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The Role Distance Learning has to Play in Offender Education

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Abstract

This article looks into the uses of digital and online tools in distance learning to improve literacy and numeracy of offenders in New Zealand prisons. Looking at the benefits and restrictions of digital education within the prison environment, this article discusses the solutions that Open Polytechnic, in partnership with the the New Zealand Government, has put in place to give prisoners further opportunity for rehabilitation, and ultimately prepare them for re-entry into society, the workforce or further study.

Introduction

As the pace of the modern world continues to speed up, education, both secondary and post-secondary, has a major role to play in up-skilling citizens to remain work ready for the changing skills needed in the increasingly digital work place.

With an economy still reeling from the global financial recession, young people emerging from universities with diploma and degrees in hand are also discovering how tough it is to find work that bears a resemblance to what they have studied for the last 3 – 5 years.

The situation for working adults who have years of experience behind them, and is able to dip in and out of post-secondary education to gain qualifications through distance learning is a little better as employers seek employees with both credentials and real world experience.

This has always been the great advantage of open and distance learning – mainly adult learners able to fit their studies around everything else going on their lives so that they can continue to earn a living while they work towards their next career step.

Distance learning has also been able to use blended approaches to reach out to adults who have slipped out of the school system, and thus lack basic numeracy and literacy skills, to help them gain a 'second chance' at learning to increase their employability.

The Open Polytechnic's Blended Model

The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand has for several years used a blended approach of appropriately designed distance learning materials and face-to-face mentors or coaches, to enable sectors of the community most in need to gain basic literacy, numeracy and communication skills so that they are able to take their first, or next, step up the employment ladder.

There is a whole section of adult society, however, that has traditionally been unable to access any kind of post-secondary education that will help them change their lives and the lives of their families – those who have been sentenced to a custodial sentence in a prison or community care facility.

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Like many countries around the world, the statistics for incarceration in New Zealand continue to grow over time. In 2002 6,048 people were serving a sentence in prison or remanded in custody, in 2012 this grew to 8,618 (Statistics New Zealand, 2013).

In 2011, 199 people per 100,000 of the population were incarcerated in New Zealand. The highest proportion of these offenders were in the prime of their working lives with 62% aged between 20 – 39 years (Te Ara, 2013a). While New Zealand prison population rates are, for example, well behind those of the United States of America (716 per 100,000); Cuba (510 per 100,000), Thailand (388, per 100,000) or South Africa (289 per 100,000) (International Centre for Prison Studies, 2013) we all face the issue of millions of adults around the world being locked away for many hours a day without access to any kind of mental stimulation to keep their minds active, with the consequence that they have little chance of gaining skills that will help them re-enter the workforce once they have completed their custodial sentence. This creates a cycle of reoffending as people return to the life they knew prior to incarceration. International research has shown that a large percentage of crime is as a result of prisoners reoffending upon their release (Hawley, Murphy & Souto-Otero, 2013)

As an example, research carried out in New Zealand with a small sample of prisoners showed that 90% of these prisoners lacked basic literacy and numeracy skills (Department of Corrections, 2013a). New Zealand has recently conducted more research in this area with a larger number of prisoners, but this has yet to be released. A significant number of offenders are also parents, and upon their release, without basic numeracy and literacy skills, are unable to provide educational stimulation for their own children, or help them if they have learning difficulties. This contributes to a continuing cycle of educational under achievement and thus reduced employment opportunities.

In the majority of countries around the world, there is an over representation of indigenous or ethnic minorities in our prison systems. Within the New Zealand prison environment in 2011 50% of prisoners were Māori, 34% European, and 12% were Pasifika (Department of Corrections, 2013b). In comparison around 15% of the New Zealand population identify as Māori, 67% as European, and 8% as Pasifika (Te Ara, 2013a; Te Ara, 2013b; Te Ara, 2013c).

