Podcasts, Prisons, and Pedagogies:

How media arts spark new possibilities for incarcerated youth

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ABSTRACT:

The United States incarcerates more young people than any other developed country. Yet, the general public has little opportunity to connect and empathize with incarcerated youth. We studied Utah-based digital media program for incarcerated youth, which generates youth-produced podcasts centering on their lived experiences. We aimed to understand 1) *how pedagogy of teaching artists enables incarcerated youth (aged 14-20) to communicate effectively to audiences using podcasts and* (2) *how, in turn, the attitudes of adult audiences change as a result of listening to podcast episodes made by incarcerated youth*. We found that teaching artists/mentors ($N = 4$) define and describe a consistent set of values and beliefs about incarcerated youth, audio/radio production and mentorship that guide their practices of mentoring of incarcerated youth. Further, we found several statistically significant changes - such as increased knowledge about incarceration, and feeling less far away from incarcerated youth - between pretest and posttest among members of the general public ($N = 33$) who listened to a podcast episode. These findings illustrate the throughline of psychological proximity - from pedagogy to dissemination - of youth-produced podcasts, suggesting the value of this program in bridging the gap between incarcerated youth and the general public.

Key words: *media arts, incarcerated youth, podcasts, pedagogy, psychological proximity*

Introduction & Literature Review

On any given day, roughly 50,000 young people are incarcerated in the United States (Sawyer, 2018). As a country, we incarcerate six to ten times more young people than any other developed country (Hazel, 2008; McCarthy et al., 2016). Further, incarceration rates are inequitably distributed across gender, racial, ethnic, and ability status lines, with Black youth and those diagnosed with mental health conditions, disabilities, and trauma histories as particularly represented in our juvenile justice system (Petrosino et al., 2022). While there is growing public support for reducing prison populations in the United States (Sundt, 2011), the general public struggles to empathize with people in -- and re-entering society from -- carceral structures, resulting in difficulty accessing employment and housing after release from incarceration (Grossi, 2017; Plassmeyer & Sliva, 2018).

It is not particularly surprising that the general public struggles to empathize with incarcerated individuals; presently, most exposure to incarcerated individuals takes place via media made about incarcerated individuals without their consented or active participation. As such, perceptions of incarcerated individuals are centered around entertaining and shocking the public gaze, including in television shows like *Orange is the New Black* and *Law in Order*. As such, shifting the public 'gaze' is a vital step in ending mass incarceration and inequitable incarceration of people who hold marginalized identities. However, there are limited ways for the general public to connect with or learn from incarcerated individuals.

As educators and researchers, our research team recognizes the potential of current technologies for youth-led production and interest-powered learning; the need of youth to have opportunities to connect with caring adults; our collective need for youth in custodial care to find meaningful paths to self-expression; and the possibility for increased empathy and perspective-taking when communities connect to the authentic voices of young people in secure care. We draw on research in connected learning (Ito et al., 2013), mentorship (Liao & Sanchez, 2019), psychological proximity (Littman, 2021) as well as the intersections of youth media and justice (Jenkins et al., 2016; Vasudevan & DeJaynes, 2013).

Arts in Carceral Spaces and Impacts Beyond Carceral Spaces

This inquiry builds on decades of empirical findings from across the U.S. that prison-based arts programs produce a variety of social, emotional, behavioral, relational, and academic outcomes (Gardner et al., 2014). A 2016 study by Miner-Romanoff found that arts programs can provide a *sense of agency* and *hope* (p. 63). Creative expression provides youth with opportunities to rewrite their identities--both for themselves and for others. In Miner- Romanoff's (2016) research, youth who exhibited their work to the public

showed a greater sense of positive self-concept (i.e., pride).

Additionally, audiences who *viewed* artistic work by incarcerated youth reported that it caused them to have more compassion and shift their attitudes around rehabilitation. Cohen (2012) noted that participation in a community prison choir had a positive impact on the community members' attitudes toward the young people, even shifting previously held stereotypes towards incarcerated young people. Brewster (2014) found that 58% of arts-program participants said art brought them closer to family, enriched conversations and nurtured a new identity as *artist* rather than *convict*. Together, these findings illuminate the potential of art to impact those in carceral spaces, as well as the communities that come into contact with such work.

Psychological Proximity

Psychological proximity (Liberman & Trope, 2003) - the feeling of being 'close' to another person, object, event, or issue - has been shown to significantly predict attitudes towards certain issues, and subsequent intentions to take actions to address those issues (e.g., environmental justice behaviors, as seen in Lee et al., 2018; 2019). Recent research has applied this theoretical frame to the physical and psychological distance between incarcerated individuals and the general public; this work suggests that exposure to virtual arts programming may foster psychological proximity between incarcerated individuals and the general public among a group of over 140 virtual attendees of a multimedia arts event virtually broadcast out of Colorado prisons and viewed on YouTube live (Littman et al., 2022). However, this theoretical frame of psychological proximity has not seen empirical application in the area of juvenile justice or the medium of podcasting, which sets the stage for the current study..

Connected Learning

Connected learning theory posits that the most effective and resilient learning experiences integrate individual interests with social support, fostering personal engagement and communal recognition. This approach merges youth's passions with opportunities for skill development within a supportive, relationship-driven environment. Research by Ito and colleagues (2012, 2013) highlights that meaningful learning occurs when activities are socially connected, interest-driven, and aligned with real-world opportunities. Drawing on sociocultural learning theories, connected learning emphasizes education embedded in authentic practices and relationships, promoting diverse pathways for knowledge acquisition and expertise development. This method effectively links interests to expertise, motivating learners through engaging challenges that build social and cultural capital.

The Current Study

We see potential to better understand not just the impact of the experience on the young people themselves, but also the larger constellation of relationships and perceptions within their community. This project is an exploratory research study to learn how a publicly shared podcast series produced by incarcerated youth in Utah impacts perceptions and attitudes by adult audiences. This project is an exploratory research study centered on a long-running publicly shared podcast series produced by incarcerated youth led by teaching artists from a nonprofit youth media program. Using surveys and instructor self-reflections, this study intends to understand both (1) *how the pedagogy of teaching artists enables incarcerated youth (aged 14-20) to communicate effectively to authentic audiences using the podcast medium and* (2) *how, in turn, the attitudes of adult audiences change as a result of*

listening to podcast episodes made by incarcerated youth.

