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DEVELOPING THE LEARNER VOICE

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Abstract

This paper presents three innovative projects in UK prisons which provide opportunities for students in prison to take greater ownership of their learning, recognising that this has significant benefits in a wider context. These include giving students responsibility for administration and peer support, Student Councils offering students voices to be heard and academic seminars to introduce prisoners to exciting new areas of study. Central to each of these is a strong commitment to "*ensure that the student voice is present in decision making*" (The Open University, 2018). Future plans and possibilities for building learning communities are proposed.

Introduction

Current practice in higher education promotes the concept of student ownership of learning, typically with a focus on Technology Enhanced Learning which reflects the increased use of personal mobile devices within the student population and the growth of Web 2.0 technologies in which users expect to engage with, comment on and "own" content (Dommett, 2018). With limited access to technology in prison (Farley et al., 2015), students are not only denied opportunities to engage with their learning community, but are also seen as passive learners who do not contribute to academic debate (Macmillan and McFarlane, 2018). Further, since these students are required to pay the same tuition fees as their external peers, the question of value for money arises (Champion and Edgar, 2013), and it is incumbent on the provider to ensure that students are not disadvantaged.

The UK's Open University (OU) maintains a vision of being "open to people, places, methods and ideas", playing a unique role in promoting educational opportunity and social justice by providing high-quality distance education to all who wish to realise their ambitions and fulfil their potential (The Open University, 2016). It has a long history of providing education in prisons and currently has approximately 1400 students across most prisons in England and Wales, supported financially by scholarship awards or through the national student loan scheme, with 192 degrees, diplomas and certificates granted over the last academic year.

Much education provision in UK prisons is targeted at lower level maths, English and vocational qualifications, reflecting the typically poor school experiences of many prisoners (Farley et al., 2015). Gillies et al. (2014) attribute this focus to budgetary constraints in the climate of austerity, and argue strongly in favour of life-long learning as offering "diverse protective pathways" into employment and therefore a cost-effective means of rehabilitation. The recent review of education in prisons, commissioned by the Ministry of Justice (Coates, 2016), made strong recommendations relating to the use of technology to support learning, many of which are yet to be fully enacted. This is due in part to the strength of public opinion about privileges afforded to prisoners, which does not align with the academic view (Knight and Hadlington, 2017). Johnson and Hail-Jares (2016) cite this risk-averse approach as contributing to an increasing digital "isolation" among prisoners with limited access to technology.

This paper presents innovative ways in which prisons can work with education providers to increase ownership of learning, develop the learner voice and help students in prison to belong to a learning community.

Ownership of learning

Dommett (2018) identifies three forms of ownership of learning; technical (owning a device with which to access education), legal (ownership of output such as data) and psychological (incorporating a sense of personal responsibility for learning), and provides evidence of a range of benefits particularly relating to psychological ownership. Being denied regular access to technology, all of the 1400 Open University students in prison in the UK receive a pack of printed materials (often several hundred pages) and many write their assignments by hand. This is a stark demonstration of the "digital divide", the inequality arising from different levels of access to technology (Warschauer, 2003). As well as the impact on students of not being able to utilize digital study materials, the use of printed materials has implications for prison education staff who are required to carry out

the administrative tasks of supporting students with the processes of registration, assignment submission and contact with tutors. At a time when prisons are facing reduced staff numbers and increasing pressure to focus on education at more basic levels, support for higher education has been squeezed, leading to a situation described by Coates (2016, p. ii) as tending to,

"quash aspiration and prevent prisoners from taking personal responsibility for their rehabilitation."

Three solutions to address these issues have been successfully trialed in UK prisons. They are:

- Giving students responsibility for study: A student orderly (also a serving prisoner) doing student-related administration and offering peer support within the prison at HMP Ashfield
- Hearing the voice of the student: Student council engagement at HMP Coldingley offers an opportunity for direct student feedback to be heard and promptly addressed
- Providing academic seminars: A series of academic seminars at HMP Oakwood bringing together students and academics for discussion and study inspiration, leading to formal study

Giving students responsibility for study

The OU Orderly role supports the development of a learning community through a clear set of duties and accountabilities which include management of the self-study room and the computer usage booking scheme; mentoring other OU students in their studies; and checking OU course applications. The role has proved to have a wide range of benefits, both for the orderly himself and also for the wider student population. Student engagement at HMP Ashfield has increased by over 40%, thanks to the presence of this well-informed orderly who is an OU student and is able to offer additional guidance on course choice as well as study advice and support based on personal experience. The full-time Orderly has the freedom to move around the prison in order to meet and support as many students as he can. He keeps meticulous records of each student's study plans, and individual student success has been a key focus of the record keeping, as demonstrated by the orderly's tracking of average assignment scores (see Figure 1). Students at HMP Ashfield have recorded in excess of 520 OU study sessions during the first quarter of 2018 representing more than 780 study hours during core daytime activity, with additional hours spent on private study sessions in the evenings or at weekends. The Head of Student Services in the Education department is now widening this reporting to incorporate a student's soft skills and overall learning journey which can play an important part with their resettlement (Knight and Hadlington, 2017).

