Open Research Online

WED: Barriers to inclusion in prisoner education: experiences of a learner (Jane Ballans)

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Cloud created by:

Jane Ballans
5 January 2015

Extra content

Barriers to inclusion in prisoner education: a learner's view

My chosen format is a paper which discusses the theme of inclusion through the lens of prisoner education, considered in light of the value of open education in supporting this agenda.

The conference presentation will introduce this theme and the supporting paper and will then go on to highlight the views and actions of a selection of world, state and charitable organisations. These will include:

- Human Rights Act with supporting discussions based on the work of Willems and Bossu, (2012)
- The Prison Reform Trust with a brief discussion of a link provided to the paper by Nina Champion and Kimmett Edgar considering how computers can transform rehabilitation.
- The Prisoner Education Trust
- The Ministry for Justice
- The Howard League with an overview of a recently won case involving the access to books in prison

Links to the above are referenced and provided on the Conference Poster.

There will then follow an edited interview with a former student who has a wide experience of education within the prison system. The interview has been conducted in advance, transcribed and the transcribed interview has then been recorded with the words of the student spoken by an actor.

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My conference poster will structure the conference presentation. The poster includes links to further resources such as academic papers, video clips of interviews and legal judgements. It is also intended to include a link to the recording of my conference presentation when this has been fully prepared.

I have chosen to consider the legal and ethical aspects of the state and charitable organisations as these could potentially provide a framework for the potential barriers and benefits of the use of distance learning and OER in including prisoners in education.

The edited interview will contain a selection of the views and experiences of a former student within the confines of a semi-structured interview. It is proposed to conduct an in-depth interview, Mears (2012) over a period of time beyond the limits of H818. The conference presentation will feature the first stage in the interview process.

The student gives an overview of experiences in compulsory education and education in prison from initial GCE "O" Levels through to post graduate courses studied by distance learning. The former student goes on to describe institutional experiences in accessing education, education resources and study time and space followed by personal barriers to accessing and valuing education. Finally the student discusses perceptions of their life and experience of living after release and the part education has played in changing attitudes and beliefs.

[Jane Ballans](#)
20:16 on 28 January 2015

This paper discusses the theme of inclusion through the lens of prisoner education and these will be considered in light of the value of open education in supporting this agenda.

The concepts of equality, social inclusion, social justice and human rights will be critically discussed and a background of the development of these concepts and the competing values and judgements will be provided. There will be an overview of current legislation, European legislation and the Human Rights Act and the theoretical underpinning of these concepts.

The essay will then move on to consider the choice of prisoner education as the lens through with to view the concept of inclusion and open education. The concepts of social inclusion and human rights will be applied to prisoner education. This will be followed by a consideration of the evidence to support the value of prisoner education in terms of reduced recidivism, employability and extended benefits to society and to the offender.

Finally the benefits and challenges of designing and implementing the use of open and distance education resources particularly in the prison setting will be applied to this theme.

For the purposes of this paper the definition of inclusion will be taken from a human rights perspective. As Williams (2000 cited in Clough and Corbett 2012, p151) states, "The issue of inclusion in education needs to be seen against the background of human rights issues related to the inclusion of all socially disadvantaged groups in mainstream society. However, it is necessary to define who exactly is to be included in this notion of "disadvantaged groups in mainstream society". Who and what would benefit society the most to be included in this category and what justifications need to be considered to exclude anyone from this definition is of prime importance.

One means through which this goal of educational equity is being addressed is through the provision of open educational resources (Willems and Bossu, 2012, p.1). As stated by UNESCO (2002) adult education is an important priority in its open and distance learning

policies and indeed the responsibility of colleges to extend access to higher education through distance learning has been stated as far back as 1985 at 4th UNESCO World Conference on Adult Education in Paris.

This concept of educational inclusion and indeed the right to education as stated in the Human Rights Act (1998) supports the concept of social justice. As Alan Tait (2013) notes, the concept of Social Justice develops from the idea of universal human rights. He notes that three of the distance teaching universities in his study had a core "commitment to equality of human beings, the development of programmes of activity to deliver inclusion of the majority in the benefits of society, and solidarity with those in need" (p.7). It would seem a natural progression of this philosophy that open education would further this notion.