Study and Program Context

Utah Juvenile Justice System

The U.S. state of Utah, and the Utah juvenile justice system is socially and politically complex. Since 2016, Utah's Juvenile Justice Services has undergone extensive reform efforts. The reform has focused on diverting youth from being incarcerated and has put early intervention measures in place to protect the rights and mental health of the youth that are incarcerated (Peterson, 2021). Recent policy changes have included:

- Elimination of life without parole and death penalty for anyone younger than age 18
- Limitations on shackling of youth in the legal system
- Entitlement to free and effective legal counsel for every youth
- Requirement of parental consent or legal counsel for a youth to waive Miranda Rights
- Elimination of jailing for status offenses
- Limitations on when and how school-based offenses can be referred to juvenile court
- Strict limits on lengths of stay and the use of contempt
- Assurances that youth may only be detained if they pose a public safety risk
- Mandates that programming must be evidence-based
- Elimination of incarceration or court for youth younger than age 12, except for aggravated offenses
- Elimination of isolation and reduction of room confinement

Amidst this context, several programs, including Spy Hop -- the community partner in this study -- have worked to support incarcerated young people to find meaning and care amidst complex circumstances.

Spy Hop Productions (Spy Hop)

Spy Hop's mission is to “mentor young people in the digital media arts to help them find their voice, tell their stories, and be empowered to affect positive change in their lives, their communities, and the world” (Spy Hop, 2023). Spy Hop was founded in 1999. Its programs include year-round, scaffolded and youth-driven learning experiences in film, audio, music, and design.

Spy Hop currently serves over 6,000 students statewide, making it one of the largest and most diverse youth media organizations in the U.S. Participants in its programs include young people ages 9-19 from all around the Wasatch Front, including Salt Lake, Utah, and Davis counties. More than half of Spy Hop's students are served outside of Spy Hop's downtown Salt Lake City media arts center and in the community through partnerships with government agencies, schools, libraries, and juvenile secure care facilities.

Spy Hop’s theory of action framework, developed out of years of program evaluation, is described as *The Spy Hop Way*. In this model, youth collaborate with their peers using state-of-the-art equipment and technologies in a safe, youth-powered space. They work under the guidance of highly qualified teaching artists/mentors (we use these two terms interchangeably) to create professional-quality work for authentic audiences. In the process, participants learn important skills that go beyond media creation, such as communication, agency, collaboration, goal setting, problem solving, and critical thinking.

Sending Messages Podcast

Spy Hop’s Youth-in-Care (YIC) Initiative is composed of a set of three programs that serve young people in the foster care system, residential treatment programs, and secure care facilities. The three programs work with different populations and in different dosages of

"intervention". One of these programs, Sending Messages, began in 2009 and is now the longest running and most prolific media arts training program for incarcerated youth in the country, and one of the few that consistently generates youth-produced podcasts centering on incarcerated youth voices.

Sending Messages refers to both Spy Hop's 10-week audio arts training program and its corresponding podcast by the same name. The training program works at a number of secure facility sites across the Wasatch Front in the Salt Lake City, Utah region, and is facilitated in partnership with the Utah Board of Juvenile Justice, Salt Lake County Youth Center, and Utah State Board of Education. The teaching artists/mentors who lead the program are not employees of the State, nor are they licensed social workers, teachers or clinical therapists.

During this 10-week program, incarcerated youth aged 14-20 (convicted of a wide array of offenses) work with Spy Hop teaching artists to craft their own authentic stories, personal writings, poetry, music and reflective conversations about their experiences. These onsite class-based programs run twice weekly for a total of 40 contact hours. Many students repeat the program during their incarceration and most receive high school English credits for participation. The program aims to teach youth essential skills in creative self-expression and audio arts—which in turn allow them to gain new opportunities to express and explore their emotions and life experiences in healthy, authentic and meaningful ways. The works authored by youth are professionally produced using audio software, computers, mics and other professional equipment that are transported into the facilities by Spy Hop.

Young people in the Sending Messages 10-week training program engage in learning experiences that principally center around the following activities:

- Training in audio arts recording mixing
- Writers workshop (learning how to tell one's story)
- Listening to (through headphones to examples of other youth works) followed by group discussion
- Collaborative and one-on-one guided production mentorship

Youth participants record and produce their pieces which are then shared with real-world audiences on Spy Hop's extensive distribution network and Sending Messages subscriber feed. At the time of this writing, Sending Messages has produced 86 episodes and has taught over 1,500 young people.

Collaboration between Spy Hop and Convergence Design Lab (CDL)

Convergence Design Lab (CDL) has engaged in a partnership with Spy Hop since 2016 as an external evaluator and learning design consultant. The majority of CDL's evaluation work has centered on Spy Hop's after-school programs. It has not focused on Spy Hop's Youth in Care programs, of which Sending Messages is a part. This is largely due to how privacy rights of vulnerable populations of young people in custodial care are strictly protected by the State, limiting CDL's ability to conduct observations and collect data by and about youth impact. Nonetheless, in 2022 and early 2023, Spy Hop asked CDL to lead a series of workshops, interviews and focus groups with Spy Hop staff/mentors about its Youth in Care programs in order to better identify and understand the key learning outcomes and practices driving Youth in Care programs' impact.

During this same period, CDL led two online sessions with Spy Hop mentors and trained Spy Hop Sending Messages teaching artists in how to facilitate reflective conversations with young participants in Sending Messages as part of a learning assessment effort. Additionally,

CDL received permission to interview a corrections officer from one of the facilities where Spy Hop leads its programs in order to gain perspectives of the program from one of those familiar with its effect on the incarcerated youth. The interview and focus groups with mentors and youth participants were transcribed, coded and analyzed prior to the launch of this study. In addition, Convergence Design Lab conducted a literature review of research on how arts and writing intensive learning experiences create specific context challenges for young people in custodial care (See *Table 1*).

