different."

Developing Empathy for Oneself

Through both theatrical and operational processes, participants began to develop self-compassion, empathy's internal counterpart. Self-compassion has generally been defined as having three components: first, the ability to forgive oneself for mistakes; second, the ability to see one's faults as normal and part of human experience, not as unusual or isolating defects; and third, the ability to be mindful of one's problems and pain without "over-identifying" with them and seeing them as immutable parts of one's character.

Almost to a woman, interviewees described their past selves as lacking self-compassion. This fact should come as no surprise: It is both self-evident and well documented that one's ego is dealt a significant blow by incarceration (to say nothing of the various traumas that almost universally predate criminal behavior—and the emotional toll of criminal behavior itself).

Ensemble members described their past selves in starkly judgmental terms: "broken"; "naïve"; "a hot-mess dumbass"; "a sad, little, lost girl"; "not knowing where I fit in anything"; "stuck in a bunch of mess."

But every interviewee who spoke of lacking self-compassion described her time in SIP as a turning point. One woman put it quite simply: “I saw myself not as a piece of shit anymore, but just as [having] a character flaw. You know, me *as a whole* isn’t bad, just some of my choices.”

Interviewees most often described self-compassion arising through the theatrical process.

Identifying with Shakespeare’s characters—and needing to see both the positive and negative traits—helped them see themselves as similarly complex admixtures. “We did dive so much into certain characters,” said one participant, saying the process revealed “my motives for why I did things in the past and how that shaped who I was in the present.”

By seeing the good in these characters, ensemble members could begin to identify what was good about themselves. And, just as importantly, seeing their own flaws mirrored in characters from an entirely different time and culture revealed those flaws to be universal and common to humanity, rather than specific to them and isolating.

“All the characters are relatable,” said one ensemble member, “and they can show ... the faults and the shortcomings, and also the things that are good about you that are harder to recognize in yourself and easier to recognize in others. And then you almost can see, like, a mirror and say, ‘Oh, yeah, I guess I am kind of like that.’”

But self-compassion did not arise only from the theatrical process in SIP; often, it was a result of the operational process—the trust and safety built in the room. “I feel I was able to be open and vulnerable,” said one woman, “and it enhanced my personality. Now I feel like I don’t have to hold my feelings back, or I don’t have to be ashamed of how I feel, or how I *don’t* feel.”

Feeling like an integral part of an ensemble, some interviewees said, helped them see value in themselves. “Through Shakespeare [in Prison],” said one woman, “I realized I *am* a great person.” Another said that, for the first time, she can say, “I like myself.” She went on: “Who I am is just fine. And that’s a beautiful thing.”

Community

We found that Shakespeare in Prison imparts a positive sense of community to its participants, a sense that continues long after release from prison. The SIP community, as defined by our interviewees, primarily included the women who actively worked together on a production, but it often extended to larger groups: the community of past and present SIP participants (often explicitly including our men's ensemble, with whom they had never even communicated), the entire community of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people, and the global theatrical and Shakespearean communities. It also involved the special role of facilitators in the ensemble, which we will deal with separately.

Community, for our purposes, refers to belonging to a group with shared characteristics and experiences. In recent years, the “psychological sense of community” has become a common framework for conceiving of communities based on something other than geography. According to the APA Dictionary of Psychology, community tends to form around: “(a) commonality of interests, attitudes, and values; (b) a general sense of belonging to a unified, socially integrated group; (c) members' self-identification as community members.” For many of the women we interviewed, the sense of community came down to having found “my people.” Importantly, this new community was always defined in terms of personal growth, either as a positive shift away from a community that did not serve them, or as a move away from profound alienation and isolation and into the world of healthy human relationships.

Research suggests that developing a positive sense of community can [enhance people's resiliency](#), [counter the isolating effects of interpersonal trauma](#), and [foster a sense of well-being](#).

It is also a primary predictor of [volunteerism and other prosocial behavior](#).

