

# Living on borrowed crime

Students learn what it's like to be marginalised in society by interviewing former prison inmates and portraying them in a theatre production, writes Jennifer Cheng



Steve Reynolds discusses the running order for the performance with students from Li Po Chun United World College.

**I**t sounded like 14 former prisoners intimately recounting their life behind bars. In fact, it was a group of secondary school students portraying them in a theatre production.

The Secondary One and Two students from Li Po Chun United World College had only six days to put together the performance in a style called verbatim theatre. Steve Reynolds, director of Education Outside the Classroom who leads the project, says: "Verbatim theatre takes the actual words of a community group and uses it as a basis of a script, so we give voice to minorities who might otherwise be unheard or ignored."

This was one of many activities organised during the school's "Project Week", during which students spend one week learning outside of the classroom. The verbatim theatre project is in its fourth year. Last year's students worked with refugees, orphans and asylum seekers, and this was the first year that they worked with former prison inmates.

Verbatim theatre grew popular in the 1990s, and theatre groups worldwide have since adopted this style to tell the stories of minorities, court dramas or historical events.

Throughout the project, Reynolds helped the students grapple with questions regarding crime and punishment. These included how people who have broken the law should be punished and rehabilitated.

The students were

introduced to the former prison inmates through the Christian Kun Sun Association, a non-profit organisation that helps them rebuild their lives and reconcile with their families. Each student was matched with a former inmate for the interview. Some even visited the hostel run by Kun Sun to conduct the interview. All the former inmates were invited to watch the show.

Some students had no previous drama experience. Reynolds, who teaches theatre, spent the mornings teaching them techniques such as how to spot their interviewee's signature body gestures and how to project their voices to fill an auditorium.

The students also learned interview skills to prepare for their conversation with their subjects.

"I wasn't sure how a bunch of former offenders would react to a bunch of teenagers interviewing them," says Arthur de Almeida Mello, a Secondary Seven student from Brazil.

It turned out that the former inmates opened up, sharing their stories of despair and hope. Before the interviews, some of the students said they had expected to meet muscle-bound men with tattoos who might be sullen. But that impression soon disappeared. "I was watching from a distance, some of them were like old friends chatting for 90 minutes," says Reynolds.

The students then had two days to edit the interview into a monologue lasting a few minutes, and learn to deliver it on stage. In the performance last

month, each student shared their thoughts of the experience before getting into character as the ex-prison inmate – adopting the individual's voice, body language and style of dress.

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STEVE REYNOLDS, EDUCATION OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM

A 21-year-old local man named "John" was interviewed by Secondary Six pupil Isaac Wong Long-sang from Hong Kong. He had been imprisoned for drug-related offences, and was released just a few months earlier. Wong, who is only a few years younger than "John", portrayed his subject's impatience at the teenager's questions about prison life, but was soon calling the student "little brother" as he shed light on the politics of the prison canteen and how he joined the triad gang.

Wong was seamlessly in character. One moment, he was speaking with poise as himself. The next moment he was in character, sitting slumped in his chair and spewing street slang. John's helplessness emerged at the end when he spoke of his

hope of trying to live a normal life as a construction worker, but without much confidence that he could achieve it. John and Wong's futures could not be more different, and the two could easily have swapped lives if they were born into different circumstances.

Reynolds hopes the experience of speaking to the former inmates will help the students see marginalised people in the community.

"Generally, the students here are well protected by Hong Kong life and college life. I want them to have the experience so they can see how well off they are, so they can understand there are different people out there who they can help."

The realisation that life is largely determined by circumstances touched many of the students deeply. Hayley Thomas, a Secondary Seven student from Australia who interviewed a Russian woman convicted of a drug-related charge, says: "What they went through is what could happen to anyone if they were less lucky with their family circumstances. There's no point alienating a social group when it could easily have been you."

Students who do not speak Cantonese interviewed former prison inmates from other countries. A Bangladeshi student became a Cameroonian man, a Brazilian student an Iranian man, an Australian a Russian woman, and a Thai an Indonesian woman. The diverse nationalities of the former inmates matched those of the students, but their reasons for

moving to Hong Kong were starkly different.

While the local former inmates who were interviewed all had run-ins with the law as a result of drug addiction, many of the non-local former inmates were put behind bars for overstaying their visa or had committed crimes to survive as an asylum seeker.

Arthur, the Brazilian student, realised the power of verbatim theatre when he interviewed an Iranian man called Francis who was jailed for overstaying his visa. He told Francis that whatever he said would be transferred directly to the stage. "I saw on his face, he was shocked that he could say whatever he wanted, and people were listening."

Hong Kong correctional facilities are generally considered safe and well run compared to those in other countries. The former inmate from Iran had endured torture in prison back home and found the Hong Kong prison comfortable.

Another student shared the story of a local man who believed he had become more engulfed in criminal life because he was in close quarters with people who committed similar offences. Thomas, the Australian student, reflected: "It was a big awakening to the tie between justice and having mercy for a person." [life@scmp.com](mailto:life@scmp.com)