By cross-referencing the existing research with what Convergence heard from Spy Hop mentors and others, the following four context challenges that incarcerated youth face were identified:

Table 1. Contextual challenges faced by youth in custodial care

Unhealthy attachments with adults	Youth in custodial care have often experienced unhealthy relationships with adults in their lives. As a result, these youth have difficulty trusting adults or authority figures.
Self-protection	Traumatizing and harmful experiences cause youth in custodial care to become self-protective. They may have their guard up, or feel mad at the world causing them to act out emotionally and physically.
Lack of access to resources	Youth in custodial care may be experiencing isolation or disempowerment as a result of lack of access to robust opportunities to learn and express themselves.
Difficulty imagining future	Youth in custodial care lack sufficient space to process and channel difficult experiences, and to envision possible futures for themselves, where they fit into society and are accepted or valued for who they are.

Current Study Hypotheses & Study Aims

In this study, we first aim to explore what intentional sets of pedagogical practices led by experienced teaching artists, result in well-crafted and personal stories by young people that authentically engage audiences. Secondly, we aim to understand whether adult audiences exposed to youth-produced media stories experience a shift in attitudes towards, and intentions to act, regarding incarcerated youth. Our guiding research questions (RQs) are as follows:

- *RQ1. What program and pedagogical practices used by SM teaching artists equip youth (aged 14-20) to deliver authentic stories to authentic audiences using the medium of audio arts and podcasting?*
- *RQ2. How do the attitudes of adult audiences (attitudes, beliefs, intentions to act) shift after listening to podcast episodes made by incarcerated youth*? Hypothesis: adult audiences will experience significant shifts in attitudes (increase psychological proximity, more positive attitudes towards incarcerated youth, and an increased desire to act on behalf of incarcerated youth) after listening to podcast episodes.

Methods

RQ1 Methods

To answer RQ1 *[What program and pedagogical practices used by SM teaching artists equip youth (aged 14-20) to deliver authentic stories to authentic audiences using the medium of audio arts and podcasting?]*, we used multiple qualitative methods (interviews, journals) to understand the precise mindsets, values and mentoring practices that teaching artists routinely apply when equipping young people to produce stories that will be broadcast to authentic audiences through the Sending Messages podcast.

RQ1 Data Collection

Spy Hop teaching artists/mentors were invited to use personal journals to document reflections on their teaching practices and experiences in Sending Messages. To ensure confidentiality and safety of juveniles, mentors only use pseudonyms when describing youth participants in accordance with the procedures and ethical guidelines for anonymity dictated by the corrections facilities themselves. We used mentor journal reflections and semi-structured interviews with mentors to help gain insight into the program's key practices and the values/beliefs that inform these practices and pedagogies.

To investigate our first research question, we engaged Spy Hop teaching artists (N = 4) in the process of routinely journaling and reflecting upon their experiences while teaching in the program. Two of these teaching artists or mentors granted permission to researchers to use their real names in published results, Adam and Myke. The other two are assigned pseudonyms, Roberto and Juan. Adam is the original founder of the Sending Messages program and served as the primary mentor during much of the research period. In addition, three additional teaching artists (Juan, Myke, and Roberto) shared reflections based on interactions with youth in the program as well as their approaches to teaching in the program. These reflections and notes from ~30 journal entries were conveyed to researchers through semi-structured recorded interviews, conversations and email exchanges over the course of one year across three 10-week programs held at three sites.

RQ1 Analysis

Investigators reflected on and analyzed interview and journal data through recursive rounds of open coding and analysis using a process of grounded theory and inductive reasoning

(Charmaz, 2014). We aimed to notice the perspectives and concepts that repeat themselves. We then worked to go deeper and excavate the themes extracted from the previous stages within the context of established theories centered on social-emotional learning, non-cognitive skills, media arts pedagogy, liberation education, and arts learning in prison contexts.

RQ2 Methods

To answer RQ2, *[How do the attitudes of adult audiences (attitudes, beliefs, intentions to act) shift after listening to podcast episodes made by incarcerated youth?]*, we used pre and post listening questionnaires to survey potential change in attitudes, beliefs, and intentions to act before and after listening to a Sending Messages episode.

Pre and Post Listening Protocol

Convenience sampling was used to recruit adults (18+) who live in Utah, USA through emails from the Spy Hop listserv, forwarding of listserv messages to Spy Hop staff and collaborators' personal networks, and via Spy Hop's LinkedIn. Potential participants were linked to an implied consent form with study details, and informed that all those who chose to participate would be compensated for their time with a $15 retail gift card to answer a brief set of survey questions before and after listening to a podcast.

Consenting participants were invited to complete an online pre-questionnaire, which consisted of brief demographic questions and measures of psychological proximity to - and attitudes about - incarcerated young people (see exact questions below). After completing the pre-questionnaires, participants were sent a specific url link to a Sending Messages podcast published online. The podcast episode was a 30-minute compilation of several Sending Messages segments from throughout the program's history. Participants were asked to listen to

this podcast segment within one week. Once participants listened to the podcast, they were prompted to complete a post-questionnaire, which included the same psychological proximity and attitude measures as the pre-questionnaire, as well as open-ended questions about participants' listening experiences. This study was approved by the Columbia College Chicago Institutional Review Board.

Pre and Post-listening Questionnaires

Demographic measures. On the pretest only, participants were asked to indicate their age, geographic region (in Utah), political leanings (Conservative, Independent, Liberal, Very Liberal/Progressive, Other), and religious leanings (Agnostic/Atheist, Christian/Catholic, Muslim, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, Secularly Spiritual, or Other). They were also asked whether they had ever visited secure care (never, once or twice, several times), if they had ever been incarcerated (yes/no), and if they know anyone under 21 who is incarcerated (yes/no).

Psychological proximity measures. Participants were asked about psychological proximity both in the pretest and posttest surveys. In building our psychological proximity measure, we drew upon seven-point Likert scale items adapted from Lee et al. (2018) and previously adapted for use in research on the impact of arts programs from carceral settings on the psychological proximity of viewers (Littman et al., 2021). This measure includes three questions about cognitive proximity (*Compared to most other people, I know a lot about the issue of incarceration; The issue of incarceration is relevant to me personally; Incarceration of young people is a vital issue for our community to understand*), and two questions about emotional proximity (*I can imagine what young people who are incarcerated must be thinking and feeling; I feel far away from young people who are incarcerated*). Participants were also

asked about their attitudes towards incarcerated young people (*In my mind, incarcerated young people…. Act out against adult authority figures ←→ seek out adult authority figures who they find trustworthy; Do not have a vision for the future where they fit into society ←→ have a vision for where they fit in; Deal with strong emotions in unhealthy and negative ways ←→ healthy and positive ways; Do not respect societal rules and norms ←→ respect society rules and norms*) and, finally, their *intent to take action on issues of incarceration*.