Applying these concepts to the education of those held in prison one would consider that the right to education is also a human right of prisoners. In democratic societies, equity in access to education is considered a basic human right (Willems and Bossu, 2012, p.4). Article 2 of the Human Rights Act (1998) states that "No person shall be denied the right to education" and the UK prison service is legally obliged to offer educational opportunities to all prisoners, however as Watts (2010) states there is an emphasis on punishment rather than rehabilitation in the prison service, and whilst there is priority given to the provision of basic mathematics and English curriculum, in-line with the Skills for Life agenda coming on the back of the Moser Report, 1991, higher education is not afforded the same level of priority.

Arthurson and Jacobs (2004 cited in Willems and Bossu, 2012, p.3) state a range of possible causes of social exclusion including which many or all may apply to those in prison, such as "lack of adequate housing and education, poor health, disability, unemployment, low income, non-participation in the regular activities of society, resource-poor social networks and lack of access to informal contacts linking to jobs or appropriate role models". Whilst it is generally accepted that some human rights are given up whilst in prison, the most obvious being the right to liberty, it could be argued that the Right to Education, as stated in the Human Rights Act (1998) is a right that there is no justifiable reason to deny those imprisoned by the state. However, it might be argued that inclusion in education and as much of the wider society as possible, would be beneficial in reducing recidivism.

However, access to internet is severely restricted in the prison environment, and as Nink et al (2009) state, this means that "inmates are ultimately held separate from such technology and lack understanding about advancements" (p40). The article goes on to discuss the economic need for the inmate to receive a standard of education that increases employability post release, that the majority of the areas of job growth require education beyond compulsory sector and that the American economy can no longer afford to "recycle offenders" (p41).

Veletsianos and Kimmons (2012) consider the Open Scholarship movement to possess "aspirations of broadening access to education and knowledge" (p166), however they also identify that open scholarship might open up a new set of dilemmas.

In terms of accessibility, if we take the underpinning philosophy of OER to be "that of making educational materials a common or public good from which all, in theory, but most especially those who receive the least benefit from the current systems of educational provision, whether publicly or privately funded" Lane (2008 cited in Willems and Bossu, 2012, p.4); then it also has to be considered that "not all OERs are fully open, not all learners have access to computers, or to the internet" McGill (2010 cited in Willems and Bossu, 2012, p.7)

Willems and Bossu also raise the issue of accessibility in terms of language, stating that English is considered the language of instruction however, the prison population is a diverse cultural mix and of course education ability, the ethnic mix in 2010 being 72% white, almost

14% black and just over 7% Asian, Ministry of Justice (2011). In 2006 13%, around 10,000 of the prison population was made up of foreign nationals, HM Inspector of Prisons (2006). In order to provide equitable access to educational resources in prison thought would need to be put into how to provide equitable access. Issues of language, low literacy and academic and learning support needs are all areas of potential threats to equitable access.

A further issue might be relevance of the OER available. "For example, many learners in remote regions often need to update and develop new skills in order to keep their jobs or improve their employment conditions" Meiszner (2011 cited in Willems and Bossu, 2012, p.9). This would certainly apply to the context of prisoner education. Certainly in the context of the long term prisoner, maintaining and developing skills in line with future employment would be of prime importance in reducing recidivism, maintaining mental health and connecting with society.

Access issues in the prison environment would of course add an extra dimension in terms of access. As Nink et al (2009) identify "security measures are paramount for the integrity of any online delivery system. Piloting web-based learning for incarcerated students requires serious attention to type and breadth of access, such as availability of threaded discussions within the classroom environment" (p.42).

Of course, a further barrier to accessibility of open and distance learning methods is cost, although as Veletsianos and Kimmons (2012) state, "Many scholars hope and anticipate that open practices will broaden access to education and knowledge, reduce costs, enhance the impact and reach of scholarship and education, and foster the development of more equitable, effective, efficient, and transparent scholarly and educational processes" (p167). There would certainly be additional start-up costs, specific to the prison environment but as discussed above these are likely to be one-off institutional and system-related costs which would reduce their impact over time.