Domett (2018, p. 84) notes that "if students are to develop a sense of belonging in their learning, it is likely that social interaction will be needed with other learners". This interaction has been facilitated by the OU orderly, through proactive bookings for the use of the study room which enable students to share study skills and tips between more and less experienced students, helping to generate a sense of belonging to a study community.

Any opportunity for increased access to technology in a prison setting will place the student into what Reisdorf and Rikard (2018) call the "Digital Realm" contributing to more successful re-entry and readjustment into society. OU students at HMP Ashfield have been supported to increase their use of computers, with feedback to specific requests demonstrating the multiple benefits of this and being displayed in posters designed by the students (see Figure 2).

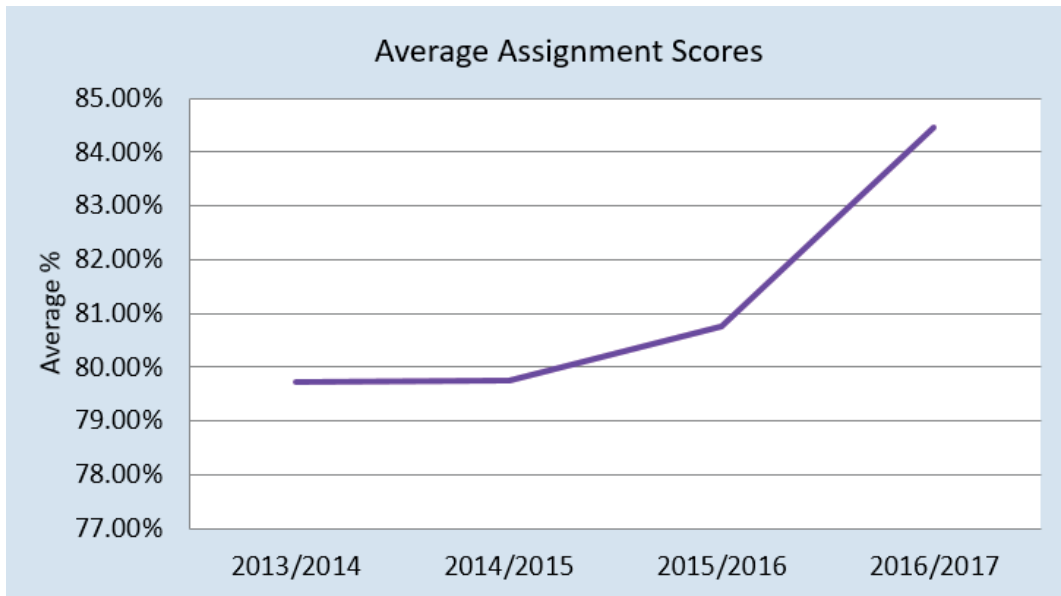


Figure 1: Graph to demonstrate increase in average assignment scores (prepared by orderly)

Hearing the voice of the student

The practice of responding to student feedback has been extended via a project at HMP Coldingley to engage with the Student Council to address study related concerns, in particular relating to the "lack of parity between provisions for students in the community compared to those studying in custody" (Champion and Edgar, 2013, p. 25). Through a regular series of meetings, students have been encouraged to present their personal experiences of OU study and to propose constructive suggestions for improvements. This has led to a jointly produced set of "Frequently Asked Questions" (FAQ) which are now shared with all OU students in prison and which are adapted and extended as new issues arise. This has helped to demonstrate to students that study issues they experience are shared across the OU student community and that they can prioritise and contribute to solutions.

Due to restrictions on internet access (Pike and Adams, 2012), students in prison are not able to use the university online library, and are therefore limited in their capacity to carry out independent research. At the suggestion of students, a new scheme to allow online library access for a nominated study partner, usually a friend or family member, has been introduced. Although this has brought some immediate benefit, further discussions revealed that not all students could identify a suitable study partner within their social circle, so a further development will be trialed from October. A group of student volunteers coordinated by the Open University Students Association (OUSA) will operate a study-buddy scheme from the OU library, processing requests from prison students for copies of journal articles or other reading materials. Although security restrictions will necessitate this contact being by letter and will not establish direct individual student connections, it will further empower the student in prison, fostering a sense of community through increased links with the general student population.



Your feedback, our answers

WE SAID!

- The small room on the side of the suite is currently being prepared for students to use to discuss relevant topics with each other. It will also be used for filling in new applications and course enquires. Also each wing has an available study room where students can work from.

YOU SAID!

"I would like use of a small space with seats that students could use to sit down and discuss the topics of my assignments on the same or similar courses".



YOU SAID

"It would be advantageous if the "stand alone" computer had printing facility attached so the work produced can be printed, perhaps with the orderly overseeing usage and billing? Otherwise the room is quiet and ideal space for students to study and support each other".

WE SAID

- A stand alone printer is not possible at the moment; however there is now a process in place for copying work from this computer to your log-in on the education network. Please speak to the OU orderly if you need this.



