

**Podcasts, Prisons, and Pedagogies:**

**How media arts spark new possibilities for incarcerated youth**

Mindy Faber, Convergence Design Lab, LLC

Danielle Maude Littman, University of Utah College of Social Work

## **Podcasts, prisons, and pedagogies: A study on how media arts spark new possibilities for incarcerated youth**

### **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 Spy Hop Productions' Sending Messages program - a Utah-based digital media program for incarcerated youth, which generates youth-produced podcasts centering on their lived experiences. Specifically, we aimed to understand 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*. We found that Sending Messages 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 approach to mentorship of incarcerated youth, as well as to the design of creative production learning experiences and teaching practices. 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 Sending Messages episode. 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.

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

### **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, this investigative 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) and 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 authorship

and 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, "changing previously held stereotypes" Another study by Brewster (2014) revealed that "58% of arts-program participants said art brought them closer to family, enriched their conversations and nurtured a new identity as artist rather than convict".

### **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 seen limited application in the area of juvenile justice and the medium of podcasting.

## **The Current Study**

We believe there is exciting potential here to better understand not just the impact of the experience on the young people themselves, but on the larger constellation of relationships and perceptions within their community. In this sense, we are interested in illuminating how artistic participation in juvenile prisons might shift relational dynamics. Here, we are galvanized by a 2011 study by Moller, which found that a prison music program led to a decrease in disciplinary infractions and negative behavior, despite stirring up challenging emotions, such as anger. Such research points to the possibility that arts programs may provide a safe place to express strong emotions and work through difficult feelings, thereby reducing their likelihood to act out in harmful or disruptive ways.

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 the pedagogy (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 state of Utah, and the Utah juvenile justice system is 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 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 motto is "Youth Media Matters". As such, Spy Hop also devotes extensive resources to audience outreach and public engagement programs. Nearly every class delivered includes a distribution, broadcast, publication and/or public event component. By partnering with other community-based organizations to showcase student work, youth media projects reach over 1,500 audience members each year, and garner numerous awards at festivals nationally.

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. Spy Hop's Director of Learning Design, Adam Sherlock, founded the program and was the primary lead mentor during the duration of this study. 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. However, Spy Hop is an independent nonprofit media arts organization and 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 ten-week program, incarcerated youth, convicted of a wide array of offenses and between the ages of 14-20, 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 a week for a total of 40 hours of contact. Many students repeat the program during their incarceration and most receive high school English credits for participation. 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. However, secure care facilities do not permit youth to use the Internet therefore, Spy Hop supplies/curates most examples, beats and mixing source materials that youth use in workshops. 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. Sending Messages is broadly recognized for the artistic and technical quality of its production as well as the import it carries among listeners and those in the field of juvenile justice, receiving the Community Awareness through Media Award from the American Probation & Parole Assoc. in 2012 and the City Weekly Arty Award: Best New Podcast, in September 2010.

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
- Listening (through headphones to examples of other youth works) followed by group discussion
- Collaborative and one-on-one guided production mentorship

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.

### ***Collaboration between Spy Hop and Convergence Design Lab (CDL)***

In this paper, we report on data collected during the period of Summer 2022 through the Spring of 2023. However, it is important to acknowledge that these findings are likely influenced, in part, by data collection, analysis and interpretation that occurred prior to the commencement of this particular study. This is due to the fact that Convergence Design Lab has engaged in a partnership with Spy Hop since 2016, which continues to the present day, as an

external evaluator and learning design consultant, providing these services on behalf of Spy Hop's youth media programs. 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 lit review of research on how arts and writing intensive learning experiences create specific context challenges for young people in custodial care. (See table below.)

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:

## CONTEXT CHALLENGES FACED BY YOUTH IN CUSTODIAL CARE

### 1. 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.

### 2. 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.

### 3. 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.

### 4. 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

First, we 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 hypothesize that 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?*

## 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 Spy Hop 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 employed a participatory research method, engaging 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 journals 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 qualitative 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 Practices (RQ1)

When this study began, we anticipated seeing patterns of teaching that could be thematically grouped as pedagogic in nature, however, our data led to a more nuanced framing. We see that a specific set of values and beliefs are instrumental in shaping the mindsets of teaching artists and that these mindsets operate as a kind of lens through which mentors design learning experiences and engage in youth interactions across many dimensions. We, therefore, refer to these as *mentor practices* rather than pedagogies.

