

## Creating safe classrooms to give prisoners their right to education

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### Summary

We need to create new safe learning spaces and educational opportunities that recognise the particular circumstances of people in prison. The creation of trustworthy prison classroom spaces requires re-privileging informal pedagogic praxis and abstracted discussion to enable learning opportunities that have previously only been realised occasionally or, at best, inconsistently.

### Introduction

The right to education is a human right that has been acknowledged in both international and domestic law. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 26), for example, states: 'Everyone has the right to education', implying that the right to education and training applies to all persons, including all persons in prison (cited by Vorhaus, 2014). Similarly, article two of the first protocol of The Human Rights Act states that 'no person shall be denied a right to an education' (Human Rights Act, 1998, Part II Article 2).

However, the rights and entitlements of people in prison are frequently forgotten, not prioritised or actively undermined. In recent years, the gap has widened between the educational opportunities available in the communities of England and Wales and the opportunities available in prison. This problem has a number of causes, including political neglect, a misconceptualisation of the purposes of education in prison, and a growing disconnect between access to learning resources in prison relative to the outside world. If this gap is permitted to grow further, there are further reduced chances for ex-prisoners to re-connect with the world they return to, and increased likelihood of associated socio-economic and human problems as a result.

The available evidence suggests that people held in prison have been left behind for many years in terms of their access to opportunities for education and learning. If anything, the gap grows further as access to learning resources in prison diminishes and the problems slip further down the political priority list. Reviews commissioned by the UK government, focusing on the adult and child prisons estates respectively (Coates, 2016), have corroborated the importance of making progress in this area.

### Key messages

- **Promote and protect people's right to education in prison, so that it is more widely practised.**
- **Create opportunities for learning that recognise the particular circumstances of people in prison, and their humanity.**
- **Re-privilege the creation of informal dialogic learning spaces in prisons, and other 'low trust' contexts.**
- **Recognise and promote the pedagogical value of using abstracted questions and discussions to generate interactions in low-trust contexts and enhance the pedagogical capital of learners (Little and Warr, 2022).**
- **Advocate for the creation of prison classroom spaces co-produced with learners in prison to enhance trustworthiness. This process may also involve students from beyond the prison walls to aid the endeavour.**

The consequences of low academic skills and achievement for individuals left behind by the educational system are considerable, particularly in a competitive market economy. Engagement with educational initiatives has the capacity to create a more stable environment in which prisoners can serve their sentences securely and safely (Nichols, 2021). Additionally, staff whose role it is to ensure that safety, can work in safe and humane conditions that should be expected in a modern penal practice.

## About the research

It is recognised that education in prison can have considerable benefits in the immediate prison context, including reduced pressure on adult males to adopt and display hegemonic masculine traits; helping prisoners to cope through mental escape by focusing on a meaningful activity and alleviating pains of imprisonment; allowing people the opportunity to re-create aspects of their identity; and enhancing relationships with friends, family and others (Nichols, 2019).

The need for significantly more attention is required in terms of the educational offer for long-term prisoners. For such individuals, the purpose and utility of education and learning will necessarily differ and should be catered for.

A recent study of men and women serving life imprisonment for murder, from a young age (Crewe, Hulley & Wright, 2020), found that for some 'learning, education, and trades' represented important routes to surviving a long custodial sentence. It was one of the few aspects of life over which individuals had any sense of autonomy, providing a means to modify one's mood and free themselves (albeit temporarily) from the 'grip' of the institution.

In this context, the author of this policy brief embarked on participatory evaluative research in a prison for life-



sentenced prisoners (HMP Lifer). The research took place in a prison classroom shared over eight weeks between learners from the prison and a group of undergraduate criminology students from De Montfort University. Data was generated from the pedagogical context and included discussions reflecting on sessions; written reflective pieces by the prison and university students which were submitted voluntarily towards the end of the course; reflective feedback by participants at the end of the course; and semi-structured interviews undertaken approximately two months after the eight-week course ended. The findings are the subject of three forthcoming publications, which underpin my PhD thesis.

# Recommendations

## **Promote and protect people's right to education in prison, so it is more widely practised**

The Council of Europe (1989) sets out three 'justifications' for education in prison - to limit the damage and degradation done to men and women by imprisonment; to support and address prior educational disadvantage commonly experienced by people in prison; and to support the process of moving away from crime.

Despite, or perhaps partly because, it is more than 40 years old, this declaration has been eroded in the context of England and Wales. The review of prison education by Dame Sally Coates (2016) recognised the need to revitalise commitments to prison education, proposing the more widespread use of partnerships with universities.

The Council of Europe is clear that education for people in prison has wider purposes than preventing recidivism or finding employment, important though these are in practical terms. In particular, it highlights the need for a holistic understanding of education, that recognises the benefits of learning for the sake of learning. My research with long-term sentenced prisoners strongly suggests this is fundamentally important.

## **Create opportunities for learning that recognise the particular circumstances of people in prison, and their humanity**

As recognised by Coates and the Council of Europe, amongst others, new pedagogical approaches are required that recognise the particular circumstances of people in prison, and their humanity. Importantly, this should not be understood as 'offender learning'. There is no evidence to suggest that so-called offenders learn any differently to non-incarcerated people. Their circumstances, however, do create particular pedagogic requirements and opportunities for learning.

## **Re-privilege the creation of informal dialogic learning spaces in prisons, and other 'low trust' contexts**

An important element here is to 're-privilege' informal learning opportunities that bring together individuals from different contexts for the purpose of exchanging perspectives, knowledge, and understanding (Warr, 2016). This may have benefits for other 'low-trust' contexts, including HEIs whose teaching has become dominated by bureaucratic logics and associated technologies, such as pre-determined, power-laden learning outcomes.

## **Recognise and promote the pedagogical value of using abstracted questions and discussion to generate interactions in low-trust contexts and enhance the pedagogical capital of learners**

A recently published article (Little and Warr, 2022), and my thesis submitted in 2023, argue for the importance of abstract questions and discussion in helping prison student learners engage in the processes of learning. It explores how ethical pedagogical praxis, underpinned by moral sight, combine to create a trustworthy pedagogical context in a prison classroom (Little, forthcoming).

## **Advocate for the creation of prison classroom spaces co-produced with the learner to enhance trustworthiness. This process may also involve students to help in this endeavour**

It also explains how the principles and practice of co-production can help to produce a trustworthy learning space. Bringing people from the 'outside' to engage in knowledge sharing and exchange, and to help co-produce a learning space, can bring considerable benefits, including the de-institutionalisation of the learning space.

## About the author

**Ross Little** is a senior lecturer in criminology at De Montfort University. Between 2016-2019, he ran a series of educational courses in prison classrooms that brought together university students and prison students. He submitted his thesis *How can trustworthy learning spaces be created in low-trust contexts? Co-producing the prison classroom in HMP Lifer* in 2023.



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