Open-ended questions on listening experience. In the posttest only, participants were asked two final open-ended questions on their listening experience: *what is most likely to stick with you after listening?;* and, *what else can you share with us regarding how your perspectives may or may not have shifted as a result of listening to Sending Messages?*

RQ2 Analysis

Demographics and psychological proximity items on pre and post questionnaires were analyzed using SPSS 28. Descriptive analyses were conducted to characterize the sample (N = 33). To test our hypothesis (that adult audiences exposed to youth-produced media stories experience a shift in attitudes towards, and intentions to act, regarding incarcerated youth), we conducted paired sample *t*-tests to measure significant differences between pre and posttest responses. We used content analysis (Stemler, 2000) to identify key trends and patterns participants' responses on open-ended responses about their listening experiences.

Findings

Findings: Mentorship Values, Beliefs and Practices (RQ1)

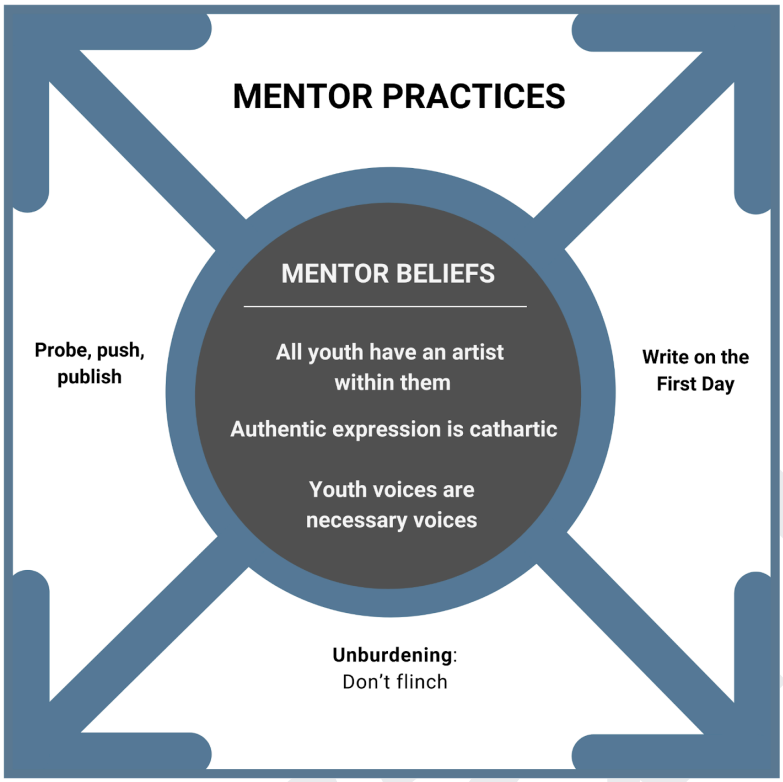
At the outset of this study, we anticipated observing patterns of teaching methods among mentors that could be thematically categorized as pedagogic. However, our data revealed a more nuanced reality. We observed that mentors in the program hold a common set of values and core

beliefs, and that these beliefs are mirrored across the vast constellation of choices that mentors make in how they design the program and engage with young people.

Specifically, mentors —who are professional teaching artists — believe that all young people, especially incarcerated teens have an “an artist within them”, a storyteller with something important to share. Secondly, mentors believe that “authentic expression is cathartic” and when youth engage in personal expression through writing and media art, it has the potential to “transform” their identity (how they conceive of themselves and their outer worlds and relationships). Thirdly, mentors hold the assumption that “youth voices are necessary voices”, believing that when youth voices are shared in the public sphere, it broadens the social concepts and perspectives of both young people and audiences.

These three core mentor beliefs in turn, propel a set of practices and iterative approaches to learning experience design; curriculum development; mentoring/coaching strategies; and, publishing/sharing of youth-produced audio work. Drawing on the lexicon of mentors as captured in our data collection, we observed three key mentor practices that closely mirror the shared set of beliefs described above.

Figure 1. Mentor Beliefs and Practices



Mentor practices include:

Write on the first day - Mentors build trust by "showing up" with gear and writing journals, playing examples of Sending Messages podcasts and guiding students to "write a letter you can never send."

Unburdening: Don't flinch - When youth write about personal trauma, mentors "never flinch," rather offer tools to improve writing and find their authentic voice.

Probe, push, publish - Mentors probe and push youth to imagine their audience and refine their final works in order to produce the best version of their story

Mentor Belief: All youth have an artist within them

Mentors in the program share that every young person has "an artist within them" and a "story to tell." Mentors believe that all youth are capable of "finding their authentic voice" and trust that when they find that voice, they will make "amazing work." Mentors excitedly describe past and current students' work with pride and admiration. Roberto says his students' work is "really, really good, better than a lot of stuff I hear on NPR." Myke describes how much of the student work "has stuck with me because it is real shit" and how the work always contains "nuggets of wisdom," and is often "deeply fascinating" and "powerful." Adam conveys how the process that mentors guide youth through "allows for reflection that is always stunning. It is deeply complex and authentic and really good radio. They make so much good stuff, even when they fail."

Mentors believe that youth are able to achieve artistically because they are "experts of their own experience." In this way, mentors not only see young people as "students" who are learning the creative process, but as "humans" engaged in the "universal" need to "tell stories."

Mentor Belief: Authentic Expression is Cathartic

Sending Messages mentors believe in the value of the creative process to provide emotional release through self-expression. They describe the importance of what they call "unburdening," particularly for youth who lack a sense of agency and control brought about by trauma. Mentors believe that writing in the form of poetry, lyrics, and stories often leads young people to a place of "deep insight, catharsis, and personal transformation." They assert that youth need to "see themselves as actors, as active pieces of their own story." Myke adds, "When they look within themselves, they can reframe." Mentors are attentive to the ways that the reframing

process happens when youth write, noting that it not only helps them navigate a complex emotional landscape, but also “releases them from debilitating patterns.”

