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## Teaching a distance higher education curriculum behind bars: challenges and opportunities

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## **Teaching a distance HE curriculum behind bars: challenges and opportunities**

The provision of education that is both effective and relevant to the needs of students within prison is challenging on a number of levels. The uniqueness of prison culture with a regime characterised by a focus on security measures such as lock-downs and head counts constrains the possibilities for learning. The absence of a supportive learning environment together with an emphasis on punishment rather than rehabilitation has the effect of marginalising education in prison so that 'education' has come to be seen by some as 'off limits'. Education in basic skills such as literacy and numeracy that contributes to 'life skills' is given priority. In contrast, access to higher education is more problematic with this generally perceived by both prisoners and prison staff as an 'elite' activity. This article adopts a case study approach to consider the barriers to higher education distance learning in the prison setting. It focuses on the practical and organisational constraints faced by educators in their efforts to help students in prison negotiate the different worlds of prison and higher education. It also highlights the value of one-to-one tutorial support in facilitating learning in less than optimum teaching conditions.

**Key words:** Distance learning; Higher education; Prison

### **Introduction**

The UK Prison Service is legally obliged to offer educational opportunities to all prisoners including those who are unsentenced, sentenced and young offenders (under 21). Despite this statutory obligation, discussion about education and rehabilitation for prisoners has in recent times been eclipsed by the issues of overcrowding and sentencing severity that have come to dominate public debate about the workings of the UK prison system (Sainsbury, 2007).

Responsibility for prison education now falls within the remit of the Department for Business Innovation & Skills (DBIS) that highlights in a number of its policy documents the role of education in preparing offenders for employment on release from prison. The Government Green paper 'Reducing Re-offending Through Skills and Employment', published in December 2005, has as its core objective the breaking of the cycle of repeat offending that is a dominant feature of the UK prisoner profile. The National Offender Management Service (NOMS) that operates under the aegis of DBIS, is building links with employers aimed at increasing the numbers of offenders going into employment (DBIS web site accessed on 28 October 2009). The work of NOMS is underpinned by the Offender Learning and Skills Service (OLASS), that was established in 2004, with the aim of assessing each offender's learning needs to develop an individual learning plan. The emphasis on assessment and appropriate ongoing provision is intended to take account of an offender's journey through the criminal justice system with the stated aim of 'joined up' delivery arrangements so that learning in one setting can continue in another.

## **The goals of prison education**

The goal of education within the prison setting is to ensure that inmates are given the appropriate skills to enable them to pursue further training on release in order to live a 'good and useful life' (Walklin, 2000: 206) with the further associated objective of making society safer by reducing re-offending. Because a large proportion of offenders find themselves excluded from employment opportunities due to low ability in literacy, numeracy and work-related skills, the greater part of the Prison Service's education budget is devoted to redressing these deficiencies. A broad range of provision from learning a trade to developing job-seeking skills is offered to support the prisoner's rehabilitation within society when released. This basic education is usually classroom based and provided in dedicated facilities and now, most usually, commercially contracted out. Kensington and Chelsea College, for example, is now the contracted provider of further and skills education to prisons across London (DBIS website accessed on 28 October 2009). The issue of the cost of providing education to offenders in prison has been taken up by the Prisoners' Education Trust (PET). This organisation, established in 1989 to offer prisoners training and education opportunities, funds mainly distance learning courses covering a wide range of vocational and academic curriculum.

The discourse of prison education mirrors the instrumental approach of learning for work taken by the Government (Bayliss, 2003; Sanford and Foster, 2006). Employability has thus become central to the emphasis of post-16 education within the UK. Although still a minority interest, higher education provision within UK prisons has been maintained, with the Open University now established as a key provider of both undergraduate and postgraduate curriculum. Some commentators, however, identify a narrowness of the HE curriculum in prisons that, combined with a shortage of resources, has resulted in an inadequate offer (Sanders, 2000). A wider point is that made by France and Beaty (1998) that the 'gap' between basic skills (such as those of literacy and numeracy), further and higher education is narrowing with all three now increasingly characterised by the language of skill acquisition and competence – 'core skills' and 'personal transferable skills' are two examples. In higher education there is often a reduced emphasis on subject specific knowledge with greater attention to generic graduate skills training.

