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“Education is Transformational”: Positive Identity through Prison-based Higher Education in England and Wales

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Education is transformational because it gives you hope, which is all that I ask for. (Jed, male incarcerated student, 40-49)

ABSTRACT

This article investigates Prison-based Higher-level Distance Learning (PHDL), and how it may lead to personal change and positive identity in the incarcerated student, through an ethnographic study within ten prisons in England and Wales. We argue that this type of post-compulsory learning, requiring learners to self-study using distance-learning materials, is potentially transformative, making a positive difference to learners' lives and identities during and after incarceration. The study investigates perceptions of transformative learning of adult prisoners within the complex prison environment. Participant observation and individual, face-to-face interviews were conducted with 10 released prisoners and 51 serving prisoners (men and women) who were due for release, in 10 prisons in England and Wales. Although results varied from prison to prison, with the 'learning' prison being the most supportive, participation in PHDL produced psychological outcomes including, increased self-awareness, positive identity and resilience. We conclude that PHDL encourages positive personal change in incarcerated students through transformative learning, with raised hope and aspirations for continuation of learning, employment and a brighter future upon release.

Introduction

A review of the relevant literature which defines identity, suggests that although the prison is understood as an environment in which identity may be disassembled (see Goffman 1968), there is a lack of research which specifically investigates how transformative learning may affect identity in the prison context. With only 1% of the funded curriculum in prison at a higher, post-secondary, level (Prisoners Education Trust, 2012), higher level education, mostly relies on self-study with distance-learning providers such as the Open University. The limited research on Prison-based Higher-level Distance Learning (PHDL) suggests that it may be 'transformative' (Mezirow, 1997). This article fills a gap in that literature by

identifying the transformative factors and their effect on the student-prisoners' sense of self and aspirations for the future.

This study uses an ethnographic approach, including participant observation methods and individual, face-to-face, interviews with 51 male and female prisoners within 10 prisons in England and Wales. Overall, this study highlights factors which enable Prison-based Higher-level Distance Learning (PHDL) to be 'transformative', with a potential to lead to personal change. The positive outcomes of that personal change being increased self-awareness, the ability to critically reflect, development of a positive student identity with raised hopes and strong, realistic aspirations for a different future upon release.

The article unashamedly uses many quotes from the participants to tell the story of positive personal change, but also tells of the support of 'significant others' in order to overcome some of the many difficulties to successfully complete post-secondary education through distance-learning in a prison environment. The article emphasises the importance of the learning environment and the differences in learning across the ten prisons. The concept of a 'learning' prison is developed (see Pike and Adams, 2012), which highlights the participants' perceptions of a good supportive environment which actively supports PHDL and nurtures a learning culture which increases the potential for transformative learning.

Theoretical framework: the theory of transformative learning

This article adopts the theory of transformative learning, as a potential conceptual framework for understanding how adults learn. It then explores the potential of adult higher learning in prisons in the UK through a transformative learning lens. Transformative learning can be defined as; "a process by which previously uncritically assimilated assumptions, beliefs, values, and perspectives are questioned and thereby become more open, permeable, and better justified (Cranton, 2006, p. vi)."

The theory of transformative learning was first developed in the United States in 1978 by Jack Mezirow after he investigated the factors which impeded and facilitated women's progress into higher education through re-entry programmes (Mezirow, 2000b). The findings suggested that the women who participated in the programmes had undergone a perspective transformation in their personal development by becoming more critically aware of their beliefs and feelings about themselves and their role in society. Influenced by Habermas (1984), Mezirow (1991) differentiated between instrumental learning and dialogic (or communicative) learning. He considered instrumental learning to be task-oriented problem-solving for improved performance while dialogic learning involved critically assessing what was being communicated, enabling the learner to recognise unquestioned assumptions and beliefs which they have held since childhood. In turn, this could lead to self-reflective learning, if the learner is able to internalise the reasons for the new perspective.

Self-reflective learning, related to the adult learner's identity, psycho-social history and potential for individual and social change, was fundamental to transformative learning. The self-reflective learner is presented with an alternative way of seeing themselves and the world around them. Self-reflective learning, in itself, was not considered transformational but it could lead to transformation (Brookfield, 2000; Cranton and Hoggan, 2012; Mezirow, 1985, 1997, 2000a). Mezirow (2003) proposed that under certain circumstances a perspective transformation could occur where transformative learning moves the learner from a "taken-

for-granted frame of reference” (p. 59) towards a more discriminating and reflective frame of reference which could fit with their new knowledge and experiences. Transformation was normally a gradual process during which the learner was made aware of alternative perspectives but it may occur suddenly such as in a personal crisis (Mezirow, 1985, 1997). A prison sentence could be just such a personal crisis.