Putting the creative process in the hands of youth is also seen as agentic. Adam reflects, “They can’t control the food they eat, the cot they sleep in, the routine they are given—but they can control what they write and what they write about.” Myke explains, “It is part and parcel of why we create the strategies we do in working with these kids,” noting, “before they can begin ‘sharing real stories,’ they need to be able to let down ‘their protective armor.’” Roberto describes it this way: “We are talking about experiences that are very traumatic that these kids have been through. But we're also normalizing their ability to talk about that stuff by making it part of the art form itself.”

Mentor Belief: Youth Voices are Necessary Voices

A phrase repeated by mentors at Spy Hop—"youth voices are necessary voices"—reflects a deep-seated belief that the enterprise in which they are engaged—mentoring incarcerated students to create Sending Messages podcast episodes for public consumption—is “necessary.” A strong undercurrent of this belief is that the undertaking of Sending Messages is not merely to deliver a good youth arts program but to contribute to the larger social good of the community. Mentors articulate this vision and purpose for their work, saying that “when youth voices are shared” in the public sphere, it “catalyzes change,” broadening the perspectives of both young people and audiences. Mentors consistently describe their purpose as “serious work.” They note the program's commitment to public dissemination of youth-created podcasts through investment in professional-grade equipment, extensive post-production, and widespread distribution, and in

the intensive nature of their mentorship of youth, as evidence of the belief that "people are seriously listening."

Mentors describe how young people in residential treatment centers and custodial care are often stigmatized, stereotyped, or written off by many in society. They also reflect on how many of their students internalize these outside projections, describing themselves as "messed up," "mean," or "bad." In light of this larger context, mentors believe that authentic youth voices are needed to correct misperceptions and "tell a different story." Mentors believe when young people's stories are heard and validated by "real audiences," this, in turn, helps youth build trust in adults, themselves, and the creative process. It also helps them imagine a world outside of their own confines, a world to which they belong and offers new possibilities for their futures.

Mentor Practice: Write on the First Day

On the first day of a Sending Messages class, mentors implement practices designed to help youth build trust in the mentors, Spy Hop, and the creative process, while developing self-belief in their capacity to create impactful work for the podcast.

Roberto emphasizes the focus on the youth by stating, "We show up and tell them, 'This is about you, not us.'" Myke elaborates on this approach by describing their role as mentors: observers of "this rad thing" they get to help youth artists accomplish as they "broadcast to the world." The mentors convey to the youth that the Sending Messages podcast "literally can't happen without you," instilling a sense of ownership and importance in the participants.

Adam articulates this empowerment when he tells the youth, "You hold the key to unlocking the puzzle." This declaration marks the beginning of the creative journey, promising

that their work will see the light of day. “It’s the pledge we give them,” he asserts, setting the stage for the participants to start writing.

An essential element of this initial engagement involves providing the necessary tools for creation. Adam explains, “I've got all the expensive microphones, all the equipment. I have brand new, state-of-the-art Macs that I'm handing out to kids.” Myke underscores the significance of the gear, saying, “We want them to know this is for real, and we trust them to use it to make good work.” Roberto highlights the importance of consistency, noting, “We keep coming back,” a gesture that builds trust and reliability in the eyes of the participants.

This approach shifts the power dynamics, placing control in the hands of the youth rather than the mentors. Adam describes this as the inverse of the traditional curricular model: “We don’t see them as these empty buckets for us to fill. It’s the inverse of that. They are the ones who fill up empty pages and podcasts with their own stories and understandings. In a way, they are the curriculum.”

The first day of the Sending Messages workshop culminates in writing. The inaugural writing assignment is titled Write a Letter You Can Never Send. Adam explains that this task sets the tone for the remaining 10 weeks, when they record, mix, and publish personal works.

Roberto highlights the assignment’s accessibility, describing it as a “low barrier entry into writing,” yet acknowledges the gravity of the topics students explore. Mentors describe how students often choose to write letters to:

- Deceased friends and family members
- Self-inflicted scars
- A higher power
- Depression and anxiety

- The system that incarcerated them
- The cell where they live

Juan shares a student's reaction to the assignment: "I just feel that what you gave us was an outlet to write a letter or just write a song to whatever. I just think that was really cool. Because, you know, in Residential…you don't get really a lot of outlets in here."

Mentors end the day leaving youth with their journals and some writing prompts, encouraging them to keep writing because "good writers write every day."

Mentor Practice: Don't Flinch

A foundational piece of mentor practice in Sending Messages is to close the distance between themselves and the youth by listening, showing acceptance, and providing constructive feedback on youth writing. The mentorship philosophy is to "never flinch" from the subject matter or the young people themselves. Adam describes it this way:

> Within the first hour of meeting these kids, we're talking about physical abuse, sexual abuse, suicide, drugs and alcohol, murder—all within the first hour. You jump in with both feet. And our strategy is, always, 'never flinch.' I never tell kids I'm sorry for the stories they're telling. I'm here to make sure that your piece is as good as it can be and as effective as it can be. That's what I'm there to do. I'm not there to be like, 'Oh my God, what was that like?' Because that's not helpful. There's enough adults in their life that do that shit.

Instead, mentors build trust by directing attention to the writing itself, complimenting their use of wordplay, or how they used a clever turn of phrase. Mentors easily recall examples of youth writing. Adam remembers how one vulnerable young woman who experienced deep trauma wrote, "I can still hear my father's tears ringing in my ears." When Adam pointed out to her how compelling that description was, he said it makes a difference and that she started becoming more confident in her ability to write.

Myke agrees that many students come in with the self-concept that “they can’t write so we try to give them everything they need,” citing the use of writing prompts, tips, and tools they didn’t have before, such as the use of “imagery and symbolism.” Myke explains that by using poetry, words and lyrics to describe how they experienced something, it helps young people “remove themselves from it,” where instead of feeling like a “bird in a cage,” they have some reflective distance.