## **The contribution of the Open University**

The model of supported open distance learning pioneered by the Open University (and now offered by many institutions across the higher education sector) has the broad aim of widening educational opportunity. The Open University's collaborative scheme with prisons dates back to the 1970's and currently there are around 1400 students studying in 150 prisons across the UK ([www.open.ac.uk](http://www.open.ac.uk) - accessed 17 August 2009). Central to this model of distance learning is the independent autonomous learner who, guided by a course activities calendar and drawing on a range of 'pre-packaged' audio and text materials, can study at their own pace. The support of a tutor is provided to mediate the materials and aid learning. Despite the increased emphasis of on-line support from tutors, face-to-face tutorials continue to feature within the Open University's teaching model with this personal support provided to students both within and outside prison settings. In theory this parallel level of support is designed to even out the differences of opportunities for learning

between prison and non-prison students; this, in reality however, is rarely the case as some of the issues below demonstrate.

### **Issues in the prison setting**

This commentary considers some of the issues faced by higher education teachers supporting students in the prison setting, drawing attention to matters relating to access, the nature of the teaching and learning environment, practical and ethical concerns associated with 'E' learning and the problem of prisoner/student identity. The commentary draws on the author's experience of teaching in a single high security prison, and while the student experience varies considerably across different categories of prison, the literature suggests that the issues recounted in this case study have relevance for teaching in a variety of prison settings.

### ***Access***

Prisons, as secure custodial establishments, have highly controlled arrangements for the admission (and discharge) of visitors with heavily monitored protocols that apply equally to 'official' and 'social' categories of visitor. Gaining access to the prison for a face-to-face teaching session is formidable, particularly at high security prisons. Access often involves long waiting in outer and inner reception areas whilst identity documents are checked, mobile phones are lodged and contact is made with staff in the prison education section. Because of the academic rather than practical learning associated with higher education curriculum, the use of a dedicated and quiet teaching space is preferable and checking about the availability of an appropriate room often adds to the lengthy entry process. As an Open University tutor, my experience of gaining entry to a high security prison over a period of three years involving many visits was, on each occasion, characterised by varying levels of suspicion on the part of prison officers staffing the entry areas. The requirement to be personally searched and the contents of my bag scrutinised was rigorously enforced; this included careful inspection of the teaching materials. On some occasions I was also questioned about earlier visits and the progress of the student.

Access to students and the allocated teaching area in the inner part of the prison was fully escorted. Being led through different sections and floors of the prison one is made aware of this setting as 'total institution' (Goffman, 1961) where the activity of teaching and learning is marginalised against a background of maintaining order and routine as priority with security tensions continually at the fore. As might be expected, the phenomenon of surveillance was the dominant feature of the environment with the sense that everyone (prisoners and prison staff alike) was engaged in watching each other. For me, this created a sense of unease and on every visit I experienced the psychological strain of having to reorient my mind set towards the practice of teaching in what I experienced as an 'alien' environment.

One feature of the 'alien' environment was the generally negative and uncooperative attitudes of prison officers that I encountered that suggest that education, particularly higher education, may not be seen as a legitimate activity for inmates. Being told to wait whilst the officer attended to something else or being ignored when asking a question are two examples of the negative or indifferent behaviour of officers I observed. Irwin (2008) makes the point that educators working in prisons are almost

entirely dependent on the goodwill of prison staff to facilitate the practical arrangements to make the teaching encounter possible. This is clearly a power issue and challenging the disappointing attitudes of some prison staff was not feasible if the teaching sessions were to go ahead. This lack of 'practical goodwill' towards the facilitation of education runs counter to the rhetoric of most prisons and the stated resolve of prison governors to give greater resource to education that is seen primarily as an instrument of social rehabilitation directed towards a reduction in re-offending rates.

### ***The teaching and learning setting***

Simpson (2003: 210) argues that 'contrary to some popular opinion prison is usually a very difficult environment in which to study'; the continuous noise of televisions and music systems from adjacent cells as well as doors crashing and shouting from both prisoners and prison staff combine to making study very challenging. Prisons are very stressful places and this negatively affects concentration and study motivation. France and Beaty (1998) argue that students are profoundly affected by the immediate environment in which they study and that this includes the influences of fellow learners. Because of prison routines that include mandatory periods of work for most prisoners, the opportunity for study is more restricted than might be expected and time to study in privacy especially scarce.