The pattern repeats in other western countries, with African Americans making up 37% of the prison population in the United States of America, and Hispanics 20%, despite the fact that they are only 13% and 14% of the general population respectively (Richards et al 2008). In Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders made up 27% of the prison population in 2012, but represent only 2.5% of the general population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013).

Few would disagree that offenders should face consequences. But we have enough evidence now to know that simply isolating offenders and controlling privileges is not enough to turn their behaviours around. We need new initiatives that give offenders the skills to learn a better way of participating in society, and which grow their sense of self-esteem and employability. A downstream effect of such initiatives is that offenders learn coping skills that help reduce the instances where they may cause harm once they have served their sentence.

In 1995 the United Nations and UNESCO released a paper '*Basic Education in Prisons*' that reiterated its 1990 resolution that all prisoners were entitled to education, and that while prisoners have contributed to their own marginalisation through their own actions, they still have a basic human right to education. However, access to education programmes can be patchy, and requires a large institutional effort on behalf of prisons and education providers to make such projects a success. A recent report on prison education and training in Europe shows that prisoner participation in such programmes is below 25% due to a range of issues including prisoner reluctance or unsuitability, and institutional barriers (Hawley et al, 2013).

Several studies have now shown that being able to access education and achieve nationally recognised qualifications that help offenders find work after serving a custodial sentence can reduce instances of reoffending. For example, a study cited by Richards, Faggian, Roffers, Henricksen & Krueger (2008) discusses the research undertaken by the Correctional Education Association in the United States of America of 3100 prison inmates over a three-year period. It states:

The study divided the group into those who participated in a correctional education programme while incarcerated and those who did not take advantage of it. Their findings show a 29 per cent overall reduction in the recidivism rate for the group participating in correctional education in comparison to those not participating. (p 129).

The Department of Corrections in New Zealand has acknowledged the research into the factors that help reduce recidivism, and actively supports education and employment

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programmes within our prisons (Department of Corrections, 2013c). As part of an effort to reduce recidivism, and based on international research, the New Zealand Government has introduced a range of initiatives to reduce re-offending and reduce the total crime rate. Under its Better Public Services goals, the New Zealand Government aims to reduce reoffending by 25% by June 2017, of which education programmes and qualification achievement at levels 1-4 on the New Zealand national qualifications framework will play a major role (State Services Commission, 2013).

To reach its target, the Government has committed to more than doubling the number of prisoners who receive access to numeracy and literacy education each year and who are supported to achieve and complete self-directed secondary and tertiary qualifications (Department of Corrections, 2013c).

One of the challenges for prisoners who want to participate in an education programme is the environment in which they live. During their incarceration they usually have no access to Internet services which makes online learning and research difficult. They may also be locked in cells for significant proportions of time, and unable to access regular face-to-face tutoring. At any stage of their incarceration they could be moved from one prison to another in a different location, or be released to a community based facility – which makes participation in any structured face-to-face based teaching programme difficult.

Of all the modalities of education, distance learning is more accessible to offenders serving a custodial sentence. Distance learning is learner centric, it allows the student to choose the time that suits them best to study, and, when delivered in its pure form with all learning materials delivered to the student (either paper based or online), is pedagogically sound as a way of lone students gaining the knowledge they need to successfully complete assessments to a similar standard as could be completed by students accessing face-to-face education.

However, given the literacy and numeracy challenges that many prisoners must overcome, it is more advisable to ensure a blended approach is used, where students can delve into the learning materials in their own time, backed up by access to a mentor or coach at pivotal points along the learning journey. The reassurance a mentor or coach can give students facing confidence issues or a learning block at key stages in their learning, can deliver a huge self-esteem boost that helps them continue their educational journey.