Adam explains it this way, “Instead of these jewels being stuck in their heads, they turn these traumatic stories into poetry with kickass beats, and they see the power in that.” Mentors emphasize that when writing about a “complex piece of history,” the process is not about “purging” or “gaining a sense of closure.” Adam reflects, “The trauma is still within them, but they have this artifact that helps them feel seen, feel heard.”

Myke describes how one of his students related the impact that writing her letter had on her: “She explained how her letter was to her mom who had passed away, and she felt like it was one of the best things she’d ever written. She said the way I explained the assignment really inspired her, and how I was not judging it, and it helped open her up more and brought her to a place of understanding. She seemed to be talking more about gaining insight into why she has done the things she did. She said that being able to write about those little personal things helped her a lot because she is the kind of person that, in her words, puts up a wall.”

Mentor Practice: Probe, Push, Publish

The "Probe, Push, Publish" practice aims to empower vulnerable youth to create high quality podcasts by helping them explore their inner worlds and present their authentic voices to the public. As Adam reflects on the purpose of this practice, he pushes young people to imagine sharing their work with others—community members, peers, and the public. “The kids only take

the time to craft the pieces because they know someone's listening. Right? That's the whole point, is that their work sees the light of day."

Mentors also encourage youth artists to imagine their audience by explaining the intimate nature of podcasting as a medium: "We tell them art is power. After putting headphones on to listen to several examples of Sending Messages podcast, 'we ask, what else were you doing while you were listening to this?' And they'll be like, 'Nothing. I was just sitting and listening.' Yeah, it's really intimate, right? There's a person in your head. That's the power that you have, right? You have the ability to have that personal of an interaction with a stranger. So you have their undivided attention."

Mentors consciously avoid exerting influence over the topics young people choose to discuss. Instead, they ask probing questions to encourage deeper reflection: "Is this the story that you want to tell?" and "How do you tell the best version of this story?" This approach is part of the "push" phase, where mentors help students find their authentic voice. Adam notes, "I'm not interested in helping them get better at lying to themselves."

Instead, mentor practice is to help young people avoid common "writing traps," guiding them towards writing with an authentic voice. The three traps—'misery tourism,' 'war stories,' and 'fake redemption'—serve as points of discussion. Mentors use these traps to engage in reflective conversations on challenging topics, asking "hard and probing questions."

Adam explains "misery tourism" to youth, saying: "You are the author, which means you have the power to drag your audience through ten miles of broken glass. But at the other end of it, they haven't learned anything. Expect them to be pissed at you, right?" This perspective shift helps young writers imagine their audience's experience and take accountability in their authorship.

Juan, another mentor, addresses “war stories” by steering students away from glorified or gruesome accounts of violence and crime. He explains, “When they start producing war stories with nasty details and other events that happened in their life, we're coming back to them and saying, ‘Okay, this is what happened to you, but how did that feel? Write about that.’”

Mentors also prepare students for the challenge of crafting authentic endings, helping them avoid the “fake redemption stories” trap. Adam shares his approach when sensing a false ending: “I ask them, but is it true? You decided to talk about this. You could’ve written anything. No fake redemption stories here. What are you really trying to say?” He recounts a story of a young girl struggling with her ending, saying, “I can't write an ending because this problem I am dealing with, it’s still going on.” Adam’s response, “That’s your ending,” helped her realize the authenticity rest within her ongoing struggle.

When youth imagine how their podcasts will land on audiences, it helps them “gain clarity of the clean mind,” Adam explains. “That is when magic happens in the work they produce. It has such deep intrinsic value.”

Summarizing RQ1 Findings

Spy Hop mentors' approach to youth media is deeply rooted in their belief in the transformative power of authentic expression for young people. Mentor practices applied in the Sending Messages program not only provide a creative outlet for incarcerated youth but also serve as a vehicle for identity reframing. Through practices like “Write on the First Day,” “Don’t Flinch,” and “Probe, Push, Publish,” mentors create a supportive environment that encourages personal storytelling and reflection. By valuing the voices of young people as necessary and impactful, mentors empower them to redefine their narratives and engage meaningfully with

their audiences. This process not only sparks transformative growth and catharsis but also challenges societal perceptions, highlighting the essential role of youth media in contributing to more informed and empathetic public perspectives.

Findings: Psychological Proximity (RQ2)

Following, we share findings from our second set of research questions and methods - how the attitudes of adult audiences shift after listening to Sending Messages podcasts made by incarcerated youth. We collected pre- and post-surveys of the general public capturing listeners' attitudes, beliefs, and intentions to act on issues of youth incarceration.

Participant Demographics

Listeners (*N*=33) were all located in Utah (91% in the Greater Wasatch Front), were predominantly white (71%), between the ages of 25-34 (36%), politically Independent (30%), Catholic (36%) or LDS (24%), had never visited secure care previously (61%), had never been incarcerated (91%), and did not know anyone who is incarcerated (52%). See *Table 2* for full participant demographics.

Table 2. Demographics of Participants

	N	***%***
Age		
25-34	12	36.4
35-44	10	30.3
45-54	1	3.0

65+	5	15.2
Geographic region		
Greater Wasatch Front	30	90.9
Other in Utah	3	9.1
Political leanings		
Conservative	4	12.1
Independent	10	30.3
Liberal	9	27.3
Very liberal/progressive	6	18.2
Other/prefer not to answer	4	12.2
Religious leanings		
Agnosticism/Atheism	6	18.2
Christianity/Catholicism	12	36.4
Islam	1	3.0
The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints	8	24.2
Secular spiritualism	3	9.1
Other/prefer not to answer	3	9.1
Ever Visited Secure Care		
Never	20	60.6
Once or twice	6	18.2
Several	7	21.2
Ever been incarcerated		
Yes	3	9.1

No	30	90.9
Know those under 21 who are incarcerated		
Yes	16	48.5
No	17	51.5

Psychological Proximity

We found several statistically significant changes between pretest and posttest among participants (*Table 3*). Listening to the podcast was associated with a significant increase in knowledge about the issue of incarceration (t = -3.57; p = 0.001), feeling more like incarceration is relevant to one's life (t = -3.14; p = 0.004), and feeling less far away from (i.e., closer to) incarcerated youth (t = 2.49; p = 0.02). After listening to the podcast, listeners also reported feeling more like incarcerated young people have a vision for where they fit into society (t = 3.16; p = 0.003), deal with strong emotions in healthy and positive ways (t = -6.03; p < 0.001) and respect societal rules and norms in general (t = -2.99; p = 0.005).