Community and empathy are intertwined and interrelated. Participants tended to talk about increased self-efficacy as a distinct topic of conversation, but they almost always discussed empathy and community in the same breath. For some women, learning empathy was what allowed them to feel a part of the SIP community. For others, it was the sense of community that allowed them to experience empathy. For all of them, the two benefits worked in synergy. (This interrelation—and its role in recovering from trauma—[is supported by recent research](#).)

Asked what she got out of her experience with SIP, one woman replied: “People supporting and helping one another, which I didn’t think existed. But it does.”

The SIP Environment

Most of the interviewees cited the environment of an SIP meeting as crucial to their ability to feel like a part of the community. One theme cropped up again and again: the feeling that they were not being judged.

“No judgment” was the phrase that most commonly appeared when we asked interviewees about how SIP helped them grow. “I wanted to get a safe place to be myself while learning new things,” one participant recalled. “I wanted to be in a space where I could laugh, and it’d be okay. And act goofy, and not get in trouble for it. ... And not feel just utterly alone.” Another, who entered the program when there were a lot of longtime participants in the group, recalled,

“Especially the older [i.e. more experienced] ensemble members were really just super friendly right from jump, and it made me feel comfortable enough to open up right away.”

Many of the women used the word “family” to describe the psychological sense of community they gained from SIP involvement. “Family” provided a shorthand for a space in which they did not feel judged, in which they felt supported, and in which they felt free to be themselves. One said, “I got a place to go and express exactly what I was feeling without fear of any kind of judgment or [being] made fun of or anything like that. What I got was a family.”

Interviewees’ use of “family” also included the ability to bicker, argue, or even have long-term disagreements without threatening the fundamental sense of connection to the ensemble. As facilitators, we have observed all sorts of conflict (except, thankfully, for physical) in the ensemble over the years. None of the interviewees—even those who had serious issues with conflict within the ensemble—dwelled on specifics. A few referred to “bad days” or “fighting” or “losing patience,” but always in the context of overcoming those obstacles in service of the larger goal.

Some also echoed a sentiment we have often heard from ensemble members over the years: the feeling of not being in prison. We understand these expressions of being “not in prison” as shorthand for feeling welcomed, safe, and free—and never in a way that posed a danger. They described healthy disinhibition, not recklessness; agency, not impunity. As one woman recalled, “I didn’t feel like I was, you know, *inside*. I didn’t feel like I was incarcerated. I actually felt like I was *outside* with family. You guys made it so welcoming. I didn’t feel controlled in there. I didn’t feel like I didn’t have a voice.”

Building a Team

For many women in SIP, working on a team was important to developing their sense of community. Theatre is inherently collaborative, and interviewees often described the collaboration as a path to a feeling of belonging that has stayed with them through the years. “We were as one,” said one ensemble member, “There were no big ‘I’s and little ‘you’s; we were as one.”

They also described the feeling of overcoming challenges together as key to building the SIP community. Some of those challenges were externally imposed by prison life or the demands of putting on a play. Others arose from conflict within the ensemble—the same conflicts that fell under the rubric of “family,” as described in the previous section—but interviewees remembered the infighting as simply another challenge to overcome. “Working with others through the good days, through the bad days, and then, in the end, getting something out of it,” said one interviewee, “through all the fights, and all the wrong lines said, and all the mishaps and funny situations and bloopers. We did this *together*. We just created something that can bring someone else joy, for just even a small moment. It’s *so* awesome. It’s fun.”

Notably, many of the interviewees—all of whom are out of prison, some for as long as five or more years—said that membership in the SIP community is still central to their identities. Several of them expressed specific interest in working with SIP in an official capacity—as a facilitator, a spokesperson, or, as one woman offered, “to support Shakespeare [in Prison] as much as I possibly can in the future, whether it be financially supportive, volunteer, whatever it may be.”

The Role of Facilitators

Interviewees, to a woman, spoke forcefully about the importance of facilitators to their ability to develop self-efficacy, empathy, and community. We have located this section within “community,” because facilitators are, after all, members of the SIP community. But the role of facilitators is also a special case that goes beyond the positive sense of community described above.