Mentors in Sending Messages apply a consistent set of values and beliefs that guide key mentorship practices aimed at helping incarcerated youth develop trusting relationships with adults, let down their protective armor, be vulnerable, and engage authentically in personal writing through the form of audio arts and podcasting. Spy Hop applies these practices with teens who are in state custody within institutional settings where they experience little power, control or agency.

<i>What program and pedagogical practices used by SM teaching artists equip youth (aged 14-21) to deliver authentic stories to authentic audiences using the medium of audio arts and podcasting?</i>	
<b>Mentor values and beliefs</b>	<b>Mentor practices</b>

<p><b>NECESSARY VOICES.</b></p> <p>Desire to be heard &amp; understood is human and universal and all deserve to be heard.</p>	<p><b>PEOPLE ARE SERIOUSLY LISTENING</b></p> <p>This is serious business: State of the art gear, real world audiences, training by professional audio artists, part of Sending Messages podcast network</p>
<p><b>UNBURDENING.</b></p> <p>Youth Media (word/poetry/song) brings transformative promise to oneself thru act of creation</p>	<p><b>DON'T FLINCH.</b> Connected, consistent and vulnerable artist/mentor relationships</p>
<p><b>AUTHENTIC VOICE</b></p> <p>Personal storytelling can counter public narratives, stigmas and stereotypes that limit new identity possibilities</p>	<p><b>WRITE on THE FIRST DAY (and everyday).</b> Writers workshop. True stories and self-authorship leads to insight and self awareness</p>

We name these values and beliefs in the chart above based on vocabulary actually used by mentors to describe their approaches during reflections. Specifically, mentors believe that youth voices are “necessary voices” leading them to deliver both explicit and implicit messages to young people, explaining that “people are seriously listening” to their media artwork. A second mentor belief is that writing and audio arts offer a transformative promise through the process of “unburdening,” a process that unfolds when mentors “don’t flinch”, stay connected and consistent, even as youth describe traumas that are “hard-to-hear.” Lastly, teaching artists deeply value “authentic voice” and personal storytelling, a value that compels mentors to push young people to complete and publish audio stories by “writing on the first day” and deepening their writing using honest feedback, reflection and production-centered mentoring.

**Mentor Value/Belief: NECESSARY VOICES.** Desire to be heard & understood is human and universal and all deserve to be heard

Mentor practices in Sending Messages are set in motion by a set of shared beliefs and values about the universal need for all people, including incarcerated youth, to be heard, understood and able to contribute to the larger human narrative. Adam says, “I believe in good radio.” All mentors express a core belief that incarcerated youth in particular need channels to express themselves. “When kids are in trouble for their whole life, they “deserve art in this moment”, says Adam.

Spy Hop describe their approach to personal storytelling as not only a way for youth to gain insight into themselves, but to also help to “counter public narratives, stigmas and stereotypes” that are publicly projected onto incarcerated youth. They believe that audio production is a positive step toward re-writing their own narratives and futures.

All Spy Hop mentors in the program have experience working with youth who have had trauma in their lives, but they come to the work, first and foremost, as practicing audio/radio/sound artists themselves. They identify as experts in the art form of audio, music, writing and sound production, and believe themselves to be fluent in the medium, from both a creative and technical standpoint. They describe how important good storytelling, writing and beatmaking is to young people. They are excited and enthusiastic about the art form and its power.

When asked to describe the works made by their students, each mentor shows enthusiasm. “It’s really really good”, “better than a lot of stuff I hear on NPR”, “deeply, deeply authentic and complex.” Juan is passionate, “It’s real shit.” Myke notes that the young people produce “so much good stuff, even when they fail, it’s good.” Adam says that for him, poetry and written pieces offer “nuggets of wisdom” and are “deeply fascinating.” Collectively, mentors are proud of the quality that their students produce in the program.

They also value *Sending Messages* for the way it humanizes and destigmatizes incarcerated youth to listeners. “It is something universal and fundamental to all cultures and people,” says Adam. “It is part of what it means to be human,” Myke adds.

Roberto adds, “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 Practice: “People are Seriously Listening”**

This belief that youth voices are “necessary” is immediately conveyed to students on the first day of the *Sending Messages* workshop. Below we describe some of the both implicit and explicit practices mentors routinely use to help youth develop trust that their voices and audio work matters to people on the outside, a concept that can seem abstract to young people who feel isolated and cut off from the public.

For example, arriving at the corrections facility on the first day of the workshop with state of the art audio production equipment in tow is a purposeful way mentors convey to students that this is “serious business.” Myke says, “We show up. That’s honestly the first thing. Like if you physically show up with gear, you get a level of trust right out of the gates.