Beyond statistically significant findings, participants endorsed change in the desired direction on all but one question (*I can imagine what young people who are incarcerated must be thinking and feeling*), suggesting meaningful shifts in perspective from before to after listening to the Sending Messages podcast.

Table 3. Pre and posttest findings

Item (7-pt. Likert Scale)	Mean difference	SD	*t*	p
Cognitive Proximity				
Compared to most other people, I know a lot about the issue of incarceration.	-0.90	1.42	-3.57	0.001**

The issue of incarceration is relevant to me personally	-1.07	1.90	-3.14	0.004**
Incarceration of young people is a vital issue for our community to understand.	-0.041	1.75	-1.29	0.021
Emotional Proximity				
I can imagine what young people who are incarcerated must be thinking and feeling.	0.48	2.85	0.95	0.35
I feel far away from young people who are incarcerated	1.09	2.48	2.49	0.02**
Attitudes ("In my mind, incarcerated young people…")				
Act out against adult authority figures <----> seek out adult authority figures who they find trustworthy	-0.72	2.00	-2.03	0.05**
Do not have a vision for the future where they fit into society ←→ have a vision for where they fit in	-1.06	1.90	-3.16	0.003**
Deal with strong emotions in unhealthy and negative ways ←→ healthy and positive ways	-1.53	1.44	-6.03	<0.001**
Do not respect societal rules and norms ←→ respect society rules and norms	-0.78	1.48	-2.99	0.005**
Intentions to Act				
I intend to take action on issues of incarceration	-0.45	0.29	-1.58	0.13

**indicates statistical significance at the <0.05 level

Listening Experience

In their posttest questionnaires, participants were given space to reflect on w*hat was likely to stick with them after*, and what else was *important to share about*, their Sending Messages listening experience.

What is sticking: Vital voices to hear. Listeners felt that "the voices of each storyteller" were going to stick with them. This was both literal - the "honesty of the speakers," and the "shaking voice almost crying" and "the strength they had to not only say what they thought but

to allow it to be recorded. This value on 'voice' was also symbolic. As one participant expressed, "we are not listening to these kids when they tell us they are struggling." One participant described their recognition that "there is so much more to a person's story than the event that they are currently living through." With this, a major sentiment sticking with participants in our study was the importance of elevating incarcerated young people's voices - both literally, though sharing these podcasts, and emotionally/socially/politically in considering what young people need to survive and thrive.

What is important to share: Newfound connection to young peoples' feelings and experiences. Several participants felt it was important to share the new perspectives they had on young people's feelings and experiences after listening - multiple respondents described how they "feel for" the incarcerated young people who made the podcast - for "the youth and the anguish in their families," for "those young people who are navigating life without much support, love, or other advantages." Participants also described getting a better "chance to understand what some of our teens are going through." In some ways, this connection came alongside a recognition of *disconnection*. As one listener shared, "I thought I knew something about youth who are incarcerated, but listening to their stories shed light that I am far removed from understanding their journeys." It is perhaps possible, then, to feel closer to understanding someone's experience - and to see how far away it is from your own - at the same time.

Mixed Methods Interpretations

The quantitative and qualitative responses on pre and posttest questionnaires help illuminate a deeper story about participants' listening experiences. One key learning, here, is around the complexity of empathy. The psychological proximity empathy item, *I can imagine*

what young people who are incarcerated must be thinking and feeling, was the only item that did not show change in the 'intended' direction (i.e., participants did not feel they could imagine what young people were thinking and feeling more after listening to Sending Messages). Instead, it seems that listening to Sending Messages may have illuminated for them how little they knew or understood. This became clearer through open-ended responses - especially, one participant's response that listening to young peoples' stories showed them how far removed they were. There is, of course, complexity here. Bringing these quantitative and qualitative findings together, we see that one aspect of feeling more psychologically proximal is the empathic recognition of distance

Discussion

In this study, we aimed to understand how mentorship practices of Sending Messages teaching artists help youth to communicate effectively to authentic audiences, and in turn, how those audiences' attitudes change as a result of listening to the Sending Messages podcast. We found that mentors' ($N = 4$) values and beliefs - that young people have *necessary voices*, that making youth media can be *'unburdening*,' and that young people's *authentic voices* are worthy, yield production-centered mentorship practices that *people are seriously listening*, that mentors *don't flinch*, and that young people *write on the first day (and everyday)*. After listening to a Sending Messages episode, adult audiences ($N = 33$) reported significant increases in knowledge of the issue of incarceration, more like incarceration was relevant to their lives, and less far away from incarcerated youth. Listeners also reported significant increases in sentiments that incarcerated youth have a vision for where they fit into society, that they deal with strong emotions in healthy and positive ways, and that they generally respect social norms and roles.

Bringing the Findings Together

Our findings suggest that the values and beliefs of Sending Messages teaching artists fuel a set of production-centered mentorship practices that strengthen the capacity of youth to access their authentic voice and create impactful stories that are broadcast on the Sending Messages podcast. Because audiences find these podcasts “engaging”, “compelling” and “honest”, they listen with intent, and in the process many listeners feel closer to and/or more empathetic toward the experiences of young people. For those who have little to no experience with incarcerated youth, this shift in perspective can shape their actions and beliefs in ways that benefit those same youth.

Over the course of this research, we saw how mentors also build their own psychological proximity to the youth participants. They work to close the distance between themselves and the youth within the first minutes of their interactions. Closing the distance is not a small matter, particularly when many incarcerated teens come to the program with a history of unhealthy attachments to adults, have their guard up or feel mad at the world. Spy Hop mentors close the distance in various ways. Three of the mentors participating in this study are alumni of Spy Hop’s afterschool programs (not that far removed in years from their students). They also position themselves as practicing audio artists who share common interests. They sport tattoos, dreadlocks, “kicks" and clothing styles similar to youth, and engage fluently in conversations about Hip Hop, spoken word poetry, rap and a range of music genres. They understand the power these creative forms hold for youth and position themselves as advocates for youth voice. They back up this position of advocacy with high tech gear, production coaching and encouragement, gaining the trust of their students to produce insightful and authentic work.

