Developing online communities to support distance learning in secure environments

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Developing Online Communities to Support Distance Learning in Secure Environments

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ABSTRACT

The UK Open University (OU) has successfully provided Higher Education (HE), through distance learning to students in prison, almost since its inception. This paper uses results from a recent qualitative study to discuss the learning process in a secure environment. It argues that the soft skills developed during the self-directed distance learning process are identity forming and discusses the social elements which support the learning. It highlights the major barriers to learning including the lack of access to the internet and explains two possible solutions which are being trialed to bridge the digital divide. It then introduces many of support networks and online learning communities which are developing within and around secure learning environments.

Keywords: Distance Learning, Communities of Practice, Identity formation, Online Community

1. INTRODUCTION

There are approximately 1500 OU students in UK and Ireland in more than 150 prisons of differing security categories, studying approximately 220 courses across all levels and faculties. The University's prison students have significantly lower entry qualifications than the non-prison student. A recent survey showed that 46% of newly sentenced prisoners had no qualifications prior to entering prison. [1]

Students in prison are usually extremely committed. Their retention is higher than the norm and their success rates are comparable with the norm and higher than other groups of disadvantaged students (see table 1: DAR = Students with disabilities, FAF = Students on Financial Assistance). However, there is a downward trend for students in prison which could be related to the introduction of online courses and the growing digital divide.

Table 1: Success Rates for 2002-2007
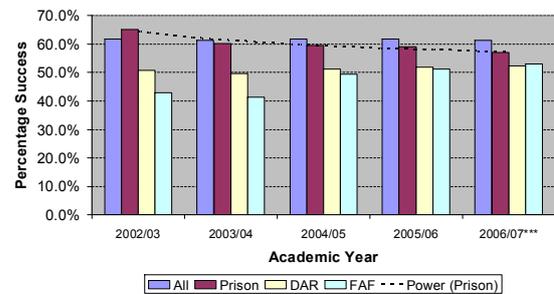
2. LEARNING IN A SECURE ENVIRONMENT

According to 'situated learning' theories [2], learning within any domain is more than a formal acquisition of knowledge or information; it has a social element which is often ignored. Learning is about the whole person and involves the situation and activity so, to understand and support learning we need to understand it in the context within which it is embedded [3].

In a recent study [3, 4], 91 students, staff and managers participated (through informal, in-depth interviews & questionnaires) in 15 prisons (ranging in security category, gender, public/private, computer access) across the UK. The three main themes of the study were:-
• Situated Learning – What effect does prison life have on the prisoner's learning and what effect does learning have on the prisoner's life.
• Support - who or what has affected their ability to study in prison
• Access - how does security and access to technology, or the lack of it, affect their learning

Situated Learning

Finding a quiet space to work in a prison can be very difficult so students sometimes work alone in their cells in the night-time. Most have had bad experiences of classroom education, so prefer more informal learning environments and they value opportunities to join flexible open learning situations where they can meet like-minded people. They gain confidence from staying the course and succeeding. They feel empowered by their knowledge and the ability to break away from the 'bad' elements in the prison; gaining self-esteem from being a student and rising above their prisoner status [4]. Although the qualification is important, it is this acquisition of the soft skills from the self-directed learning process which changes their values and helps them to form a new identity.

"Education has given me options to stop re-offending" (Social Science student)

Support

Most students identify one or two 'special' people who have made the difference by either encouraging or believing in them. It is sometimes the first time in a prisoner's life that someone has shown faith in their ability to achieve academically.

"P [the education coordinator] said I had the potential … he was like a father to me. I still remember him" (Science student)

OU lecturers (tutors) provide face-to-face tutorials and much additional information from the internet which is inaccessible from prison. There is now a support forum for tutors to discuss these alternative approaches [6]. Tutors mostly negotiate their own access to the prison and requirements for security clearance are often extraordinarily difficult and lengthy – some can take up to 6 months by which time the course is almost complete. Students can feel isolated if, for whatever reason, tutors do not visit. Not all tutors are adequately prepared for the prison environment. One student in a high security prison explained:

"The tutor arrived completely 'frazzled' and didn't stay long"

Tutors suggest that a prison-specific induction, or mentoring scheme, would help them to appreciate the risks, deal with the confined spaces and provide better support for their students.