Adam adds, “I’ve got all the microphones, I got all the equipment. I have brand new state of the art Macs that I’m handing out to kids.” “I believe that this says to them, ‘Here’s all this gear. This is about you. This is why I’m here to do this rad thing, and I literally can’t do it without you.’” Myke adds that the equipment is state of the art because, “We want them to know this is for real and we trust them to use it to make good work.”

Mentors then inform students that they will be writing and creating audio for a real world audience and publishing their pieces on a long-running podcast called **Sending Messages**. “People are seriously listening,” mentors tell youth.

Adam reflects on the purpose of this practice; “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.”

As part of the “people are seriously listening” practice, mentors characterize listeners to their students as “... just people who listen to podcasts. They are not there to be your judge. You don’t need to convince anybody anything. You just get the opportunity to telegraph your story to a regular Joe Schmo out there.”

Adam reflects that youth see this as “an evocative idea because sometimes they’re like, ‘I know what you probably think of when you see me, but I’m going to tell you a different story’. So for most kids, the podcast offers an opportunity to be more visible, and better understood. The message to students that their works will be broadcast to the world is “a pledge I give to them at the beginning, on day one of the class. And it works - kids take it super seriously.”

Also, a key practice mentors use to animate the belief in “necessary voices” is to engage youth in listening to examples of other works produced by past youth in Sending Messages, as well as by other poets and writers, some of whom wrote while in prison. The students are set up on individual headphones and allowed to listen to a range of pieces for the youth participants. Adam, Myke, Juan and Roberto use a series of prompts. Adam describes a typical exchange as follows:

Me: What else were you doing while you were listening to this?

Student: Nothing. I was just sitting and listening.

Me: Yeah, it's really intimate, right? There's a person in your head.

Student: Yeah.

Me: That's the power that you have, right? You have the ability to have that personal of an interaction with a stranger?

Youth: Yeah.

Me: So you have their undivided attention. That is the power of being an author. And what it means is that you wield that incredible power.

This practice of using accomplished works of poetry and culturally relevant works of audio art as examples of the kind of work that students can create in the program, positions them as serious creators for serious listeners.

**Mentor Value/Belief: UNBURDENING.** Youth Media (word/poetry/song) brings transformative promise to oneself through the act of creation

Mentors in Sending Messages believe that “unburdening” is essential to helping youth navigate a complex emotional landscape.” Myke says, “It is part and parcel of why we create the strategies we do in working with these kids.”

Mentors believe that before youth can begin “sharing real stories” that lead to “deep insight, catharsis and personal transformation” they need to let down “their protective armor.”

Mentors anticipate that being asked to write poetry, raps and spoken word audio art may “trigger” a lot of intense emotions that are difficult to confront and process in honest ways. Adam puts it this way, “When you give these kids the microphone, that's what they're going to do, because that's what's been on their mind. And that's what's been weighing so heavily on them. This is the burden that they're carrying.”

This belief in the importance of “unburdening” stems from a deep sense of empathy and understanding of the challenges that these young people have endured. Mentors describe the youth in their program as: feeling scared, angry, hurt, harmed, abandoned, alone, bored, and misunderstood.” They point out that many carry poor self-concepts and direct their energy into negative social behaviors, actions and words. Juan describes how being locked up means that for incarcerated teens, “they have no voice, no control.” By stepping into a process of writing and producing, youth come to release difficult emotions through creativity. In this way, mentors hope that by expressing confusing thoughts and emotions through audio art, youth channel internal conflict toward a positive and productive end, that may bring them self insight and a greater sense of creative ownership, confidence and control.

**Mentor Practice: DON'T FLINCH.** Build connection, show consistency and allow vulnerability in the artist/mentor relationship

A key tenet of mentor practice in Sending Messages is to close the distance between

themselves and youth by building consistent connection and allowing vulnerability to be openly expressed. Mentors “never flinch” from the subject matter or the kids 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 my strategy is, always, never flinch. I never tell kids I'm sorry for the stories they're telling. It's not like I come in as an expert, but I come in as someone who isn't there to feel sorry for them and isn't there to flinch away from their experiences. It's okay. This is what you decide to write about.

I'm here to make sure that your piece is as good as it can be and as effective as it can be. Right? 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. —Adam, Sending Messages mentor

The practices and pedagogies used in Sending Messages have evolved over time with these experiences in mind. Teaching artists come into the facilities prepared, primed to ‘live process’ and mentor in the moment, depending on conflicts that may arise. As Adam reflects, “Because if you weren't prepared for that, if you didn't go in knowing all these kids are going to talk about some fucked up stuff, if you didn't think that when you built the curriculum, you would be completely caught with your pants down and the whole thing would fall apart and it would be awful.”