Illeris (2013) considered Mezirow’s definition of transformative learning was too narrowly focused on cognitive learning and suggested that it did not adequately take account of the emotional dimension of learning. He defined three different dimensions to the learning: cognitive (content); emotional (motivation); and social (interaction), which he suggested were inextricably linked. Illeris (2013) defines identity as a psycho-social concept (after Erikson, 1968) which included how one is experienced by oneself (personal identity) as well as how one is experienced by others (social identity). Illeris (2013) redefined transformative learning as comprising “all learning that implies change in the identity of the learner” (p40). He suggested this was a much fuller but simpler definition of transformative learning, encompassing Mezirow’s cognitive changes but adding an emotional and a social element.

Prisons, Education, Hope and Identity

On entering a total institution (Goffman, 1968), prisoners lose their home, their possessions and their very identity as a person, to become just a number. Numerous researchers have emphasised the dehumanising experience of prison (Jewkes, 2002; Liebling, 2007; Sykes, 1958). Maruna et al. (2006) suggested that, “prison provides a stark and vivid social context for exploring the conditions that allow for quantum personality change” (p. 163). In their study of 75 prisoner-to-religion converts, they posited that religion could give prisoners a new social identity to replace their criminal label, empowering them with a language and framework for forgiveness, which gave them more control over their future. As we shall see, transformative learning may provide similar benefits in terms of facilitating the development of more positive personal and social identities.

Jewkes (2002) suggested that prisoners needed to maintain a private, pre-prison, identity while also having a public identity which they would use in socializing with others in the prison, enabling them to be able to revert to a pre-prison identity when they were released. This relates to the “front region” and “back region or backstage” of the individual’s everyday performance, developed by Goffman (1969, p. 93). Similarly, Burnett and Maruna (2006) postulated that one of the survival mechanisms for coping in prison was for inmates to obscure their personality in order to blend in and avoid drawing attention to themselves. These examples highlight the extreme prison environment which is thought to exaggerate every-day life experiences and thus make prisoners potentially more open to change, to develop a new personal and social identity, and see the world in a different way.

The concept of identity transformation for prisoners through education has been debated (Reuss, 1997; Duguid and Pawson, 1998) but these researchers focused on rare, taught, higher education classes rather than distance learning. Links between transformation and higher-level distance learning have been made in Ireland (Costelloe, 2003). Cleere (2013) extended Costelloe’s research, finding evidence of higher social capital among those who

were participating in education and suggested that learners were “‘insulated’ by the positive mindset created through education. There is very little empirical research into PHDL in England and Wales. Early pioneering work by Forster (1976) provided a good indication of the benefits and barriers to distance learning in prison but did not focus on identity. More recently Hughes (2012) focused on motivation and experiences of distance learning in prison. She suggests that it can be seen as ‘hooks for change’ (see Giordano et al, 2002) which “can offer the opportunity to develop a new identity” (Hughes, 2012, p163). Aresti et al. (2010) also discuss formation of pro-social identity for ex-prisoners who entered higher education post-release. However, these did not fully explore the concept of transformative learning and there is, therefore, significant scope for further research to investigate the links between transformative learning and the development of personal and social identity in a prison context in England and Wales.

Method

In order to address the research question of, ‘In what ways is Prison-based Higher-level Distance Learning (PHDL) ‘transformative’ (Mezirow, 1997), and how does it lead to personal change in the learner?’, this study took an ethnographic approach (see Wolcott, 2008). In-depth data was generated from multiple qualitative data collection methods, with data sources including field-notes of observations and informal conversations with relevant others such as prison staff, educators, peers and family. The research method also included an emphasis on in-depth, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews (see Adams & Cox, 2008) with 10 released prisoners (from 1 to 10 years earlier) and 51 serving prisoners (both men and women) due for release, in 10 prisons in England and Wales.

Through these methods, the research investigated participants’ reasons for studying PHDL, what they expected from their study and perceptions of transformative learning and personal change. The transcribed interview data, field notes and much of the additional data was brought together into NVivo10 and was thematically analysed (Braun and Clarke, 2006) on an ongoing basis, to identify themes which ran through the learning journeys. The emergent themes provided the important determinants for transformative learning in prison and integration into society upon release. Through a “subtle realism” (Hammersley, 1992, p50-54) we argue that perceptions may differ, but an assumption can still be made that the described phenomena are as they are and not just how they are perceived to be. The names of participants provided here are pseudonyms which have been specifically selected to reflect gender and ethnicity. All quotes also indicate participant’s age range.

Approval was gained from the Open University Human Research Ethics Committee and the National Offender Management Service Research (NOMS) Committee. Permission to research in individual prisons followed once NOMS approval had been gained. Data collection was guided by the data protection act and the NOMS permissions criteria. Power relations are a concern for researchers in any research context, but in a prison environment, “power and control ebb and flow in complex ways that are sometimes visible, but mostly hidden” (Piacentini, 2013, p21). Hence, the research design underpinning this article considered the power relations of the prison at every stage, for example, by ensuring

participants could not be overheard by prison staff and also being aware of potential power disparity issues between participants, staff and researcher at all times.