This mode of blended delivery is the model that the Open Polytechnic is currently using in our partnership with the New Zealand Department of Corrections to deliver foundation level education leading to nationally recognised qualifications (at levels 1-2 on the New Zealand Qualifications Framework) to up to 1,000 prisoners throughout the country. As part of its comprehensive programme to give prisoners the best chances for rehabilitation, and ultimately prepare them for re-entry into society, the workforce or further study, the Department of Corrections identified five qualifications offered by the Open Polytechnic that prisons can access to further develop their literacy, numeracy, communication work and life skills.

These qualifications include:

- Open Polytechnic Certificate in Career and Self Development
- National Certificate in Employment Skills
- Open Polytechnic Certificate in Work and Life Skills
- National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) Levels 1 and 2

The Open Polytechnic has structured these programmes so that they pathway to higher level qualifications, enabling them to celebrate achievement along the way. Anecdotal feedback we have had from educators working with prisoners was that often they had low esteem, had never achieved success in education during their lives, and that early success was a huge boost that encouraged them to continue in their studies.

Courses early on in the programme are designed for adult learners who have low and limited literacy and numeracy levels. The programme applies the research on effective literacy and numeracy development for adults by developing confidence and competence in reading, writing, listening and numeracy strategies, in the context of their everyday life (family, community, and employment). Learners study this suite of programmes to gain literacy and numeracy levels to enable them to staircase into followup courses.

Further courses in the qualification facilitate learners to identify positive ways forward in their lives. Learners explore aspects of their personal, social and educational development with a focus on literacy, effective communication, financial goal-setting, and training and employment pathways. Learners also explore personal and community health and wellness, establish realistic plans to enhance employment opportunities and set future goals. Followup courses within the programme are designed to get prisoners

work-ready, develop their employment prospects, inspire and staircase them into further study, and prepare them for the workforce.

Due to the high proportion of Māori offenders in New Zealand prisons, the Open Polytechnic has contextualised the course materials so that they reflect culturally appropriate images and messages for offenders so that they are better able to identify with what they are learning.

The course materials are instructionally designed for self-managed learning. They enable the learner to work through comprehensive guides, journals and workbooks independently in their own time and place. The language used within the course materials is aligned with the New Zealand Government's literacy and numeracy progression standards. The reflective journals supplied with the courseware are used for learners to assess, monitor and evaluate their personal, social and academic learning experiences. The course materials are also specifically designed to allow for varying learning styles. They are printed in full colour and contain photos and illustrations to help maintain the learner's interest as they progress through the course.

As I mentioned earlier, the Open Polytechnic uses a blended delivery approach for our partnership with the Department of Corrections. A coach is integral to the successful delivery of the courses we offer to offenders, as it is important for learners to get guidance and support when learning new skills. The programme is highly motivational with a focus on supporting and inspiring learners. To achieve this, the programme has a strong support component which includes face-to-face coaching, with at least two student/coach interactions per course. The programme enables learners to study independently, meet regularly with small groups of other learners and provides support from programme coaches.

We have been pleased with the achievement levels we are seeing from offenders enrolled in the programme. But we are also aware that they are not able to access support from coaches whenever they reach a learning block, and that print based learning materials can provide challenges for those that struggle with basic literacy issues.

On top of this, learners in prisons, particularly Māori and Pasifika learners, may not ask questions or draw attention to themselves in classrooms or groups. Reasons for this include cultural factors and previous lack of educational success.

On top of building literacy and numeracy skills, offenders must also face the additional challenge of mastering the increasingly digital world we live in. Digital and online tools change rapidly, and employers now expect employees to have basic digital literacy skills. These can be impossible for an offender to master if they have no access to the Internet, computers or mobile devices over several years during their incarceration.

What's more, educational technology has been shown to support the development of literacy and numeracy, and skills development (Davis et al, 2010). Multimedia, audio, images and video can help overcome learning difficulties. Mobile devices give learners control and independence, and they support the practise of skills.