**Mentor Value/Belief: AUTHENTIC VOICE.** Personal storytelling can counter public

narratives, stigmas and stereotypes that limit new identity possibilities

Mentors in Sending Messages believe that, for youth who are incarcerated, learning how to gain insight and self-awareness is a key step to rewriting their own identities and future narratives. To do this, they believe it is important to position youth as “experts of their own experience.” Myke explains, “We show up and tell them, ‘this is about you, not us’. When it comes to what they choose to write about, we try to get out of the way. We tell them, ‘You hold the key to unlocking the puzzle.’”

Adam explains that he and his fellow mentors deeply value Authentic Voice as do all of the teaching artists at Spy Hop. Spy Hop mentors think of Authentic Voice as both a competency and a disposition that is integral to artistic identity and creative confidence. In Convergence Design Lab’s extensive evaluation research for Spy Hop, it surveyed mentors at Spy Hop asking them to describe what they interpret to be indicators of Authentic Voice. The evaluation revealed that mentors share a common perspective and that this view permeates across all classes and teaching modalities.

### **Indicators of Authentic Voice (a sampling)**

(Raw data retrieved from 2021 Survey of Spy Hop Mentors conducted by Convergence Design Lab)

- Youth explore their writing style by sharing with others and receiving feedback
- Youth question their motives for why they create particular pieces
- Youth question their motives in their storylines to make sure they are keeping true to their "take away"
- Youth experiment with different singing or writing techniques.
- Youth challenge themselves to demonstrate accountability
- Youth test out different styles of production

- Youth write directly from their perspective
- Youth avoid unnecessary clichés and tropes.
- Youth examine why they want to write a song
- Youth confront themselves to make sure they can "gut check" their concepts and ideas as their stories progress

For Sending Messages mentors, Authentic Voice has been internalized into the culture and purpose of the program. It is not only deeply valued by mentors, but connected to how they perceive their role as a teaching artist in the program— that is to cultivate Authentic Voice in youth. For Adam, this is being achieved when youth take full ownership over the messages they want to send and stories they tell. “Any feelings that I might have of drawing out a bunch of really personal stuff from this really vulnerable population, I avoid. Instead, I'm really trying to center myself on, ‘okay, this is the story that you want to tell. How do you tell the best version of this story?’” Finding one’s authentic voice is seen by mentors as integral to what it means to “make good radio.”

**Mentor Practice: WRITE on THE FIRST DAY.** Writers workshop. Honest reflection leads to insight, self awareness and ‘good radio.’

The value mentors hold for Authentic Voice is evident in each and every workshop session of Sending Messages. It begins by ensuring that all students are “writing on the first day”, and then deepening their writing through iteration using honest feedback, reflection and mentor coaching.

Since the program’s inception, Sending Message’s first day writing assignment is titled: *Write a Letter You Can Never Send*. Adam explains that youth begin writing with the knowledge

that “this is the very first piece that will see the light of day. It's the promise I make. It's the pledge I give them.” Writing on the first day sets the tone for the remaining 10 weeks and sends the message that the youth are there to create, produce, and publish personal works. It is their project.

Roberto explains that this assignment to write a letter you will never send offers students, especially reluctant writers, a “low barrier entry into writing”, yet the topics that students end up exploring “are really heavy.”

Mentors describe that students often choose to write letters to:

- Deceased friends and family members
- Self-inflicted scars
- A higher power
- A drug addiction
- Depression and anxiety
- The system that incarcerated them
- The cell where they live

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 understanding why she has done the things she did. She told me that just sharing like those little personal things helped because she is the kind of person that puts up a wall.”

Juan recounts how one of his students felt about 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.”

## **No Cop Outs**

Even while mentors open up opportunities for youth to write about what they choose, they also do not hesitate to “call BS” when they believe youth are “copping out.” This is why mentors build feedback, reflection and iterative writing into the production process, similar to a writers workshop. Students are given writing journals and prompts that encourage them to write in between classes. They are also motivated to record their letters aloud and then add in music or beats that they also may create themselves. These writings turn into audio recorded pieces that make up the Sending Messages podcast that is published and distributed.

Another key mentor practice used in the program is on how to avoid writing “traps” as a way to help young people level up toward the goal of writing with an authentic voice.

