Researching inside: Exploring the impact of higher education learning initiatives on incarcerated students in regional Australia

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Abstract

Conducting research with incarcerated students in prisons is challenging. Policy, politics, public opinion, the prejudices and motivations of custodial officers and researchers, the multiple layers of disadvantage of prisoners and harsh fiscal realities all contribute to the emergence of a volatile and largely invisible environment, where power dynamics are often difficult to discern and trust is hard to gain. Prisoners are cautious about sharing information, fearful that it may be used against them, and researchers require special skills and exceptional empathy to conduct effective interviews and focus groups with both prisoners and custodial officers. Prison research often emphasizes the dichotomies of prisoner/officer, researcher/prisoner, freedom and incarceration. The dehumanizing effects of dichotomies, isolation and social justice are key elements of the think piece offered by Jan McArthur.

This paper reports on ‘close up’ research conducted in a correctional centre in Southern Queensland, Australia, between 2012 and 2016. The research sought to explore incarcerated students’ perspectives around the value, need for and experience of digital learning initiatives deployed at the correctional centre. The initiatives provided incarcerated students with internet-simulated access to higher education course materials, activities and assessment in order to deliver learning experiences equivalent to those of students with internet access. The research team investigated the real-world impact of the learning initiatives by collecting quantitative (enrolment numbers, retention rates, grades) and qualitative data (through focus groups, interviews and reflective diaries). Prisoner education, particularly post-secondary education, increases employment success upon release and contributes to lower rates of re-offending. As noted by Jan McArthur, social justice ‘illuminates the need to breach… distances and separations’. The introduction of digital technologies to correctional centres can help to address distance and separation issues, both real and artificial, and improve prisoner access to learning.

In conducting the research, issues around the epistemic justice of higher education, as discussed by Monica McLean in her think piece, were writ large. Lack of social capital, limited access to digital technologies, prejudice from correctional officers, educators and administrators, and even families, challenged students’ beliefs in their own ability or worthiness to participate in higher education and potentially transform themselves and their lives post-release. As universities become increasingly dependent on online course offerings, those who are already marginalized become more so. his paper shares prisoner, prison officer and researcher perspectives of higher education learning in prison..

Keywords

Research impact, mobile learning, impact, research, student learning, incarcerated students.

# Introduction

The education of prisoners is a social issue that raises many questions about the purpose and outcomes of learning while incarcerated. Evidence suggests that students who earn a post-secondary qualification during their time in prison have an increased chance of employability upon release and are less likely to recidivate (Davis, Bozick, Steele, Saunders & Miles, 2013). Furthermore, providing learning opportunities for incarcerated students contributes to improved prisoner behaviour (Ross, 2009) with potential benefits in terms of institutional dynamic security (Wynne, 2001). In Australia, prisoners are generally prohibited from accessing the Internet which restricts their ability to access higher education and acts as a disincentive to study (Watts, 2010).

Since 2012, researchers from the University of Southern Queensland have been exploring how digital technologies could enhance the learning experiences of incarcerated students. The *Connecting4Success Programme* consists of four projects that develop and deploy innovative solutions to provide incarcerated students with equivalent learning experiences to those students who study with Internet access. Initiatives such as the *Connecting4Success* *Programme* are becoming increasingly important as many higher education institutions prioritise the online delivery of learning materials over more traditional face-to-face or paper-based methods, which is marginalising incarcerated students in particular (Klemencic & Fried, 2015). Providing incarcerated students with access to higher education learning resources using digital technologies supports students to develop digital literacy skills. Digital literacies are “those capabilities which fit an individual for living, learning and working in a digital society” (JISC, 2014) and are becoming increasingly important in a society where many commercial and social transactions are conducted online such as banking, shopping, navigating and communicating with family and friends (Humphry, 2016).

# Background

The *Connecting4Success Programme* provides incarcerated students with access to 30 digitally enabled courses across five programmes in 20 locations across Australia. In developing and deploying the digital technologies, researchers work closely with prisoners, prison officers and prison management to ensure technologies suit the prison learning environment, and consult extensively with course examiners (coordinators) to ensure learning resources are adapted for use on the offline learning management system. The final product must meet strict prison security requirements, and at the same time be pedagogically appropriate.