Figure 2: Posters in response to student feedback (produced by OU orderly)

A student responding to this initiative said,

"I wish to thank you for all the hard work and perseverance with the student council. We are not the easiest customers and probably give you plenty of headaches. I continue to wonder what we could achieve on a level playing field"

A key concern of the Student Council related to tutor engagement and the benefits of good quality support and feedback. Because most OU tutorials are now delivered online, there is no longer a regional allocation process so tutors are not always able to visit the prison. Students at HMP Coldingley are preparing to record some short videos to explain their study circumstances, aimed at persuading more OU tutors to support students in prison. A series of study skills sessions, delivered by local tutors, is now offered to prisons, with the aim of developing the learning community, and this is proving popular, especially for students who are new to university level study. One of whom said,

"Thank you for taking our concerns about tutorials seriously. It was great to exchange ideas and we look forward to all the exciting developments"

A common feature in many online study courses requires students to participate in online forums with peers from their tutor group and this type of communicative engagement has been shown to increase student success (Rienties and Toetenel, 2016). However, students in prison are prevented from taking part in this online communication, further disadvantaging their studies. Discussions with

Forum Activity - Offline Alternative

Students in Secure Environments are not able to access the Tutor Group Forum or other tools for communicative and collaborative activities (due to MoJ restrictions), so we suggest you speak to your tutor early in your module about how you can provide evidence for your TMA.

Where the TMA asks for evidence of your contributions to the Tutor Group Forum or other collaboration, you might like to arrange a discussion on the topic with other students at your establishment and then complete this form to detail your discussion.

Name		OU PI number	
Module Code and title		Date	
TMA number			
Subject of discussion			
Date of discussion		Witnessed by	
Notes from discussion			
Key learning points			

Figure 3: Draft version of alternative forum discussion activity

the Student Council have led to a proposed alternative activity being developed in which students can take advantage of the prison's learning community to create a "mock forum".

In particular response to this proposal, a prison education staff member said,

"The students feel that the OU have worked really hard to address the issues they have raised and are much happier and more confident in their studies. Thank you for everything you have done to improve the learner's experience and overall journey"

Academic seminars as a taster for formal study

Linked with this greater opportunity for academic debate is the recent series of academic seminars held at HMP Oakwood, in which OU academics have been invited to deliver a short seminar to groups of students, followed by an opportunity for questions and debate. The initial request for this project was inspired by the TV programme "The Blue Planet" (a joint BBC/OU programme), but in fact the seminar series has covered a wide range of topics including the atmosphere on Mars, the Trump phenomenon and sports psychology. HMP Oakwood promotes a thriving student community, with seminars open to everyone in the prison. One student said,

"It was great. We are often talked down to here. The thing is that we're not kids. It was good to be treated like an adult for a change."

Another summed up the enthusiasm from the entire group,

"I think you and the OU staff have just blown my mind! That is a lot to think about. Thanks so much for coming in."

An additional benefit of this project has been the impact on the academics taking part, one of whom declared it to be,

"one of the most profound educational experiences I've ever been involved in".

This improved understanding of the circumstances of students in prison has led to increased academic support for the adoption of alternative activities which will further improve the learning experiences for more students, such as the forum discussion and tutorial support presented earlier.

Discussion and future plans

These three projects have demonstrated some of the innovative ways in which prisons can provide "a learning community as an alternative to the often anti-social communities within prisons" (Farley and Pike, 2016, p. 6). They provide effective opportunities for students to engage in a community of learners, with self-regulated interaction, dialogue and reflection enables them to benefit from full participation in their learning, in a setting which typically only permits more isolated distance learning as acquisition (Sfard, 1998).

Two of the projects have taken place at privately run prisons, which may reflect a view that "private contractors see it as part of their role to bring in innovations that lead to greater efficiency and

effectiveness, and improve prisoners' quality of life and chances of resettlement" (Jewkes and Reisdorf, 2016, p. 540). Opening the model up to other establishments offers the opportunity to develop a Community of Practice (Wenger-Trayner, 2015) by sharing ideas across the estate, with released students, supported by OU managers, being encouraged to act as "brokers" between these communities.

These projects have been proposed to a number of other UK prisons and have been well received. Baseline data is being collated by prison education staff and OU managers on numbers of students and current levels of participation and success. This offers the opportunity for students to carry out their own participatory action research projects (Fine and Torre, 2006) and to promote the strong voice of student experience in regard to the ownership of their learning environment.

There are plans for future Student Councils across a number of prisons to also engage with the newly launched Prisoner Policy Network from the Prison Reform Trust (2018) which aims to "bring people with lived expertise of imprisonment together to provide insight into national policy issues" (O'Carroll, 2018, p. 1). The importance of having the voice of serving prisoners at the centre of all these projects is paramount to their success. Each project reflects the wider OU commitment to student engagement being at the heart of the development of the institution and this is echoed in a plea from one of the students involved.

"Give us some trust and the chance to express our views and it gives us the chance of leading a crime free life".

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