In conclusion, clearly there are a number of barriers to the use, design and access of OER and Distance Learning technologies generally and specifically within the prison environment, but as discussed above, there are compelling reasons to overcome them. The potential benefits to offenders, their families and the wider society are compelling and if as stated in Watts (2010) the goal of prisoner education is to ensure inmates are given skills to be better positioned to take up further education, training or employment on release then there appears to be a strong case for increasing the uptake of education opportunities in prison.

There are certainly cost implications attached to education provision in prison, but these need to be considered in relation to the high costs associated with the cycle of reoffending.

Word count: 1472

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Jane Ballans
20:24 on 28 January 2015

Transcribed presentation and interview

Presentation

Slide 1

Welcome to my presentation today, entitled: Barriers to inclusion in prisoner education: Experiences of a learner.

Slide 2

First of all I would like to introduce you to the format of my presentation today.

My artefact will be a paper discussing the theme of inclusion through the lens of prisoner education and these will be considered in light of the value of distance learning and the use of open education resources in supporting this agenda

Designing my poster allowed me to explore a few ideas around the barriers to accessing education and in particular the accessing of distance education and of open education

resources in the prison setting. These link to my paper in that the barriers and potential to remove these barriers form a structure/a context for my paper to sit within.

This leads me to my presentation today. I have decided to use the structure of my poster to guide you through my thoughts about access to education and in particular to distance learning methods and open education resources within the constraints of the secure prison environment.

The final stage of my presentation will be a short initial interview with an ex-student with experience of education in the prison system. Just to note that this interview has been recorded using an "actors" voice and the transcription added to the presentation slides. I will conclude with a brief description of my way forward from this point.

I hope you enjoy the presentation, and my thanks to my interviewee.

Slide 3

The issue of Human Rights and prisoners is an interesting topic, and clearly some human rights are forfeited when given a prison sentence, the most obvious being liberty. However, as Willems and Bossu (2012) state, "In democratic societies, equity in access to education is considered a basic human right" (p.4). If you would like to take a look at Article 2 a link can be found on this slide.

You will see it stated that "The courts have ruled that the right to education relates to the education system that already exists. It does not require the government to provide or subsidise any specific type of education", however it might be argued that there is a comprehensive distance learning modality already in place and it is merely the access to this that is required.

Slide 4

There are many pieces of research supplying evidence to support the value of prisoner education to reduce recidivism, that is the return to crime after release, the potential education can have in finding employment and the extended benefits to both the offender, society and his/her family. The Prison Reform Trust is an independent UK charity who works towards the ideals of a just and humane prison system with reduction of recidivism as a goal.

You will now find a link to a YouTube video supplied by the Prison Learning Alliance and The Prison Video Trust. The video lasts around 8 minutes and contains interviews with a variety of people within the education department at HMP Swaleside.

Slide 5

As mentioned on the previous slide, The Prison Reform Trust supports the rights of prisoners and promotes the humane aspects and also supports making the time spent in prison a productive and developmental experience.

The link on this slide is to a piece of research conducted by the Prison Reform Trust and is the product of interviews with prisoners about their experiences of education prior to conviction, during their sentence and some discussions of what they feel they need from education in prison.

Slide 6

The Prisoner Education Trust work across 125 prisons in England and Wales to help prisoners achieve their potential though learning. They are able to support learning with grants to access education. The YouTube video attached "More than just a prisoner" lasts just over 3 minutes. The video shows interviews with prisoners and the value they place on learning and how their self-esteem is raised through education and the support of the Prisoner Education Trust.

Slide 7

The Ministry of Justice is a ministerial department which works to protect the public and reduce reoffending, and to provide a more effective, transparent and responsive criminal justice system for victims and the public. They therefore respond to the policies and convictions of the prevailing administration, at the moment the policies of the conservative liberal democrat alliance.