If studying in prison is stressful for students, teaching in prison can also be stressful for tutors engaging with the unwelcoming physical and cultural prison environment (Simpson, 2003). For several teaching sessions I undertook with a student serving a life sentence for murder, because of a 'mix up' with the booking of rooms, the only teaching space available was his cell, with sessions conducted on the wing with the door open and a prison officer standing guard outside. This teaching space was claustrophobic and untidy and one in which it was difficult to 'settle down' to teaching. The toilet located in the far corner of the cell served to remind me that this was essentially a 'living and sleeping space' that was intrinsically personal and not appropriate as a space for teaching.

Because of the multiple constraints of the teaching setting it was sometimes necessary to adapt lesson plans, particularly to take account of surveillance aspects to ensure that the student was not compromised in any way by the teaching activities. As an example, during a tutorial with a prison student taking the *Death and Dying* course, a planned activity exploring different dimensions of loss had to be by-passed because of the close presence of a prison officer standing guard by the open door of the teaching room. My judgement was that the student might inadvertently disclose sensitive information that could not be kept confidential because of the surveillance of the session. As a consequence tutorial aims and objectives were derailed leading to a less than wholly satisfactory teaching encounter from the perspective of both the tutor and the student. The circumstances described above depict less than optimum conditions for teaching and illustrate what Simpson (2002: 158) characterises as an 'anti-intellectual environment' in which studying is resented with educationalists confronted by a range of practical inconveniences (Irwin, 2008). This resentment is not confined to prison staff, with prison students often the targets of harassment and bullying from fellow inmates (Simpson, 2002). This may have highly detrimental

social and psychological impacts with students made to feel stigmatised and estranged from inmate camaraderie.

### *'E' learning*

The impact of technology on both conventional face-to-face and distance learning higher education environments has been enormous. Sankey and St. Hill (2009: 127) point to the role played by 'E' learning in what they term as the 'massification' of higher education that in recent years has been transformed from an elite to a mass system with a much larger proportion of the population participating. They point to a greater diversity of people entering higher education with factors such as age, culture, employment status, language issues and aspects of disadvantage combining to challenge both the teacher and the student. They see a multimodal approach to the design of distance learning materials as an important tool with which to support the different learning styles of a diverse student population. Other aspects of transformation are commented on by Demiray and Sharma (2009) who argue that the emergence of the internet has transformed distance education with the developing widespread use of email, online chat rooms, web sites, blogs, instant messaging, online journals and a range of multi-user environments.

Despite the growth of 'E' learning in higher education and its potential to engage large numbers of students for whom traditional face-to-face 'classroom' provision is neither possible nor appropriate, Simpson (2009) suggests that the assumption that students can readily access 'E' learning opportunities merits closer scrutiny. In the case of students studying in prison, access to the internet is highly contentious and, in high security prison settings, generally unavailable, with this mode of study further excluding the already socially excluded. Equality of access should be central to any strategy for social justice prompting Simpson (2009) to suggest that 'E' learning may create ethical issues by restricting as well as widening educational opportunity. Most of the prison students I have supported reported to me that their choice of course was predominantly influenced by the extent to which they would be required to 'E engage' as part of the core pedagogy.

Higher education students cannot work effectively without access to modern technologies and the largest barrier to offender learning is the digital divide. Access to computers and storage media varies widely and is dependent on the culture within each prison. Whilst all prisons have some level of traditional library facility, these are seriously under-equipped and ill-funded, despite the policy intention of DBIS whose stated vision for prison libraries is 'to provide offenders in custody with a similar range of services to those found in public libraries in the outside community' and that the library service within a prison should be seen as part of the core provision of the establishment (DBIS web site accessed on 28 October 2009). In recent years computers, with their 'searching' function, have come to be regarded as libraries enabling instant access to a wide spectrum of information resources. Learners studying in prison, without access to these resources, are likely to have a much more limited learning experience. As curriculum innovations in distance learning come to depend increasingly heavily on 'E' pedagogies, the choice of modules and degree pathways for students in prison becomes ever more limited, with this acting as a disincentive for these students to continue their studies (see Open University, 2009).