Researchers who conduct research within prison walls face many challenges. Obtaining research ethics approval is a protracted process due to the fact that prisoners are identified as a potentially vulnerable group and 27% of the total Australian prisoner population identify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016). Therefore, research ethics approval requires review by a Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) rather than any form of expedited review permitted under the National Health and Medical Research Council, Australian Research Council, and Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee (2015) for research deemed to be low or negligible risk. In addition to approval from the research institution, research conducted in prisons also requires jurisdictional approval from the state body responsible for the correctional centre. Once ethics clearances have been obtained, researchers must navigate the complicated process of seeking and achieving access to the prison site, which is complicated by access approval processes and high security requirements. Once inside the prison, researchers must overcome low levels of trust (Bosworth, Campbell, Demby, Ferranti, & Santos, 2005; Liebling & Arnold, 2012) to seek honest and open feedback on individual perceptions of the learning innovations. Research with incarcerated students is further complicated by prisoner transfers between correctional centres, prisoner movements within centres, prisoner parole orders, separate confinement, temporary detention and prison lock-downs.

# Methodology

The *Connecting4Success Programme* is a suite of four cascading projects: *PLEIADES*, *From Access to Success*, *Triple ‘E’* (Empowerment, E-Learning and E-Readers) and *Making the Connection*. These projects have been undertaken successively since 2012, with each project building on the learnings from the previous project. Throughout the *Connecting4Success Programme*, researchers have continuously upgraded digital learning initiatives as technology has evolved and new affordances of digital technologies became apparent.

The first project entitled *PLEIADES (Portable Learning Environments for Incarcerated Adult Distance Education Students)* was undertaken from 2012 to 2013 at the Southern Queensland Correctional Centre in Australia. The project sought to research how digital technologies could improve access to higher education learning resources for incarcerated students. Two technologies were deployed: 1) a specially modified learning management system installed on an education computer lab file server to provide access to higher education learning resources without needing an Internet connection, and eBook readers that could provide students with digital access to course and reference materials in ePub format without requiring students to visit correctional centre computer labs. The aim of the research project was to evaluate the effectiveness of digital technologies for improving the learning experiences and learning outcomes of incarcerated students.

Since the completion of *PLEIADES*, three other projects have been undertaken to extend the digital technologies available to incarcerated students. From 2012 to 2015, a project entitled *From Access to Success* further developed a stable and secure server hosting an adapted USQ learning management system into two correctional centres in Queensland, Australia. The Triple ‘E’ Project saw the further deployment of eReaders to an additional four correctional centres. Learnings from these projects informed a subsequent project entitled *Making the Connection* that commenced in 2013 and is due for completion in 2016. *Making the Connection* has deployed a dedicated server (USQ Enterprise Platform) and notebook computers (USQ Offline Personal Devices) into corrective services facilities across Queensland, Western Australia, New South Wales, Tasmania and the Australian Capital Territory in Australia.

# Discussion

Throughout the course of these projects, data has been collected from incarcerated students, prison education officers and academics. While all research has been framed within an interpretivist paradigm that seeks to understand lived experience from the perspective of those who experience it (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994), there has been an interesting evolution in the focus of the research and the research question. Whereas early research was designed to investigate the effectiveness of deployed educational models, later research was focused on exploring perceptions of prisoner education.

## Design-based research

The research was initially undertaken using a design-based research (DBR) approach which is typically used for evaluating innovation in learning environments. DBR emerged early in the 21st century with application evident in studies published from 2007 onwards (Anderson & Shattuck, 2012). In DBR, practitioners typically use rigorous data collection methods and retrospective analysis/review to conceptualise and refine approaches to teaching and learning (Reeves, 2006). DBR is a pragmatic approach to research that is non-prescriptive in terms of epistemology and methodology (Anderson & Shattuck, 2012). DBR tends to use a range of research approaches with mixed methods approaches popular (Anderson & Shattuck, 2012). Early efforts aimed to answer the research question: *How can digital technology improve the learning experiences for incarcerated students?* Questions explored student perceptions of the learning materials and technologies in relation to course accessibility, training and support, and obstacles and impediments to study.