Slide 8

The Howard League, a registered charity, working towards a reduction in the prison population and in support of prisoner rights recently challenged the ministry of justice and was victorious when a High Court ruled the ban on books for prisoners was unlawful. If you are unaware of the background to this case the overview was that

Chris Grayling, Secretary of State for Justice placed a ban on sending books in to prison for prisoners. A number of authors and prisoner rights campaigners challenged this in the High Court and in December last year a High Court ruled the action unlawful. The link to the full judgement is attached.

Slide 9

The paper attached looks at some of the logistics and the obvious need to maintain security in access to the internet is one of the issues considered. Alongside this there are the rights of prisoners on remand (that is who have not yet been found guilty of any crime) to be considered, the various targets set by government to reduce recidivism and the links to reduction in employability for those prisoners who are released into a difficult employment market without the added difficulty attached to a criminal conviction. There are some interesting and relevant discussions made in this paper about the tensions between these areas.

<div align="center">Interview</div>

Slide 10

To conclude a short interview and a roundup of my thoughts about where this might lead me in the journey towards completing my paper.

Interviewer: What was your experience in compulsory education?

Interviewee: My school days…that's a difficult one. I seem to remember being pre-occupied with the social aspects. My experience in compulsory education was in a secondary modern school in the NE. I don't really remember much about my actual education. I remember scoring very highly in maths and the teacher laughing as though I'd been cheating and I hadn't. It was all very difficult due to the spelling situation. I just couldn't write. I couldn't spell so I got a lot of

negative experiences. I did well at maths and I did well at chess. Other than that I was only interested in the social aspects of school…not at all with the academic. I couldn't see the benefit of it.

Slide 11

Interviewer: What led you into starting education courses in prison?

Prison is boring and one of things you have is a dream that you might be able to leave prison as a professor. So I asked to go on education. I'd failed English Language O Level twice before and I finally got it on the 3rd attempt. I ended up getting 8 "O" Levels before starting on the Open University.

Slide 12

Interviewer: What barriers to education did you encounter within the prison system? Who or what did you perceive to be a barrier?

The main barriers to education in prison were that the education was very low wage compared to other jobs you could do. In the kitchen you could earn more than double, nearly triple what you could as a student in education.

I suppose the financial element was the biggest barrier actually, especially at the low level of education.

Once I'd received a degree I was told that the only way I could do further education was if you got your own funding. Of course I'd been in prison a long time then and I hadn't got a clue about the outside world and I just thought that was it.

Slide 13

Interviewer: What attitudes in yourself or others around you created a perceived barrier to furthering your education?

For myself I thought I'd never achieve it really. I thought it was just a dream, because I'd never actually achieved anything. Other people thought I was just wasting my time. Staff were really resentful that I just got everything laid on…students got all the facilities laid on without actually having to pay for it, where-as they had to pay for their families, get them to school, get them from school, pay for extra trips and materials.

Slide 14

Interviewer: What value did you place on your education whilst in prison and afterwards?

Once I got the degree I did place some value on it. Where I understood the difference in the way people behaved around me. I'd always been respected in prison because of my aggressive attributes, where now people would actually come to me with problems…"what do I do with this, and what do I do with that". The fact that they kept coming to me showed that I'd developed a good education and then I started to value it and thought I'd try the masters.

Slide 15

Interviewer: What could have enhanced your education experience?

Being able to do it in the cell and being able to access information and computers. There was no computers. They allocated me a librarian in an academic library which I had to write to for certain questions in order to complete my assignments, where-as if you are just browsing it you can pick up more information and be a bit more creative.

I certainly think…I'd asked several times about employment because I wanted my education to be of some use once I'd been released from prison and my single greatest disappointment was that I wasn't able to use the degree and master certificate because at one point I was going to do computing and I'd asked the probation service when they came in to visit me one day "which would I find it easier to get a job in". They said the degree and masters I was thinking of studying would be best, but it turns out that the computing route would have been a lot better for getting a job.