Beginning the learning journey

Reasons for prisoners to begin studying a higher-level distance course provide insight into what they expected from their study, and form a starting point for their learning journey and personal change. The reasons given by prisoners for starting a PHDL course were many and various. Time was a commodity in prison, most participants highlighted the need to use that time usefully and distance learning was something which enabled them to do that. However, one person's 'useful' was very different from another's. Some participants had specific prison-related reasons to study such as filling their time to prevent them from thinking about being in prison or wanting to ease their path through the prison system. It seemed, however, that participants with solely prison-related reasons to study, tended not to fully engage with their learning. Some participants had employment-focused reasons for starting their PHDL journey as they wanted to achieve qualifications and skills which would help them to gain suitable employment upon release.

However, commencing PHDL was not easy and most participants would not have actually started their learning journey without the help and encouragement of others. Some prisons were more encouraging than others and the reasons to start and continue PHDL were affected by many factors within the prison. Some participants were traumatised by being in prison and a few participants admitted that starting PHDL was a means of surviving their prison sentence. For example, Nina, had completed two years at University before going to prison and she explained that PHDL had been a way for her to maintain her student identity which had helped her to survive her prison sentence.

It[PHDL]'s how I've been able to cope – studying is something I've always done.

It was part of my life.

Nina (21-24)

Many participants appeared uninterested in qualifications, starting their PHDL journey for personal development which took many different forms but was often related to personal discovery or a desire to change who they were. Some had completed all the lower level classroom education on offer and wanted to test themselves to see if they really could study at a higher level and change the course of their future. That need to change had been triggered by a variety of reasons but the shock of prison and maturation were two key factors.

For example, Rees was only on his first prison sentence but had been involved in the criminal justice system since his youth. He had studied Fine Art at A level before prison and was a talented wing artist in the prison. He also needed to use his time constructively, but he specifically chose to study psychology because he thought that it would provide answers for him:

Learning something and not wasting time ... when something went wrong with me I wanted to know why... qualifications are just a bit of paper, I'm not interested in them. ... It's the knowledge which matters.

Rees (21-24)

Like many others, Rees had started studying to learn about who he was and how he could improve himself. For those who had been to prison many times before, this desire to improve was often linked with stopping their cycle of reoffending. For example, Darren had left school at 15, “*became derailed*” after a family breakdown, and had been in and out of prison ever since. When asked why he started his psychology course he answered,

I thought I'd try and understand myself a bit ... I done it to know that if you do put your mind to something you really can do it, even though you may think you can't. Don't just give up at that first hurdle ... I think I've just got to that point. I started this sentence at 25 and realised this isn't the life I want any more. Now's the time to start sticking to something

Darren (25-29)

This quote suggests that Darren started his learning as a personal challenge but it also hints at the many challenges ahead and the possibility that Darren may have tried to better himself before but had failed. He clearly believed that his learning was a catalyst for a different sort of future and that he needed to continue with it if he was ever going to change. Andrew, like Darren, had been to prison many times before and had matured to a stage where he wanted to change,

I aim to get a degree ... I was 25 when I was convicted and I've been in prison from then. It's been a long time. Over time the education and growing up – education has brought that on...

Andrew (25-29)

Andrew perceived that his education had helped him to mature. He was interested in economics and aimed to get a degree but he also just wanted to learn.

Easing the learning journey

Participants identified a number of different factors which had eased their learning journey in prison. These factors formed a network of support which appeared to mediate some of the structural difficulties of distance-learning in a prison environment. Support came from family, learning communities and peers, as well as specific individuals working for the

organisations which provided services within the prison. They provided participants with opportunities to develop confidence, self-esteem and social skills and helped them to overcome some of the barriers to self-study in prison.

Participants provided many examples of how relationships with family had made a difference to their studies. Family was often a great comfort to participants, both as providers of additional resources, such as books, but also as motivators. For example, Tristan felt that his family kept him motivated,

*Mother and father are there to support me. My older sister is also there for me –
to keep me on the right track.*

Tristan (18-20)

The relationship worked both ways as he was concerned that his younger brother was keeping bad company so Tristan needed to succeed at his studies and be a role model for him,

*I'll be sharing a bunk with him [younger brother]. I'll have plenty of time now
[when released] to show him the right way.*

Tristan (18-20)

Andrew was confident that he would be able to continue his studies after release because he was supported by his mother,

*My mum has a few degrees herself. When she [mum] heard I was doing it[PHDL],
well ... she will make sure I get what I need to do it*

Andrew (25-29)

The pride with which Andrew talked about his mother suggested a supportive relationship and the potential for good support upon release. However, sometimes the family relationship was traumatic and a barrier to learning. For example, Sabir, whose reason to start studying was to make his mum proud, explained why he had been unable to continue with his last course,

*My brother was stabbed to death in 2010 – that affected me – when it happened I
was doing Social Science, I had to stop doing it and go to [another prison] and see
a psychologist*

Sabir (30-39)

This quote hinted at the kind of background that some participants had come from and would be returning to after release.