This examination is long overdue. We have long understood that facilitators play a crucial supporting role in the work of SIP, but we have chosen to focus more on the “supporting” part of that description and less on the ways in which facilitators are crucial. No longer. Our alumnae have pushed us to correct this oversight, and they did so unprompted—we asked no questions designed to elicit responses about facilitators. The word “facilitator” did not appear in our interview script. So it was impossible to ignore the message: facilitators are a central aspect of the SIP process, if not *the* central aspect.

Speaking about facilitators, interviewees focused on three things: that facilitators “saw me as a human being,” that facilitators always show up and put all their energy into the work, and that facilitators are available to support MDOC-approved alumni after their release from prison (in our Shakespeare Reclaimed program).

(“You saw me as a human being” requires a brief explanation. This sentiment, put one way or another, was nearly ubiquitous among interviewees. We understand it to include several common refrains from the interviews: facilitators’ nonjudgmental attitude, belief in participants’ abilities,

and willingness to encourage them and push them when necessary. Being seen “as a human being” surely encompasses more, and less tangible, things than those, but they are a start.)

Lack of judgment was a common theme in interviews. One woman put it plainly: “Not [being] judge[d]. That helped me get through [prison]. Not being judge[d] by the facilitators.”

Incarcerated people often feel intense shame and self-consciousness, so being met with openness was important to many participants. “You met me at my lowest point,” a woman recalled, speaking to SIP director Frannie Shepherd-Bates, “and you’re still here.” She went on to emphasize that “you didn’t ever appear like you were afraid of us.”

Equally important was the sense that facilitators had faith in participants’ abilities. One woman, an accomplished artist, echoed a common sentiment when she said, “You guys just gave me that encouragement and support... Even beyond Shakespeare [in Prison]. Like, with my art and stuff. You guys helped me believe in myself.” Another said, “It didn’t matter if they thought you were wrong [about interpreting Shakespeare]. They still validated your opinion... It made you feel like you mattered. Like you were important.”

Facilitators’ consistency was also key—it provided participants with a sense of stability and the feeling that they were a priority. An interviewee recalled that “without you guys, I kind of would have drifted in [prison].” One woman said that she was transformed merely by facilitators’ steadfast efforts to show up for every session. “That *itself* changes a person,” she said.

Some women focused on facilitators’ willingness to enter a prison, specifically. “You guys were willing to walk into a place where we were deemed ‘horrible people’ and the scum of the earth and dangerous, violent, manipulative,” one woman said. She went on, “The fact that you guys

were willing to come in and put yourselves in that position and *still* look at us as humans said a lot.” Another recalled that facilitators came to prison “despite all the challenges. Despite all the stereotypes. Despite the crimes that some of us committed. And you came in there and said we were human, and you tried to show us this gift that you had. And you passed on that gift to us.”

Shakespeare Reclaimed

We focused our questions narrowly on the in-prison experiences of our ensemble members in our interviews. But every interviewee, unprompted, chose to speak about the value of Shakespeare Reclaimed, the post-release program of SIP. Our programming after release isn’t strictly covered in this report, which is about the value of SIP’s in-prison component, but several of the women we interviewed mentioned the *in-prison* value of knowing that they would be able to continue a professional relationship with SIP facilitators upon release.

One woman, who had just recently been paroled, said that being in touch with facilitators during her first few days home made her feel more stable. Another, who was paroled years ago, said that having healthy contact with facilitators, who knew her in the past, helps her stay grounded now.

And even in prison, said one woman, “when we found out that [we] could still continue working with you guys [after we went home]... that was kind of a game-changer.” She went on to say that the offer of a continuing professional relationship encouraged her to more fully buy in during her time in prison. “If you’re going to truly open up to somebody and work with them,” she said, “[it] makes it easier to know that [when you leave prison]—that’s not *it*. That’s not the end.”