Slide 16

The interview: The short interview provided for this presentation supports many of the views given by prisoners in the YouTube videos and the papers discussed in this presentation.

My next step is to continue to review the research evidence and to look at the system in the USA who are enabling prisoner distance education methods.

My paper will draw together some of the current issues and debates and will draw on the developments in the USA to support the increased use of distance learning methodologies.

Thank you for your support and perseverance in remaining in the conference to the last presentation.

[?] Jane Ballans
20:26 on 1 February 2015

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Discussion (14)   Links (0)   Academic References (0)

Rachel O'Connor
10:02am 26 January 2015 Permalink

Hi Jane. Part of my role is supporting prison students so I am intersted to hear your presentation and what you find out about the experiences. I might be able to take away some useful information to share in my organisation.

Jane Ballans
1:23pm 27 January 2015 Permalink

Hi Rachel, that's really interesting. I hear that some prison education providers are using MOODLE. Have you any experience of this? Have you seen it used effectively? I've not observed it in use so any feedback appreciated.

Hugo Teixeira
10:43am 28 January 2015 Permalink

Hi Jane. Seeing that we're both (and Sara) working on practices (thanks Samantha for pointing this out), I look forward to reading your abstract. Have you posted your poster somewhere we can see it? Thanks!

Rachel O'Connor
7:13pm 28 January 2015 Permalink

Hi Jane
As Hugo says, I would interested to read your abstract if you are able to post it.
Where I work we mainly have lots of problems with supporting prisoners. They seemed to be constantly denied or given delayed access to the materials etc needed and so they have to be really committed to keep on track with things. Often they move prisons - no one tells the tutors and then they lose all their materials. I am not sure how I feel about the debate about education in prisons but I don't think thats the point. If an organisation or provider or Government makes a committment to educate then this is what prisoners should get. I have heard of MOODLE being used in theory but I think in practice it has rarely been sucessful unless a prison Governer has a very proactive and positive attitude to education.

Jane Ballans
8:22pm 28 January 2015 Permalink

Hi Rachel and Hugo, thank you for prompting me to provide an abstract.

Rachel, I;ve heard and experienced the scenarios you describe as I have also worked as a prisoner educator, and also worked in probation as a lecturer in numeracy. An interesting post which allowed me to work with a range of students and hear very similar stories to those you describe.

My artefact is a paper which I've posted in openstudio if you want to see the beginnings of it. It hasn't progressed very far yet, but I know what I want to do with it now. I'll add to this cloud in a moment.

I'll add my poster as well, Hugo. I'll just about have caught up by the end of the course!

Rachel O'Connor
12:23pm 30 January 2015 Permalink

Thanks for posing that Jane. It is really interesting. It will be eye-opening I am sure to hear the things you have learned from the prisoner's perspective too. Looking forward to your presentation. Great that you hope to expand this work further after H818.

Dave Martin
12:34pm 2 February 2015 Permalink

Fascinating insights from the learner/prisoner perspective Jane such as that working in the kitchen pays twice what working as a student does. Your context is certainly an area where government policy has a clear and immediate impact such as the Justice Secretary's attempt to stop/ limit prisoner access to books.

Jane Ballans
2:42pm 2 February 2015 Permalink

Thank you, Dave. The more I have researched the topic the more interested I've become.

Rachel O'Connor
5:24pm 6 February 2015 Permalink

thanks for posting the presentation transcript above Jane. I have nly read it quickly as I am keen to listen to the presentation 'live' next week but the interview with the prisoner was so interesting. It just makes you think that we need to listen to the end users like this if we are to get education in prisons right. To make it work for the prisoners and in turn for the wider society if the prisoners feel that they will make a better societal contribution upon release. This guy sounds like he didnt get the right advice to give him as a good a chance of this as we would have hoped.
In preparation for the presentations I have been looking over people's postings in OpenStudio to see their journey through H818. I am interested to know how people have felt about the open learning we have been required to take part in and the sharing of work in progress. I notice that you have not posted many things and I know you have mentioned before the need to catch up. I am interested to know though whether you have fel comfortable working openly? I could imagine there are even more issues around sensitive information or confidentiality in your presentation, maybe more than some others, do you think this has affected your approach.
Hope the presentation practice is coming along ok and looking forward to Wednesday