‘Learning’ prisons

Prisons varied in how much they supported PHDL. Participants identified some prisons with especially good support, termed ‘learning’ prison (after Pike and Adams, 2012) with physical, infrastructural and organisational structures which enabled the learning process. However, participants also identified specific individuals within all prisons who supported them in their learning journey. These individuals worked for different organisations inside or outside the prison walls and made a significant difference to whether participants were able to successfully engage with their learning or not. The difference was that in a ‘learning’ prison, those individuals worked with the system, whereas in other less supportive prisons, the individuals worked against the negative structures in the prison.

Sometimes however, it was merely being treated with respect which made the difference. Stuart remembered one particular teacher from one of his first prisons,

There was a woman [in a young offender institute]... she understood that a lot of people had had a troubled childhood. They took extra time. They knew how to talk to you – it was not like the school environment. Obviously some rules – can’t let you take liberties - but apart from that you were tret [treated] like an adult.

Stuart (30-39)

Estha also explained, that the education manager in one prison had helped her to take the PHDL route. Here she added that she had felt lost initially and why it was so important that someone gave her that helping hand,

You’re so closed in. There are options but I don’t know what to do because I’ve never been in this position before. But who do I go to and ask? What am I meant to do?

Estha (25-29)

As PHDL students cannot communicate with their distance learning provider directly, most participants valued the support they received from the person in the prison who managed the distance learning (the distance learning coordinator or manager). Many participants stressed how important that person was to them and their effectiveness could make a huge difference to the success of the learning. Those who did not fully engage with their studies cited lack of

support from the distance learning coordinator (often due to overwork) as one of the main problems.

Kevin was a recovering alcoholic and explained how he had been supported by various staff within the prison. Firstly, one of the teachers,

I've got a bookcase upstairs [distance learning department] and [teacher]'s upstairs – she's my tutor and very supportive. I wouldn't have done it without [teacher]. She's like a friend as well as a teacher.

Kevin, (21-24)

Then he explained that a prison officer on the wing was also encouraging,

I know he will ask me about my coursework [when I return to the wing] and they're excited and happy for me. It sounds crazy but it's the sort of thing you go home and tell your family.

Kevin, (21-24)

He clearly felt well supported within this 'learning' prison, almost part of a family. This was not unusual among the younger participants, many of whom had troubled backgrounds.

Alan was only 14 when he was excluded from school and had hated education. Although this was his first prison sentence, he admitted that he had been in trouble a lot as he was growing up and he had not originally considered that distance learning was for him. He would not have made the commitment if it had not been for the education manager in a previous prison,

[W] was a good jail... I was on the computing course [ECDL]... I got a lot of help from [education manager]. She offered me the teaching assistant job. She noticed I offered help to other students and put me forward for [OU Access course] and I took it from there.

Alan (21-24)

Alan had been encouraged to take a more responsible position as well as complete PHDL. Here the teaching assistant role was synonymous with PHDL. Together they provided the student with self-efficacy, with the confidence to learn autonomously and to succeed, but also to develop socially by imparting their knowledge to others. In a 'learning' prison this was part of the prison's organisational structure, in other prisons it relied on a particular member of staff to identify learning potential and point the learner in the right direction.

There were many examples where staff of all kinds had provided the necessary support required for participants to overcome some of the structural barriers to learning. Some participants received support from other prison interventions. Jed, as a recovering drug addict, had found support from staff in a drug rehabilitation programme which he had started on a previous sentence. Last time he was released he went to ‘rehab’ and spoke fondly about that time.

It was the best 6 months of my life – finding myself again. Everything was new to me. People wanted to be my friend for who I was, not for what I had in my pocket.

Jed (41-49)

However, recovering from addiction was not an easy process. He went back to live on his own too early and returned to drugs and crime. That was just before this latest 5 year sentence in which he started his distance learning. He was now ready to go back to ‘rehab’ but this time he knew he would need a lot of help. This highlighted his raised awareness, which is considered to be a pre-requisite for transformative learning.

Brian was also recovering from drug addiction. He was realistic. He had been through the system many times before and knew there would be difficulties when he was released so he intended accepting all the support that was on offer.

[a charity] are still working with me. They’ll see me every week and give me advice – meet up have a cup of coffee... [the prison staff] have a mentoring scheme. [the prison staff] will help with probation, housing etc. I’m going back to mum’s for the duration of the licence.

Brian, (25-29)

This quote highlights the numerous people involved in supporting participants in their learning journeys.