Conclusion

SIP has Lasting Positive Effects on Ensemble Members

Through a series of formal interviews, we found that Shakespeare in Prison has three long-lasting effects on its participants: enhanced self-efficacy, more fully developed empathy for oneself and others, and a positive sense of community. All of these traits are associated with positive outcomes in work and life, and all three are especially important for people who have been incarcerated, as they face substantial challenges in employment, housing, and community support upon return.

None of these themes was explicitly prompted in the questions we asked; we arrived at them after analyzing recordings of interviews conducted with 11 alumnae of the women's ensemble. We used the framework of the case study we conducted in the 2016–2017 season, which proposed a novel theoretical framework for describing the effect of SIP on its participants: a combination of Narrative Identity Theory, from social science, and Reader Response Theory, from literary studies. In accordance with Narrative Identity Theory, we asked interviewees to reflect on their past selves, define their present selves, and envision their future selves. And in accordance with Reader Response Theory, we asked interviewees to name a character from one of Shakespeare's plays whom they identified with their past, present, and future selves.

Personal identification with a character—as either cause or effect of a shift in a participant's identity—is at the heart of how SIP works. That process is described in the 2016–2017 case study's combination of Reader Response and Narrative Identity Theories. And, in accordance with both theories, the interpretive process is ongoing. Even understanding of one's past self can

shift dramatically. In 2016, an interviewee might identify with Lady Anne's helplessness or Iago's addiction to power. But asked in 2020 about her past self, a participant might say she identified with Juliet's whole-heartedness or Kent's undying loyalty. Far from an indication of faulty memory, this discrepancy is a sign of the ongoing revision of the ensemble member's narrative identity—and her evolving understanding of Shakespeare's texts.

It is important to note that, although we found powerful evidence of growth in self-efficacy, empathy, and positive community, we did not anticipate or attempt to elicit any of those responses. None of those words—or their synonyms—appeared in the questions we asked. We arrived at those terms after the fact: We annotated recordings of the interviews and identified three clear trends. But we had no language for those trends, so we set out to find an established social-science vocabulary for describing them. So it was surprising to find such uniformity in responses. Every interviewee at least touched on the three themes described in this report. Most spoke at length about all three.

Each of these connections deserves further attention from researchers—not only to better understand SIP participants, but to learn more about the in-prison experiences that can benefit returning citizens everywhere. The growth suggested by our interviews was powerful, indeed.

Another Conclusion: Why Shakespeare?

Almost none of what we have described above seems to have anything to do specifically with Shakespeare. It would be reasonable to ask whether our objectives could be met just as well (or better) by using some other type of text or some other format.

It is especially important to think about our chosen texts now, in the midst of a global movement to “decolonize” or “democratize” Shakespeare. No one who works with Shakespeare can claim ignorance of the material’s potential to perpetuate harmful cultural narratives, particularly when working in marginalized communities. Practitioners’ sensitivity when exploring the text with program participants is key.

The SIP approach attempts to avoid the pitfalls of “doing Shakespeare” with marginalized people by centering the program around the voices and experiences of our participants: specifically, by creating an environment in which ensemble members can empower themselves. Shakespeare in Prison prioritizes process over results and personal empowerment over artistry; it is, very explicitly, neither a class nor a traditional rehearsal process. Facilitators are not “teachers” or “directors,” incarcerated ensemble members are not “students,” and we resist anything that enforces the norms (and power dynamics) of a classroom. This non-hierarchical approach democratizes Shakespeare by giving participants complete ownership of the process, from interpreting the text to conceptualizing the performance. As facilitators, we are fundamentally unconcerned with our own views of Shakespeare and his plays; we are deeply concerned with our participants’ views of Shakespeare, his plays, and everything else. But we are most concerned with our participants’ personal growth—as defined and achieved *by them*.

We also believe that Shakespeare’s texts are uniquely suited to this approach. So perhaps the question is better put this way: Why Shakespeare—the SIP way?

We’ve never been satisfied with a facile response to that question, so we put it directly to our interviewees. Answers to this question broke down into two categories: responses about the content and language of Shakespeare’s plays, and responses about what Shakespeare represents

in our culture. This section deserves more considered and focused study in the future, but the interviews provided some clarity about the value of Shakespeare's works, specifically.