So how can we help offenders improve their educational outcomes and learn digital skills while also complying with rules about limiting offenders' access to the outside world through the Internet? Farley et al, (2012) describe their challenge in selecting a technological device to support private learning that could work within the constraints of correctional centres. They selected an e-book reader that could hold a large number of files, could not connect to the Internet, could not connect remotely to another device (other than via a cable which only education officers would be able to access), has batteries that cannot be removed without damaging the device, and has a long battery life, that 'can be measured in weeks or months'.

With this pilot project in mind, and the advances that are now being seen in delivering tablet based technology, the Open Polytechnic is conducting its own pilot trial of delivering learning resources to offenders on tablets. If successful, the tablet will supplement the work done with the physical coach, and will enable offenders to gain additional guidance in between visits from their coach.

The tablet version of our courseware in the pilot uses a similar framework to the workbooks in the programme, but adds a 'Getting started' section to introduce learners to tablet use as well as to the programme itself. The coach takes this role in the current blended delivery model.

During the development of our tablet project Open Polytechnic staff have engaged with key stakeholders involved in offender education, and feedback provided about the opportunities of the project, which included the potential of tablets to:

- decrease the need to have a coach supporting the learner (this will increase independent learning)

- support independent learning for low-literacy learners by using video and audio
- reuse content developed by others, such as apps to develop literacy and numeracy
- enable learners to practise skills using interactive and responsive activities and games
- utilise diagnostic and adaptive features to enhance learning efficiency
- potentially increase engagement through games, multimedia and responsive interactivity
- provide an almost limitless number of practise activities because of the ability to store large amounts of data at low cost
- support portability of materials
- build technology literacy
- low reproduction costs.

However, stakeholder feedback also recognised that print materials still offer benefits, such as:

- familiarity
- safer distribution within the prison environment supporting the development of different skills such as handwriting
- overcoming the constraints of a small technological device such as being able to enlarge images and diagrams
- being able to keep a record of activities, as learners may not be able to keep the tablet.

Of course, delivering a project such as this in a prison environment has specific and unique challenges which limits the choice of tablets we can use. The learning device must not be capable of being utilised for illegal purposes, nor used to contravene prison regulations. Voice recording devices and cameras might compromise the security of prison staff, so they need to be disabled, which then eliminates potentially helpful learning options. New systems in the prison will need to be developed so staff can be sure how such devices are being used.

The majority of prison systems around the world do not allow Internet access, although the Norwegian prison system does allow offenders access to educational websites (but all other websites are blocked) (Hansen & Breivik, 2010). New Zealand is one of the prison systems that does not currently allow offenders' access to the Internet, which means the type of content that can be developed for the tablet is more limited. For example, when looking for games to use, the criteria were: fully self-contained, able to be stored, will work on the specific device, cannot be accessed online.

While these challenges seem significant, we see the value in investing in our tablet project. If we can prove it complies with the restrictions of a prison environment, the implications of improving prisoner engagement in education could help to further develop literacy, numeracy and digital literacy.

Often Governments focus on meeting the demands of the many in the delivery of cost effective education services. But this one-size-fits-all education model can fail the most vulnerable in our society, with sometimes tragic consequences. The high relative number of indigenous and ethnic minorities in our prison systems highlight the need to develop better education systems that can assist those that have failed, or been failed, in their first attempt at higher education.

Open and distance learning organisations across the Commonwealth have a major role to play in engaging with prisoner services. Such institutions are able to ensure offenders' education is not abandoned as they pass through the various stages of offender management such as remand, custodial, community and probation sentences.

The world is moving towards a digital future, and to give offenders the best chance of rehabilitation and employment opportunities, they need to be familiar with technology that modern society is now taking for granted. This presents a challenge for distance learning providers, who must develop digitally enhanced courseware on devices that cannot use the internet, but which replicate an interactive experience.

While the challenge may seem huge, the benefits to society of providing access to education for offenders which helps reduce recidivism rates are many. It is in this often difficult environment that we can show that distance learning remains one of the most powerful forces for change when there are challenges in the setting in which learning can occur.

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