Learning community

Belonging to a learning community appeared very important to the development of social identity. Some participants felt isolated from the distance learning community. There is no Internet in prison and they lacked communication with their tutors or other (not-prison) students as well as resources. Most study was done in the cell which sometimes did not even have a desk, let alone any technology, so participants needed to gain access elsewhere to such things as computers with appropriate software and DVDs. Once again prisons varied and it was sometimes a lottery as to whether adequate resources were accessible. Susan was studying International Development and really needed the Internet to gain access to media information but found daily newspapers and books in her previous prison were a useful alternative. However, even that was lacking in her current prison,

In [previous prison] I had the Guardian every day but here there are no papers at all ... I also had lots of books but here it's a struggle to get anything

Susan (51-60)

This comment highlights the isolation of prison, but many found other means of belonging to a learning community. For example, Rees helped other students which enabled him to gain vital feedback for his own learning,

There are students doing education at a lower level and they ask me and it's quite nice that it confirms to me that I've learnt correctly.

Rees (21-24)

Many participants felt they needed to give something back to society and help others less fortunate. They enjoyed feeling needed and as shown earlier, certain roles and responsibilities were particularly good for promoting a sense of pride. Responsible roles included classroom or library assistants and a variety of different mentoring roles. These opportunities were important to them as they helped them to feel part of a community.

The peer mentoring role in one 'learning' prison was a particularly good example of where participants were able to help others as well as being part of a learning community. The prison employed prisoners to be peer-partners who were champions for different subject areas such as Business or Psychology. These jobs were officially advertised in the prison and the prisoner had to formally apply and pass the interview to be accepted. The peer mentoring scheme was excellent on many fronts and there were numerous examples where these roles went hand in hand with PHDL. It provided valuable mentoring for the less able learners but the mentors themselves also gained hugely from their responsible role, gaining self-esteem, self-confidence and a sense of belonging.

Brian was initially introduced to distance learning through the peer-mentoring role.

They offered me a peer-partner job. I then got interested in distance learning. They introduced me to the OU.

Brian, (25-29)

This role also enabled Brian to develop his pride and independence by becoming a link between staff and prisoners as well as helping him to develop his studies by giving him good access to resources for learning.

Tristan was getting satisfaction from the responsibility of using his skills to help others

I got a peer-partner job [in IT] ... It's quite fulfilling ... I help to organise the class, help students with folders and basically mentor them. The number of people who

can't read in prison is ridiculous so I'm helping them with that and the computer.

I'm really enjoying that.

Tristan (18-20)

In a 'learning' prison these roles were provided as part of the learning culture. However, there were many examples of where participants in all prisons sought roles which could help them to support their peers. For example, they became listeners (a peer counsellor trained by the Samaritans to listen to prisoners who are in distress) or 'Toe-by-Toe' mentors (a mentoring scheme run by the Shannon Trust to help prisoners learn to read and write). Doug remembered how proud he was to do this.

I think anything like that helps when you talk to each other, so I had something to offer them, to offer prisoners that were in the same boat, and it was nice because a lot of prisoners saw me as someone they could look up to. I used to help them write their letters and stuff.

Doug (10yrs, 40-49)

Susan had filled her days with such roles,

I help out here [classroom assistant] twice a week. I'm also a library orderly and do Toe-by-Toe all the time. In Toe-by-Toe a whole world opens up for people.

Susan (51-60)

These participants were doing whatever they could to be valuable, to feel needed and to give back to society but these responsible roles were also providing participants with self-confidence, self-esteem and self-efficacy. Those who were able to feel part of a distance learning community, by meeting their tutor or getting additional information about [non-prison] students, were the lucky ones. A few participants were able to engage more fully with other students through exceptional circumstances, such as temporary release, or by tutors providing extra feedback. Students valued any form of contact with the wider learning community and these provided particularly powerful feelings of belonging.

However, if they could not get that contact, sometimes they just imagined it. Andrew, for example, was able to cope by imagining he was in university,

You can treat it like you're in university. In my mind ...

Andrew (25-29)

He was partitioning himself off from other prisoners who were not students but he explained that the physical environment of prison made the concept of being a University student quite difficult at times,

I don't feel like a student most of the time. Occasionally when I'm here [independent learning room] I do but then you're reminded very quickly on the wing that you're in prison!

Andrew (25-29)

Clearly, the study room provided a positive learning environment which enabled Andrew to feel part of a learning community but that time was short and the rest of the time he had to rely on his imagination.

Sheena had done many PHDL courses in prison and was well on the way towards her degree in Social Care. She enjoyed belonging to a student community. She had found the distance learning provider's newsletters for prisoners gave her the confidence to continue,

I used to get the Open University newsletter – I liked that and how you could see how people got through their courses. It makes you know that you can do it too.

Sheena, (30-39)

Sadly these newsletters were no longer available but this quote highlights how any contact with out-of-prison learning communities was found to be invaluable by these isolated learners.