The aim of the research was to understand perceptions and experiences of the project outputs, from the perspective of students and prison education officers, to identify the desired characteristics of a digital learning system for a correctional centre environment. Qualitative data was collected from prisoners using focus groups. The focus groups were held in the education centre of the correctional centres which is a dedicated facility that provides resources to support student learning including computer labs. Participation was voluntary and no audio or video recordings were made. Focus group questions focused on evaluating the benefits and effectiveness of using e-learning technologies to increase access of incarcerated students to higher education courses. Focus groups were conducted with newly enrolled students as well as current students who had been exposed to the learning initiatives, and were conducted at the start and conclusion of each semester. Focus groups did not exceed 60 minutes for each group.

Prison officers participated in interviews and provided feedback by survey on their observations of student use of the technology and information about problems or concerns experienced with the technology. Where possible, academic perspectives were also collected to investigate the experience of delivering learning resources into prison and conducting research within prison walls. Research data would inform continual improvement of the digital technology. One of the outcomes of a DBR approach is the emergence of design principles (Anderson & Shattuck, 2012) that would help guide the development and deployment of technology across a wider range of correctional centres.

The research data revealed multiple issues with paper-based study whilst incarcerated: “My textbook never actually arrived, I had to borrow off other students” (*Incarcerated student, July 2012*) and “Some of us need to get our family or friends on the outside to get on the net and look up things for us. That becomes very costly as well” (*Incarcerated student,* *July 2012*). Some students highlighted a lack of experience with using computers: “I didn’t even know how to turn it on” (July 2012) and “e-books weren’t even out when I came to jail” (*Incarcerated student,* *July 2012*). As noted by one prisoner, “For a lot that are studying here, technology hasn’t been around for them for say the last 5-10 years, they haven’t done any sort of training at all” (*Incarcerated student,* *July 2012*). This perspective was also noted by another student:

I don’t have a lot of experience with computers, when I got in here last year, I took a course on basic computers, certificate 1 I think they called it, just to learn how to use a computer and all that. So this has got to be good for me because I can further my skills in the use of a computer. I taught myself to type so that’s no problem (*Incarcerated student,* *July 2012*).

Other students noted the barriers to accessing educational opportunities while in prison: “There is a lot of red-tape and bureaucracy that’s internal that seems to block people from education” (*Incarcerated student,* *July 2012*) and “Since coming here in April last year I have been trying to get into education, and I highly regret not being able to be involved in education for a whole year. I have repeatedly put in requests, and nothing happened until now” (*Incarcerated student,* *July 2012*).

Students were generally supportive of the digital technology opportunities: “The quizzes gave me another platform for learning and were quite helpful. It helped me negotiate my way around the computer” (*Incarcerated student, November 2012*). The opportunities provided by the eBook readers were highlighted despite evidence of some discomfort with digital technology: “I had to learn how to use it. The dictionary was very good but I’m old fashioned with the books” (*Incarcerated student, November 2012*).

During the focus groups, students also volunteered information about learning motivations: “I have been institutionalised my whole life. And I have another life sentence yet to do. I’m starting to think that I can help younger kids to not do the same mistakes that I did. Do courses, and get out and stay out. That’s my main motivation, is helping the younger generation” (*Incarcerated student,* *July 2012*). Another commented: “I was always too busy to study on the outside. You can better yourself here. It’s good to have that opportunity” (*Incarcerated student, February 2013*). Incarcerated students admitted to being hesitant about commencing study:

To be honest I feel a bit daunted. I only went to year 7 at school so I feel a bit daunted at first... I wouldn’t have a clue how to use Windows but I reckon I will pick it up pretty quick. I don’t know how to use Facebook even. I haven’t used computers since I was a kid (*Incarcerated student, February 2013*).