The UK Open University has conducted a review of its offender learning provision and currently is developing reasonable alternatives to the online elements of its curriculum until the prison service is better resourced and more liberal access to IT facilities becomes available. Alongside this alternative provision, as technology in prisons begins to be used for reform and rehabilitation, platforms are being developed which can offer prisoners safe access to online education. One example is the implementation of a Virtual Campus that provides secure and bounded web access using existing systems. Secure E-messaging, via a guardian, is anticipated and this 'E' innovation should enable students to access both their tutors and the Open University's electronic assessment system, representing a significant step forward (Open University web site accessed on 28 October 2009).

### **Prisoner/student identity**

Many prisoners are emotionally and mentally unstable with low self-esteem and negative and defensive attitudes. On entering prison some inmates will have physical as well as mental health issues and these require assessment as part of a wider duty of care that is the responsibility of the Prison Service (Scruton and Moore, 2006). Engaging in education programmes to gain qualifications is thus not an immediate priority for prisoners who are having to deal with the traumatic effects of incarceration such as isolation, separation from family and friends, detox, bullying and appearances in court.

Because prisons make a contribution to the costs of most inmates' study from constrained budgets, assessment of suitability for education and training, particularly for higher education learning, is mandatory to ensure as far as possible, suitability for study. For longer-term prisoners, assessment may not take place until well into their prison sentence with education departments taking the view that prisoners have to achieve some sense of stability within the prison environment before they can embark on the challenge of higher education study with any realistic prospect of success. In this context the concept of stability is contested given the unpredictable nature of prison life with the frequent movement and transfer of prisoners to mitigate overcrowding.

Features of the prison environment that serve to challenge teachers have been outlined above; these are principally cultural and structural and, in the main, difficult to overcome. The reality is that these have to be 'endured'. The further challenge, that is both challenge and opportunity, relates to the persona of the student who is completely bound up with his or her self first and foremost as prisoner. Fostering a student identity can be understood as part of the pastoral role of the tutor aimed at helping students to reposition themselves as students that this becomes part of their social and cultural identity. In my experience this principally involves the tutor in being an attentive listener as acknowledgement that curriculum comprises more than just the syllabus. During my three years as a higher education tutor in prison I was never once able to move straight into the teaching role at the start of a session. This was because before the student could move into the student 'self', to be fully engaged in the learning situation, it was necessary for him (I have only taught male prison students) to actively, if only temporarily, 'leave' and 'unlock' the prisoner 'self'. This was achieved by allowing the student time to talk about non-study issues such as family news, visits, changes to work schedules within the prison and legal aspects

relating to status review. Often this took considerable time but experience has shown that this is time well spent as it gives the student time to 'position' himself in the teaching context through a process of narrative self reflection. Sometimes their narratives included comments about disrupted study due to security alerts and uncooperative cellmates (see Simpson, 2002), creating a picture of 'study as struggle'.

One-to-one support requires considerable concentration on the part of the tutor and can be draining. Making sessions varied and interesting without the input of a group dynamic is also challenging. This dedicated time, however, is an opportunity to respond to the individual learning needs of the student and build rapport in the teaching encounter. Students who are disempowered by the depersonalised prison environment highly value these one-to-one focused sessions and Irwin (2008) argues that the forging and developing of links between student and teacher can be pivotal in sustaining study motivation. Over time I observed that, despite the restricted life situation in which these students were placed, their enthusiasm for learning was nurtured through these responsive and 'tailor-made' tutorials that seemed to act as motivators for personal growth and advancement (Rogers, 2002). None of the prison students I taught had contact with other students and the individual teaching sessions helped to ameliorate the isolation they felt as students (see Tait, 1989) within a 'total' institution (Goffman, 1961). They were also instrumental in helping to build self-esteem and confidence related to study skills, particularly the skill of academic writing.

## **Conclusion**

Students learning in prison do not have the opportunity to form bonds with other students; nor do they currently have ready access to their tutors because of restricted internet and phone use. Without enrichment and reinforcement that stem from being a member of a learning community, students taking higher education courses in prison are socially and materially disadvantaged with outcomes for these learners heavily shaped by negative peer pressure and the highly unpredictable nature of prison life. As this case study illustrates, however, one-to-one tutorial support can make a positive difference to the student learning experience in the distance medium. With the Prison Service now characterised by higher numbers of people serving shorter sentences, chronic overcrowding and high prisoner mobility (Sainsbury, 2007), the opportunity to develop and extend higher education for prison students would seem to be limited.

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