The support factors so far discussed, all helped participants to develop their confidence, their self-esteem, their pride and ultimately their social identity. They included being treated as a student, being valued, being supported by individuals who cared and belonging to a learning community. The following sections highlight how these factors encouraged participants' personal change, how they helped them to develop their self-awareness and their resilience and raised their hopes and aspirations for future prospects upon release.

Reflection and self-awareness

Many participants found their studies had helped them to be more aware of their failings. For example, Alan had been in the criminal justice system most of his life and perceived that PHDL had enabled him to mature and see things differently.

It [PHDL]'s helped me to make the changes in my life. Education is definitely making it happen ... I've grown up a bit. I stop and think about the consequences of things now before I do them

Alan (21-24)

This quote suggests that Alan's learning had helped him to mature and also to reflect on his behaviour. Rees also perceived himself to be more mature. Success in his psychology course had helped him to see things differently,

It [PHDL]'s made the difference. I've grown as a person since I've been in here.

Rees (21-24)

Other participants were developing a student identity, becoming part of a wider community of learners which helped them to replace their prisoner identity. This next quote from Andrew clearly shows that he was developing a new identity, a student identity.

It's opening up my eyes to a lot of things. It's changing me as a person. It's giving me the way out. My interests are different. I don't necessarily entertain certain conversations as I'm not in that frame of mind.

Andrew (25-29)

He now considers himself part of a different group of people who are educated. He is looking at things from a different perspective, from a different 'frame of reference'. Jed was also starting to look at things differently. His previous comment highlighted how much he wanted to stay away from drugs. The following quotes also show that he perceived that his learning journey was changing him,

I used to go to the class and think "They're special". When I was doing a Diploma I saw the Open University as special and I wanted to join them.

Jed (40-49)

He had looked upon the university as something to aspire to, but now he was becoming a university student and that had helped him to move away from his prisoner identity,

I sort of disassociate myself with prison. I don't run with the crowd. I chat to people, I'm polite but I don't really mix. I'm like at a crossroads. I've got one foot in and one foot out of my previous life.

Jed (40-49)

Although he was clearly beginning to change who he was, he did not yet perceive himself as a student so perhaps his student identity was not yet fully formed. Jafaar was also only just beginning to develop a student identity.

Education has made me feel as if I can learn. It's not as hard as I first thought it was. I used to look at university and think 'no I haven't got the brains for that' but now I see I can. So now I've got the confidence to do it when I get out.

Jafaar (30-39)

He had developed sufficient confidence to see that he could study at this level and that he could continue learning when he was released. Tristan was also developing a new identity through his learning:

It [prison]'s made me uncertain about my future. But that's created a good – a need to find some stability and I've done that through education. At the end I'll have come out of here with a different outlook. My whole persona's changed I like to think.

Tristan (18-20)

However it was his next comment which really showed what his Sociology course had done for him,

I've done a lot of thinking. What is the correct way to behave? We create our own norms. How should I be acting? ... We have a role to play in society. We have to sacrifice some things ... What I've got from education is the ability to have these thoughts. It's developed my motivation and allowed me to have these thoughts and to change my whole behaviour and attitude.

Tristan (18-20)

Tristan had clearly developed through his learning. He had become far more aware of who he was and his position in society. These quotes highlight how participants, through studying PHDL, had begun to reflect on their situation, to become more aware of themselves and others and had begun to develop a student identity which had enabled them to rise above their prisoner status.

Developing Resilience

Through PHDL some participants found confidence, focus or determination which they needed to help them to overcome the many barriers to studying in prison, to help them to continue their learning journey and to fulfil their aspirations. They appeared to be developing an inner strength, or resilience, which would help them to overcome further barriers after

release. Nina, for example, had felt isolated in her studies, but this isolation had actually helped her to develop into an autonomous learner and so, even though she had been to University previously, PHDL had been transformative as the following quote highlights,

But I have learnt self-reliance quite a lot because when you're here you can't email your tutor and it's difficult... Prison don't support you at all. You have to be determined and self-motivated otherwise you'd just end up failing...

Nina (21-24)

Clearly, the positive effects of having to be self-reliant, in order to study, were helping Nina to develop greater confidence and determination. She also perceived the benefits of not having distraction, such as television, mobile phone and the Internet, enabled her to focus which aided further her transformation.

It [PHDL] focused me. This assignment, this book, I set myself a timetable. My own space, locked in and I actually believe I can achieve whatever I put my mind to.

Nina (21-24)

This comment highlights Nina's focus through adversity also empowerment from her learning. Many of the participants felt empowered in this way, mostly through overcoming the barriers to learning but some were purely empowered by the knowledge they had gained. For example, Brian had no previous qualifications and had found his distance learning course challenging but he was empowered by the knowledge that he really could study at this level,

I didn't think I was capable especially essays and stuff and it was a bit heavy but it was good... It opened doors and made me realise I can study at this level.