## Ethnographic research

As the *Connecting4Success Programme* evolved, it became apparent that there was a need to understand student motivations for study, previous experiences with education and technology and aspirations for continuing learning post-release. Three research questions emerged: *How do prisoners perceive the benefits of learning while incarcerated? How does improving digital literacy improve the learning experience for prisoners? What are the institutional advantages of a digital learning system?* The focus of the research moved from design-based to ethnographic research with a focus on describing and interpreting the learning culture within the group (Creswell, 2013). Ethnographic research can be useful for understanding how humans resist conditions of oppression in attempting to gain control of their lives (Denzin, 2000) and was an appropriate methodology for understanding how higher education learning impacts incarcerated students. Researchers refined the focus group questions to seek student perspectives about study aspirations, learning motivation, perceptions of knowledge gained, individual impediments to study, perceived benefits of study and aspirations to continue studying post-release from prison. Data was also captured from prison education officers to understand how the prison learning experience could be improved, and to explore the impacts and benefits of digital learning opportunities from an institutional perspective.

The ethnographic research revealed a multitude of learning motivations across incarcerated students with reference to “a brighter future” (*Incarcerated student, August 2013*), “more opportunities when you are released” (Incarcerated student, July 2013) and the chance to “better myself” (*Incarcerated student, July 2014*). The opportunity to study in prison also encouraged students to focus on opportunities post-release: “I’m getting out in a month and am looking forward to using the real online one as I’m going to finish my studies” (*Incarcerated student, November 2013*) and “I want to go to Uni after” (*Incarcerated student, July 2014*). One student shared his longer-term vision: “I look forward to the day when I graduate from university with the presence of my family knowing that I fought adversity and won” (*Incarcerated student, May 2013*).

For other students, the benefits of study were more immediate by making “good use of time” (*Incarcerated student, July 2014*) and increasing self-esteem:

Studying requires much dedication and perseverance in this place – there are many days you don’t feel good about doing it, but there are other days when you do feel good about it, and feel like you are doing something good for yourself/your future (*Incarcerated student, July 2013*).

Another student saw education as an opportunity to correct past mistakes: “I never passed year 8 so I want to use my time wisely in jail. And get better qualified when I get out” (*Incarcerated student, July 2013*).

In mid-2016, the *Connecting4Success* *Programme* trialled oUSQ Offline Personal Devices in three correctional centres with positive feedback from students. The research data reveals strong support for the personal devices with one student suggesting “It’s only recently with the laptop that things are better. There’s nothing better than having that computer in your cell” (*Incarcerated student, March 2014*). The value of digital technology is apparent in other student comments:

Being able to type actually motivates me to want to do my assignments. For a few reasons, one is this is a novelty in here. It almost makes me feel normal. Also less writing and re-writing” (*Incarcerated student, May 2016*)

My experience with the device was extremely pleasing. It was straight forward and easy to follow. It has the potential to eliminate redundant procedures, unnecessary use of paper, less reliance on prison officers, whilst giving inmates the experience of navigating on USQ sites (*Incarcerated student, May 2016*).

Prison education officers have also been supportive of the technology with comments hinting at an increase in student enthusiasm: “The students are ‘absolutely’ enthusiastic about the courses and OffLine StudyDesk and it is definitely attracting students” (*Education Officer, Semester 3 2015*). The affordances of digital technology are apparent in other comments by prison education officers: “Students were initially a bit wary but the video clips, etcetera, are attractive, for the younger students especially” (*Education Officer, Semester 3 2015*). The attractiveness of digital technology to younger prisoners reflects the contemporary culture of “connectivity and online creating and sharing” (Ng, 2012, p. 1065) that has become an important part of 21st century life (Prensky, 2004). Given that prisoners under the age of 25 years account for 17% of the total Australian adult prisoner population, and persons aged 25 to 29 years have the highest imprisonment rate in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016), there is good reason to embrace the affordances of digital technology to improve the learning experience for incarcerated students and prepare them for their “online life” post-release from prison (Prensky, 2004, p. 2).

# Conclusion

The *Connecting4Success Programme* is changing the way incarcerated students access and interact with higher education. The program is having a significant impact on the learning motivations and aspirations of incarcerated students with data revealing the potential for digital technology to improve the student learning experience and provide students with skills in digital literacy.

The evolution in the research methodology reflects the need to understand the learning experience of incarcerated students. The ethnographic approach has been effective in revealing motivations and aspirations of prisoners in relation to Higher Education learning. Further research will explore how the prison culture impedes or enhances learning opportunities, with a view to better understanding how Higher Education learning opportunities can support dynamic security within prisons.

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