Mentors strive to design trauma-informed pedagogies and practices because they believe

youth voices are necessary and they matter, particularly for young people who are marginalized and disenfranchised from the larger society. In doing so, they work to bridge the distance between them and incarcerated youth - and in turn - between incarcerated youth and the general public.

Contributions to Empirical Understanding

This work builds upon decades of findings that arts programs are valuable in prisons - and further, that they may catalyze myriad social, emotional, and relational outcomes. Specifically, our findings bolster prior work which has found that young people who have opportunities for creative arts and expression can provide opportunities to rewrite identities (Miner-Romanoff, 2016); further, such work suggests that audiences who view creative work produced by incarcerated artists experience increased compassion for incarcerated youth (Miner-Romanoff, 2016) and incarcerated community members in general (Cohen, 2012).

Our findings further build upon prior work which suggests viewing digital/virtual arts made by incarcerated individuals as associated with increased psychological proximity, shifted attitudes, and intentions to act on issues of incarceration (Littman et al., 2021). While Littman et al.'s (2021) research studied audiences of adult incarcerated artists, this study suggests that similar mechanisms - art as a conduit for psychological proximity - likely exist between incarcerated youth artists and the general public.

Empirically, this study offers new insights of some of the potential mechanisms associated with developing psychological proximity - that first, proximity must be developed between mentors, artists, and the creative medium. Then, once such proximity is established, audiences may be brought into this fold of empathic and cognitive proximity with incarcerated artists and their experiences.

Limitations & Implications for Future Research

We used a mixed methods and exploratory approach to conduct our research. While these findings offer valuable insight into the potential of pedagogical practices in catalyzing authentic digital media for youth participants - and for closing the psychological gap between youth participants and adult listeners - certain limitations should be noted.

We sampled from a purposive sample of artist/mentors (RQ1), and a convenience sample of those connected to the Spy Hop listserv or LinkedIn (RQ2) in conducting our research. There is likely some bias towards inherent appreciation and/or respect for the Sending Messages program and incarcerated youth among those already tangentially connected, which may have shaped our findings. We may expect that these individuals would already feel slightly more proximal to and/or empathic towards incarcerated youth than the general public, and thus have higher pretest scores. While we still saw significant change between pre and posttest, we may see an even stronger effect among those less connected to Spy Hop's work. Of course, the short time frame (one week or less) between pre and posttest questionnaires could have posed threats to reliability, and future researchers may consider administering pretest questionnaires earlier to allow for more time between questionnaires (and thus a lower likelihood of remembering one's exact answers).

Further, our small sample of mentors ($N = 4$) and listeners ($N = 33$) is limited in drawing strong conclusions on our guiding research questions. Qualitatively, we can see that mentors' pedagogical approaches were meaningful for youth participants, and the mentors themselves, in catalyzing compelling and authentic digital media. However, future research should include more mentors (to see how these practices align or diverge across approaches), and further, should

consider the extent to which such pedagogical practices are transferable and teachable across mentors. Quantitatively, a larger sample size would have allowed for stronger power and effect size, as well as the capacity to conduct more advanced statistical analyses.

Finally, the geographic context (Utah) is unique in comparison to the broader US. Utah is 90% white, and has a greater population of youth than the average U.S. state (US Census Bureau, 2022; Utah Department of Health and Human Services, 2022). As such, further research should explore how our findings compare when applied across a broader geographical context.

Considering our promising findings - and very real limitations - in concert with one another, we propose the following areas as vital to future inquiry:

- *How do media artists working with vulnerable youth build authentic audience engagement AND relevance into their pedagogy and mentorship?*
- *How does psychological proximity to incarcerated youth among a larger and more diverse sample of adults shift after listening to the Sending Messages podcast?*
- *How do shifts to psychological proximity to incarcerated youth differ after experiencing other artistic mediums and/or program contexts?*

Implications for Practice

Policy & Legislative Recommendations

Youth media organizations may be uniquely positioned to serve as a lever of change by state policy-makers in the work of building greater psychological proximity between the general public and incarcerated youth. These shifts could lead to greater psychological proximity

between juvenile justice services policy makers and court-involved youth in Utah, providing them with critical insight into the experiences of these youth, and ultimately helping them develop prevention and/or intervention strategies to keep young people from becoming incarcerated in the first place. The hope would be that these writings and media arts programs like Sending Messages could become key elements of the state's juvenile justice reform efforts and ultimately lead to fewer youth in the system.

Youth Development and Media Arts Sector Recommendation

Youth development and youth media arts organizations like Spy Hop are expert at delivering out-of-school time arts-based mentorship and artistic engagement that nurtures transferable cognitive capacities among young people. We saw evidence of such capacities in the way Spy Hop mentors described how their practices in using writing, media arts technology and storytelling led to the ability of their students to gain a greater sense of purpose and belonging, take responsibility for their actions, and develop self-insight. Yet, incarcerated youth are vastly underserved by youth arts organizations across the country. The field could benefit by forming more strategic partnerships within the Juvenile Justice sector, drawing on the insights generated in this research about one of the longest running programs in the country dedicated to serving youth in custodial care.

Conclusions

In exploring the Sending Messages youth media podcast and program, we aimed to understand both the pedagogical practices of mentors on facilitating the creation of authentic youth media, and the impacts of listening to the Sending Messages podcast for general adult audiences. We found that Sending Messages mentors describe a consistent set of values and

beliefs about incarcerated youth, audio/radio production and mentorship that guide their approach to teaching incarcerated youth and help them produce authentic media. Further, we found several statistically significant changes in cognitive and emotional proximity - as well as changes in attitudes about incarcerated youth - between pretest and posttest among members of the general public who listened to Sending Messages. These findings illustrate the throughline of psychological proximity - from pedagogy to dissemination - of the Sending Messages program, suggesting the value of this program in bridging the gap between incarcerated youth and the general public. Similar youth media programs may consider how the values and beliefs found here align with (or diverge from) their pedagogical approaches, and further, may consider disseminating their programming intentionally to shift attitudes about, and advocacy for, incarcerated youth more broadly.

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