The open-endedness of Shakespeare's plays came up often. "It's so easy and it's so natural to dig into yourself when you get into Shakespeare," said one woman, "because there's so many ways you can interpret these characters. And there's so many avenues you can go down, especially when you're working with other people who are also figuring out how many ways they can interpret these characters." Another said that reading Shakespeare, "is reading between the lines." A third woman said, "You can see all these other people's different sides of the stories." She went on to say that this exercise allowed her to "actually evaluate [each] person's situation, actions, judgments—and empathize," and that doing this for fictional characters helped her do it with people in her life.

Other women said that working through Shakespeare's archetypal characters helped them change themselves. In particular, several women mentioned Iago, the manipulative villain of *Othello*. Discussing Iago, said one woman, "affected how I thought about the person I was" and made her realize that, "if I want to be a better person, I have to acknowledge that and forgive myself for those horrible choices and the things that I'd done." Another woman said that "when we were reading through Iago and really diving into his character flaws, I felt a shift within myself that said: look at how everyone is reacting to him and what ugly things they say about him. Do you want to be that person anymore? Is that who you want to be? *No*." She went on to explain that, by exploring a character, you also have to explore yourself.

But where villains often reminded interviewees of their past selves, they saw role models in the heroes. One woman said she identified with Richmond, the hero of *Richard III*: "He had to go

through some crap,” she said, “but he came out victorious.” Another who identified with Richmond said she was “Very powerful now,” and “using [that] power to be positive.” Others identified with less archetypal heroes, such as the Nurse in *Romeo & Juliet*, whose nurturing side spoke to several of our interviewees.

Many interviewees also spoke about the importance of what Shakespeare represents—his works are generally seen as challenging, tough to understand, and “meant for” educated members of the upper classes. So there is particular power for someone who moves from seeing Shakespeare as *too dense and difficult for me* to seeing Shakespeare as *something I can do and have done*. From *not for me* to *for everybody, including me*. From *Shakespeare belongs to the educated and the elite* to *Shakespeare belongs to everyone, including me*.

The challenge of working with Shakespeare’s texts in a theatrical context fosters self-efficacy. There seem to be three specific challenges, as one woman summed up: “I didn’t think that I would ever read Shakespeare, understand Shakespeare, perform Shakespeare,” and that doing so “definitely gave me a lot of self confidence and made me believe in myself.” *Read, understand, and perform*—at least one of these steps presents a mental hurdle to every ensemble member. Often, all three do.

The nearly universal experience of struggling with Shakespeare’s language, which cuts more or less evenly across lines of race, class, and cultural background, provides substantial benefits in self-efficacy. “[Shakespeare] seems impossible for some people. And once you conquer the impossible, you know that anything is possible.” said one interviewee.

You grow up hearing about Shakespeare, maybe reading Shakespeare in high school or even middle school, and you’re, like, “I don’t get it. I don’t want to get it. This is too

much. The language is too heavy; it's too dense." And then you walk through the forest, and you're, like, "Oh! I can navigate these woods!" ... Whenever something is [considered] difficult or hard, and you conquer it, you know that you can conquer anything that comes your way.

And even for the (relatively rare) members who have prior experience with Shakespeare, observing others pushing through created a shift in themselves. One woman noticed the shift in others during her time in the ensemble. Shakespeare, she said, "is one of those things that people think that they can't do. And then they do it. And then they feel a sense of accomplishment."

Interviewees focused on the continuing presence of Shakespeare's themes. "It's still relevant today!" one woman exclaimed. "All of it is still relevant. [*The Taming of the Shrew*] is relevant because of domestic violence and women's voices and women's roles. *Othello* [which deals with racism and prejudice], obviously, is unfortunately too relevant today."

Or, as another woman said, "Even though it's so old, and the language is so clearly different, all of those things are all—it's humanity. It's not dated. ... It's relatable, even all this time later. It's never going to *not* be relatable. Some things are just perfect the way they are. You don't need them to be any better."

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