Dr Simon Ball
11:03am 12 February 2015 Permalink

Your questions and comments from the live conference presentation are below:

> I hadnt even thought about barriers to adopting technology in the prison system in terms of access

- its interesting to look at USa. as very differnt culture and most there for life
- Shame about the wage element
- from an inclusion point of view education really importnat to re engaging with society
- interesting contrast in value given to education by prisoners and, in terms of wage, by the prison authorities
- And although it's not really covered here, the link with prison education, post-release employability and recidivism is very strong
- Probation workers = careers advisors? Sounds like they need an open training resource!
- Could Jane put the links into Cloudworks please. Would be good to catch the videos.
- Have you tak about this with cooleagues?
- how might prisons access online learning?
- The tone of this is that the prison services begrudgingly allow the right to education am I right?

[?] **Jane Ballans**
5:29pm 12 February 2015 **Permalink**

Hi Rachel, Sorry not to have responded sooner (busy week). The question you ask about whether I feel comfortable about working openly is an interesting one. I didn't initially, but not for the reasons you suggest, that is the sensitive nature of the subject. My initial reticence was entirely due to a lack of confidence in what I was doing. This was not just the use of technology, though certainly that to some extent, but also to the content of my written work.

Over the weeks I've begun to feel "safe" in the community, and so felt able to post my work and receive some excellent and developmental feedback. I wish I could start the course again and have a bit more time to interact with everyone. I work full time on a very busy programme and always feel I can't do everything as well as I would like, however in terms of distance travelled I feel I've come a long way down the networking road compared to my starting point.

I hope this helps answer your question, but feel free to delve further if not.

Jane

[?] **Jane Ballans**
10:28am 13 February 2015 **Permalink**

Response to comments and questions:

Barriers to adopting technologies in prison: Yes, an interesting area. There does seem to be some engagement with trying to address this.

USA interested me as they seem to be finding ways to use the internet safely now. A development strategy that may well influence this country in the future.

The wage element seems to vary. There are varying accounts over time and different prisons of education being prioritised as a higher wage option. It also seems to be the case that some prisons are reducing education options, one case I have heard recently is the removal of vocational courses and only the provision of basic maths and English.

Yes, having a possibility of employment (and hence the need for vocational and higher level courses) has a positive link to reduced recidivism and re-engagement in society in a positive way. This is the theme of my paper.

The link to the presentation is now available. Please feel free to contact me for the link again if it doesn't work.

I haven't talked to colleagues about the issues here as I don't work in prisoner education.

One prisoner education provider has introduced MOODLE. I've talked to a teacher working in prison with this available and was told (only one lecturer and only in one prison so not exactly conclusive evidence) that no-one used it. She said that they'd had the training but then never found time to play with it and really get to grips with how to make good use of it. I asked how that might be changed and was told that it would take an interested prison governor to drive through any such changes.

I suspect that prisoner education will be patchy and responsive to Governemtn agennda and funding. With the mix of privately run and state run prisons I suspect there will be even greater inconsistencies.

[Alison Walker](#)
12:44pm 14 February 2015 [Permalink](#)

Hi Jane

I thoroughly enjoyed your presentation on Wednesday - I felt very emotional after watching it, I had no idea of the types of barriers to learning experienced in prison and had assumed it was simply logistics such as access to the internet. The other barriers described were eye opening - especially attitutdes towards learning and the learner. I think we could have carried on asking questions for the rest of the evening if we had had the time.

Thank you for raising my awareness of this.

[Jane Ballans](#)
7:52pm 15 February 2015 [Permalink](#)

Hi Alison,

Thank you for your comment. I was actually quite moved by your response. You have motivated me to continue my research in this area. It's not part of my working life, but a personal interest so is really demanding of the spare time I don't have. Thank you again.

Contribute to the discussion

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cloudengine

Preferred language   English