The three traps, described below, are ones that mentors use to push young people who have experienced a lot of trauma, to confront difficult feelings and experiences in a more honest way. Mentors describe these traps as:

- Misery tourism
- War stories
- Fake redemption

These traps, once explained to youth, provide mentors with entry points to engage in deeply reflective conversations on painful topics, by asking “hard and probing questions.”

Adam explains “misery tourism” to young people in this way: “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?” In this way, he asks young people to consider another perspective, that of the listener, as a way to help the young writer take more accountability in their authorship.

Mentors also work to help students steer clear of what they call “war stories” —writing that delves into detailed, glorified or gruesome accounts involving violence, gangbanging, drug use and other criminal behavior. As Juan describes it, “When they start producing war stories with icky 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 recognize that endings are difficult for most writers and are prepared for a trap that many students fall into which they call “fake redemption stories” Adam explains how he coaches writers when he senses that there is 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?”

Adam recounts the story of one case where a young girl told him, “I cant write an ending because this problem I am dealing with, it's still going on.” Adam then replied, “That's your ending.” And then she thought about it and said, “Yeah, you're right.” Adam explains that these strategies help students” look at their experience as more universal—as a way to write a better story through insight into themselves. “Writing can be transformative, to real problems. When it

works, it helps youth gain clarity of the clean mind. That is when magic happens in the work they produce. It has such deep intrinsic value.”

In summary, Sending Messages mentors believe that youth voices are necessary voices and want their students to understand that audiences are seriously listening, that their voices matter. Mentors structure their teaching practice around production-centered coaching and writing intensive learning experiences with the goal of listening for and bringing forth Authentic Voice. They believe the creation of truthful personal works of audio art by incarcerated youth, can not only build empathy among listeners, but can ultimately result in deep personal insight and remarkable self-awareness for young people who need to unburden the weight they carry and be more fully seen and understood.

## **Findings: Psychological Proximity (RQ2)**

### ***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 1* for full participant demographics.

**Table 1. Participant demographics (N=33)**

	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
<b>Age</b>		
25-34	12	36.4
35-44	10	30.3

45-54	1	3.0
65+	5	15.2
<b>Geographic region</b>		
Greater Wasatch Front	30	90.9
Other in Utah	3	9.1
<b>Political leanings</b>		
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
<b>Religious leanings</b>		
Agnosticism/Atheism	6	18.2
Christianity/Catholicism	12	36.4
Islam	1	3.0
The Church of Jesus	8	24.2
Christ of Latter Day Saints		
Secular spiritualism	3	9.1
Other/prefer not to answer	3	9.1
<b>Ever Visited Secure Care</b>		
Never	20	60.6
Once or twice	6	18.2
Several	7	21.2
<b>Ever been incarcerated</b>		
Yes	3	9.1

No	30	90.9
<b>Know those under 21 who are incarcerated</b>		
Yes	16	48.5
No	17	51.5

***Psychological Proximity***

We found several statistically significant changes between pretest and posttest among participants. 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.

Item (7-pt. Likert Scale)	Mean difference	SD	t	p
<b>Cognitive Proximity</b>				
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
<b>Emotional Proximity</b>				
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**
<b>Attitudes (“In my mind, incarcerated young people...”)</b>				
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**
<b>Intentions to Act</b>				
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

\*indicates statistical significance at the <0.10 level

+indicates reverse coded item

### ***Listening Experience***

In their posttest questionnaires, participants were given space to reflect on *what 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, through 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 considerations.** 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 high quality 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.

### **Conclusion**

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.

## References

- Brewster, L. (2014). The impact of prison arts programs on inmate attitudes and behavior: A quantitative evaluation.
- Cohen, M. L. (2012). Harmony within the walls: Perceptions of worthiness and competence in a community prison choir. *International Journal of Music Education*, 30(1), 46-56.
- Gardner, A., Hager, L. L., Hillman, G., & Network, S. C. A. (2014). Prison arts resource project. *An annotated bibliography*.
- Grossi, L. (2017). Sexual offenders, violent offenders, and community reentry: Challenges and treatment considerations. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 34, 59–67.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2017.04.005>
- Hazel, N. (2008). *Cross-national comparison of youth justice*. Youth Justice Board for England and Wales. [https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/7996/1/Cross\\_national\\_final.pdf](https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/7996/1/Cross_national_final.pdf)
- Ito, M., Gutiérrez, K., Livingstone, S., Penuel, B., Rhodes, J., Salen, K., ... & Watkins, S. C. (2013). *Connected learning: An agenda for research and design*. Digital Media and Learning Research Hub.
- Jenkins, H., Shresthova, S., Gamber-Thompson, L., Kligler-Vilenchik, N., & Zimmerman, A. (2016). By any media necessary. In *By Any Media Necessary*. New York University Press.
- Lee, A. R., Hon, L., Won, J., You, L., Oloke, T., & Kong, S. (2019). The role of psychological proximity and social ties influence in promoting a social media recycling campaign. *Environmental Communication*, 14(4), 431–449.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17524032.2019.1677737>
- Lee, A. R., Hon, L., & Won, J. (2018). Psychological proximity as a predictor of participation in