Brian (25-29)

Here Brian was showing greater self-confidence. He was learning a lot about himself and business and he felt that this was going to make a lot of difference to him.

Ernie, who was fostered at 14, said a lot about his studies but this quote highlights the confidence he had developed through his PHDL:

OU has helped me think differently. It's given me the edge. It's given me the end game ... When I was little I was with a charity – someone wanted me to give a speech. I said I didn't want to do that – I would now.

Ernie (25-29)

Eric was studying Business. He was studying his second module and was developing in self-confidence. He wanted more of the calmness that he perceived PHDL had to offer,

I've seen what it can do. People who do this are calmer. I want that... It's like eating a cookie, you've like tasted it and you want more. I've done some Business Education and now I want more

Eric (25-29)

This calming influence of PHDL was perceived by others too. Chandresh had a lot of previous convictions but had only started to study on this sentence and had recently found an inner peace from his reading,

This sentence I've changed. I've read so much about Psychology – laws of power, attraction. I've learnt how to calm down and relax. I've found an inner peace in this sentence I think.

Chandresh (25-29)

Chandresh had clearly been empowered by his learning and changed through his PHDL. Tristan was also empowered by his progress and wanted to continue when he was released. He was the youngest participant and had needed to develop the skills of independent learning very quickly.

Distance Learning is really helpful but you really have to have dedication and motivation. You need to develop skills very, very quickly, knowing how to study and extract relevant ideas from the text... I will need it for later learning.

Tristan (18-20)

This quote illustrates Tristan's determination to overcome the barriers to study but also that he was determined to continue with his studies. He planned to go to college to take his A-levels and also to take a distance learning course as he had hoped to go to university, eventually, to study law. He knew that his parents would prefer him to get a trade and earn some money. He was concerned that as a student he would be a burden to them but he was still very determined just four days before his release,

I want this education and I'm going to get it and I can't see anything stopping me ... I've given up smoking to buy a bus pass and clothe myself.

Tristan (18-20)

Ernie was empowered by his achievement. His aspiration was to keep studying, develop his own business and hoped that he had done enough.

Just the fact that you've achieved something, I'd never achieved anything like that [PHDL course]. Because I dropped out of school and everything, it just makes you feel different.

Ernie (25-29)

These participants perceived themselves to be more confident, determined, focused and empowered by their learning. They were developing a resilience which would help them to overcome the barriers which were yet to come.

Hopes and Aspirations

Many participants wanted to continue studying, especially those who had perceived good support. For example, Malcolm was a traveller and had applied for agricultural college. He hoped to become a farrier and work with his family's horses.

I'm going to college now to train to be a horse farrier – a blacksmith. We've applied for college [name of college] - they've got places, they know about prison. I needed qualifications but I've done enough.

Malcolm (21-24)

Brian was also looking forward to continuing his property development course and wanted to do the research he could not do in prison.

I'm now doing A-level Property Development which I'll continue on the out. It's a good course but there's a lot of research. I'm limited in what I can do. [Prison's distance learning coordinator] has been online for me but when I get out I can go to the library and spend all day doing it.

Brian, (25-29)

The “we” in Malcolm's comment, and the optimism in Brian's comment, suggests a collaborative, supportive environment of the distance learning department in the ‘learning’ where they had completed their PHDL. There was clearly a commitment to learning from them both with much hope that their studies would make a difference and perhaps overcome the potential barriers to continuing their education after release.

Kevin also wanted to continue his studies. He had done a counselling course and was registered for a psychology course, starting just after his release. He hoped to become a drug counsellor for young people in care.

I've been through the care system, alcohol and the prison system. My head's screwed on now [through PHDL] and I know what these people want. I want to help people ... I want to do something that will make a difference.

Kevin (21-24)

As pointed out above, the need to help others was a strong desire for many participants and this had been followed through into Kevin's aspiration for the future. This quote highlights Kevin's belief that PHDL had given him what he needed to be able to integrate back into society on his release and help others. The supportive environment in the prison had helped to provide him with the hope to go out and fulfil his aspirations. However, he was young and inexperienced. Jed was also a recovering drug-addict who had aspirations to be a drug counsellor eventually. However, he had much more experience of the criminal justice system than Kevin and he knew from that past experience that staying away from drugs would be very difficult. He had worries about finding a safe place to live on his release but he had found new hope in his studies on this sentence and his response to the question about whether his studies had transformed him needs no further comment.

Education is transformational because it gives you hope which is all that I ask for.

Jed, (40-49)

What was particularly noticeable about these four participants' aspirations, were their low pre-prison qualifications (mostly none!). Their aspirations indicated that their learning journeys in prison had raised their expectations. Some participants had completed all their secondary education in prison and had gradually progressed to the higher-level learning which had been transformative.