Access

There are many barriers to learning in a secure environment. The security regime itself hinders movement and reduces access to study space, study material and support; crowded conditions necessitate sudden transfers and disruption. The day-to-day running of a prison is dependent on the prison officers, many of whom resent the learning of the prison students.

'They don't like you doing OU. Some of these officers are sun newspaper readers. Know what I mean?' (Maths student)

There is evidence to suggest, however, that many prison officers would welcome a more proactive role in the rehabilitation of prisoners or would like more education for themselves[7].

One of the biggest challenges for students in a secure environment is the lack of access to computers, storage media and the internet. The OU's increased use of the VLE has caused a significant reduction in course choice and there are now less than 10% of the named degrees available in prison. Alternatives can be found. Hancock [6] has investigated alternatives to online course requirements provided by tutors and found it to be a very time-consuming and difficult process. An EDO (essential, desirable or optional) framework has been trialled which enables tutors and faculties to identify the alternatives required, and initial reactions have been favourable.

But alternatives are not the long term solution. Prison students need access to the technologies which will provide them with employable skills and enable them to resettle satisfactorily into the community.

"What's the point in rehabilitation if you don't know modern technology" (Student close to release)

3. BRIDGING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

The UK government has acknowledged the need for a long-term strategy of online secure access in prison [8]. Over the last few years platforms have been developed which can provide prisoners' safe access to online education [5] but progress is very slow. They are, as yet, still only in the form of small trials. The OU is currently involved in two trials - the Virtual Campus and a high security Intranet, which are enabling better access to one course and some open access material.

The Virtual Campus

The Virtual Campus provides secure web access through 'thick client' technology using existing systems wherever possible to reduce costs. It is being trialed in prisons in two English regions. The system is a full resettlement tool, providing access to accommodation and employment opportunities as well as education. This makes it more acceptable to the authorities than 'just' an education facility. 3 or 4 prisons in each region are currently participating in the trials which provide a suite of computers connected to selected whitelisted sites through a secure firewall. The OU is to trial one course for direct online access initially and tests are ongoing with the aim of going live in October 2009. Secure e-messaging, via a guardian, is anticipated and will allow students to be able to communicate with their tutors and the OU's e-assessment system – a huge step forward.

The Intranet.

An intranet has been developed in a high security prison in England. The OU course modules sit on the third-party Moodle platform and the trial has consisted of a few students who are able to access the course material but no other internet-based tools. Although the system is not attached to the internet, students found that accessing web-pages 'online' rather than on paper was more like a real internet search and very useful when attempting to answer assignment questions. They could access the videos which they found very helpful. Forum discussions are simulated via the memo facility, printed off and passed to their fellow students, since online communication is still not allowed.

4. DEVELOPING COMMUNITIES

Even in a secure environment, like-minded individuals still come together to form communities of practice [9].

Students develop informal study groups, not necessarily studying the same course, but supporting each other in the face of adversity. Irwin suggests that politically aligned prisoners are able to create learning networks extending beyond their physical and geographical boundaries [10]. The students on the Intranet trial have developed their own small community. They are not yet communicating 'online', though they did initially use Moodle's forum and chat facilities on the intranet until these facilities were removed on security grounds! The Virtual Campus offers a real opportunity for prison education departments to become an online learning community. It could be used by all in prison; staff and prisoners alike, maximising use of resources and developing a culture of learning.

For the tutors there is a support wiki and a forum to discuss alternative approaches. These are developing into online tools for use by a growing community of OU tutors. There is however much more that can be done to develop these tutor support networks. The OU's Openlearn open source collaborative space has two online communities: one website has been developed for OU tutors and prison education staff to share ideas and resources. The other website supports an international community of researchers who are investigating prison education [11].

5. CONCLUSIONS

In secure environments there is often a strange perception of space and time. Education in prison has been likened to learning in bubbles [12], where prisoners can gain access to another place where they can leave their prisoner status behind, but also stressing the isolation of learning. There are however many developing communities to support distance learning in secure environments. These are often small and informal but should be nurtured and encouraged. As technology in prisons begins to be used for

reform and rehabilitation rather than for control and punishment, so these communities will be able to develop further, enabling vitally needed online communities for students and staff alike.

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