- a social media issue campaign. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 85, 245–254.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2018.04.006>
- Liao, L. C., & Sanchez, B. (2015). An exploratory study of the role of mentoring in the acculturation of Latino/a youth. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 43(7), 868-877.
- Liberman, N., & Trope, Y. (2003). The psychology of transcending the here and now. *Science*, 322 (5905), 1201–1205. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1161958>
- McCarthy, P., Schiraldi, V., & Shark, M. (2016). *The future of youth justice: A community-based alternative to the youth prison model*. Executive Sessions on Community Corrections, No. 2, Harvard Kennedy School of Government.  
[https://www.hks.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/centers/wiener/programs/pcj/files/ntcc\\_the\\_future\\_of\\_youth\\_justice.pdf](https://www.hks.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/centers/wiener/programs/pcj/files/ntcc_the_future_of_youth_justice.pdf)
- Miner-Romanoff, K. (2016). Voices from inside: The power of art to transform and restore. *Journal of Correctional Education*, 67(1), 58–74.
- Moller, L. (2011). Project slam: Rehabilitation through theatre at Sing Sing Correctional Facility.
- Littman, D. M., Sliva, S. M., & Lin, J. (2022). Closer to the problem: can a virtual prison arts event foster psychological proximity to the issue of incarceration?. *Contemporary Justice Review*, 25(1), 4-23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10282580.2021.1995719>
- Peterson, B. (2021). Juvenile Justice Pipeline and the Road Back to Integration; *Hearing before the Subcommittee on Crime, Terrorism and Homeland Security*.  
[HHRG-117-JU08-Wstate-PetersonB-20210513.pdf \(congress.gov\)](https://www.congress.gov/hrg/117/ju08/wstate-petersonb-20210513)
- Petrosino, A., Fronius, T., & Zimiles, J. (2022). Alternatives to youth incarceration. *Handbook of issues in criminal justice reform in the United States*, 685-700.
- Plassmeyer, M., & Sliva, S. (2018). Social exclusion as a state-level predictor of changes in

collateral sanctions. *Criminal Justice Review*, 43(2), 236–251.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0734016817721292>

Sawyer, W. (2018). *Youth confinement: The whole pie*. Prison Policy Initiative.

<https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/youth2018.html>

Spy Hop (2023). *Spy Hop: Mission & History*. Spy Hop. Retrieved October 26, 2023, from:

<https://spyhop.org/mission-history/>

Stemler, S. E. (2015). Content analysis. *Emerging trends in the social and behavioral*

*sciences: An Interdisciplinary, Searchable, and Linkable Resource*, 1-14.

Sundt, J. (2011). Oregonians report broad support for policies that could reduce prison

population. *Criminal Justice Policy Research Institute Research Briefs*, 6

<https://www.pdx.edu/criminology->

[criminal-justice/sites/g/files/znlchr3071/files/2020-08/ReducePrison\\_ResearchBrief.pdf](https://www.pdx.edu/criminology-criminal-justice/sites/g/files/znlchr3071/files/2020-08/ReducePrison_ResearchBrief.pdf)

Vasudevan, L., & DeJaynes, T. (Eds.). (2013). *Arts, media, and justice: Multimodal explorations*

*with youth*. Peter Lang.

U.S. Census Bureau. (n.d.). U.S. Census Bureau quickfacts: Utah.

<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/UT/PST045222>

Utah Department of Health and Human Services. (n.d.). *Complete health indicator report of*

*Utah population characteristics: Age distribution of the population*. IBIS.

[https://ibis.health.utah.gov/ibisph-view/indicator/complete\\_profile/AgeDistPop.html#:~:t](https://ibis.health.utah.gov/ibisph-view/indicator/complete_profile/AgeDistPop.html#:~:t)

ext=According%20to%20the%20U.S.%20Census,of%20the%20total%20U.S.%20popula

Tion.