Estha did gain some GCSEs at school but the distance she had travelled in her learning journey was also clear from her comment below.

If I wasn't the sort of person that I am I wouldn't have pushed as much as I have and got as much as I have but if I hadn't had the initial advice from the education manager in [prison] I wouldn't have ever looked at the OU. I never ever had in my brain ever that I was going to do a degree.

Estha (25-29)

Estha's determination had clearly helped her to overcome the barriers to study but she had also needed additional support, which in her case was the person who had encouraged her to take a university course in the first place.

Dennis, released 10 years ago, remembered the person who had set him on his learning journey which ended with him gaining a degree and a very different life.

Unfortunately I can't remember this woman's name, but she made it quite plain and she was a godsend. She said "you won't know it, but there will come a point where you look back and you won't recognise the person that you were, and it will be because you've persevered and you've learnt through education. I wish you well" and then she signed the entry fee to the OU. And that was my first one.

Dennis, (40-49)

He went on to say how "doing education" within the structure of the prison system, not only mediated the effects of the structural barriers but also made him more resilient.

I definitely think education helped, I'm a totally different person to who I was 20 odd years ago and I believe the education is the reason. Prison definitely moulds you and brings out both the positives and the negatives, but running or doing that in conjunction with education - it's the education that made me the educational fighter that I am now.

Dennis, (40-49)

Here Dennis clearly suggests that his PHDL was transformative because overcoming the barriers in order to learn in prison had given him the resilience to keep fighting and change his life on release.

Discussion: Enabling Transformative Learning

The analysis of the research on which this article draws, suggests that PHDL had led to personal change in many of those participants who had engaged with their learning. Participants perceived that PHDL had influenced their maturation. They had developed through their learning and found new meaning in their lives. They were showing an ability to reflect on their situation. They had increased self-awareness. They were more aware of their failings and had a desire to give back, to help others who were less fortunate. They were developing and maintaining a student identity which further developed their self-confidence and determination to reach for their goals. They seemed able to see beyond the confines of

their closed world. They had new horizons and potentially a brighter future. This suggests that PHDL may have been transformative by building a positive personal and social identity to help them to overcome the barriers which were to come upon release.

The amount of study, and the level to which the participant had risen, appeared to reduce fears and raise hopes. Most of those who had engaged with their learning had strong, realistic, aspirations and perceived their PHDL to have had a significant effect on these. According to Burnett and Maruna (2004), hope is not only the expectation and desire for a specific goal (as per the dictionary definition), but also needs a realistic plan of how to meet that goal. The participants' sense of hope was raised as they were provided with the means of realising their aspirations. Many participants had plans to continue studying and some had plans to go to university or college on release. Those students who had not engaged with their study had very few realistic aspirations, sometimes none at all.

Distance learning at a higher level in prison is not easy and there are many structural barriers such as lack of resources and isolation. Although distance learning is self-learning, prisoners are not able to study without the support of 'significant others'. The perceived network of support and belonging to a learning community appeared to mediate the structural barriers to learning in prison. When this mediation was adequate, there was development of an inner strength, or resilience, from overcoming the barriers to study. This led further to personal change, the development of hope, aspiration and the potential for transformative learning. The most important enablers for transformative learning were therefore dedicated space and time for independent learning, belonging to a learning community and responsible positions which nurtured self-confidence, self-esteem and self-efficacy. The prison context was found to be very important and a 'learning' prison's learning culture provided an environment more conducive to transformative learning and personal change.

Conclusion

This article has explored the factors which were perceived to develop personal change through Prison-based Higher-level Distance Learning (PHDL) in England and Wales. Drawing on the findings from research with 10 released prisoners and 51 serving prisoners close to release, we have argued that successful participation in PHDL encourages positive identity development, increased self-awareness and resilience in incarcerated students. Many participants found their studies had helped them to mature, to be more aware of their failings, as well as raising their hopes and aspirations prior to their forthcoming release. PHDL may have been transformative by building a positive personal and social identity to help prisoners overcome the barriers to continued study and other huge barriers which were to face them upon release.

We have argued in this article that PHDL has essentially enabled personal change through transformative learning. Despite their low pre-prison qualifications, participants in this research indicated that their learning journeys in prison had raised their expectations. Some participants had completed all their secondary education in prison and had gradually progressed to the higher-level learning which had been transformative. They had realistic hope and aspiration for a better future. However, due the lack of post-secondary curriculum

and the huge barriers to PHDL, many of these participants would not have succeeded without the support of ‘significant others’ or having their learning journeys eased by belonging to a learning community. Hence, in conclusion, we advocate for greater recognition of the significant benefits of PHDL for personal development, improved access for incarcerated students to funded post-secondary curriculum and courses and increased opportunities for the development of learning communities in prisons in England and Wales.

As released prisoner and participant Dennis observed: “...it’s the education that made me the educational fighter that I am now.”

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