

The Acquisition of Cognitive Skills As a Means of Recidivism Reduction: A Former Prisoner's Perspective.

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"Who the f..k do you think you are Doherty? What are ya a f..king professor now? You're just another shifty c..t trying to get out of industry!". These were the words I was greeted with upon entering the division after my first day as a full time student in the education centre. I had, until that time, attained a year eight level of education from a 'working class' Technical School, and had never achieved anything in my life that I was proud of. Incidentally I had waited two and a half years and submitted numerous applications to obtain the *privilege* of accessing the education centre in a full time capacity, not a bad result for a devious little scumbag trying to rort the system!.

My father had just died, whose funeral I went to in handcuffs. I was at the cross roads of my life. I was enrolled in a ten session introductory computing course and amidst an overwhelming fear of failure, I was prepared to take the jump and try to finish something for once in my life. I still remember how strange I felt when I completed that course; it was a very foreign experience that stimulated an ambivalent attitude toward myself. I hated going to the education centre but was too scared not to go. It seemed that education was my last avenue of hope, a chance to dig myself out of a rut of helplessness. The education staff were the benchmark against which I measured my ability to relate to middle class Australia, because although they came into the prison, I perceived them to be about as close to the norm as I was going to get whilst on that side of the walls. I remember the condescending manner, in which they seemed to address me, which left me with feelings of inadequacy. The vitriol that awaited me, from the prison officers, upon returning to the division became routine and expected.

I vividly remember fellow inmates asking me how I put up with those 'God playing morons' and the general consensus among inmates was that you had to suck a c..k to get anything in the joint. Their encounter with education was not personalised, and they adamantly refused to 'dag' them to get some stupid certificate that they'd never use anyway.

Unfortunately, the only people who had any chance of making education attractive to them were fellow inmates. It is an extremely difficult job for an inmate to make education appealing, when those who are trying to acquire an education are constantly displaying extreme levels of frustration at the copious amounts of superfluous red tape they encounter in order to get anywhere. This appears to be the experience of many prisoner-students. One such prisoner who was articulate enough to document his personal struggles in a dossier that provides a precis of his experience with prison education, stated that he had to incessantly request that he receive ten sealed Deakin University educational tapes from management and was met with responses from prison authorities such as 'He'll get the tapes if and when I'm ready'. After being forced to delay starting his university course for three weeks, due to being placed in an untenable position, he felt that it was only going to be through "resorting to childish behaviour in requesting the tapes at half hour intervals" that they would get fed up with him and give him the tapes to shut him up. It took thirty days for him to receive the required material.

Education within a prison setting is viewed by authorities as a privilege and is consequently heavily policed. Although viewed favourably by the parole board, it is far from being encouraged by prison staff. The adamant opposition toward educational pursuits displayed by prison staff invariably brings about a 'play the game mentality' to which a large proportion of correctional educators succumb. Consequently, to safeguard their own careers, they often wear two hats.

Although the difficulty of trying to be a part of the cure in an environment where the attitude and approach of the prison staff with whom they must liaise is a part of the problem is appreciated, it is nevertheless disappointing and confusing when trying to learn from someone whom you perceive as being two faced.

If correctional educators are really serious about addressing the needs of inmates, it is paramount that they firstly cease wearing two hats. It has been eloquently and importantly suggested by Richard Brown (1990) that:

"Although it is suggested that professionals should keep a significant personal distance between themselves and their charges, the prison educator can not afford such safety nets because the net also confuses the lines of communication. In fact, 'objective caring' is self contradictory. Teachers must be prepared to give something of themselves; they must also be trained and supported in relation to the strain and dangers of such an approach".

Secondly, and equally important is that they stop seeing themselves as working with criminals and begin working with people. Stephen Duguid (1997), himself a correctional educator, summed it up well in saying that " the teacher has to

(believe) that behind the criminal record, the tattoos, the hostile demeanour and all the symbols of prison culture, there resides a choosing human, a decision maker, a potential citizen, even a friend and comrade”

Fortunately, upon displaying a genuine desire to learn, the education centre staff began to accommodate me. From then on I loved going to the education centre, I learnt new words and acquired new skills every day, I read voraciously and eclectically, there was no discipline about which I didn't want to learn. I still recall the surprise and amazement on the faces of some of the teachers as they witnessed me making quantum leaps, they were witnessing first hand a bona fide metamorphosis before their eyes! I enrolled in a Bachelor of Arts degree with Deakin University and soon became the pride of the education centre - a potential success story! Today I am just about to complete my degree at Melbourne University, I am employed with a large petroleum company, and am hopeful of pursuing postgraduate qualifications in psychology and philosophy. I have a quality of life that I could not have dreamed of five years ago and would not trade it for all the tea in china!

I wish I could say that the courses I completed in prison gave me what I needed to 'cut it out here' but I can't. The reason I can't is that knowing how to use a computer or sit an exam, whilst invaluable skills, are of no service at all when it comes to personal relationships, dealing with conflict, understanding what it means to love, accommodating others who are ignorant of your world, or appreciating the personal value of morality. It is a fallacy to equate formal education with wisdom.

After completing numerous TAFE certificates, I recall thinking 'Maybe I am capable, yeah I can cut it out there, oh shut up Trevor the standard in here is inferior to that of the outside world, these certificates are a token gesture they mean jack shit'. There was a problem with me and it had nothing to do with my ability and everything to do with the way I saw myself.

I was one of the many prisoners who was convinced everyone was trying to 'take me for a mug' hence when things were going well it looked as though I really had it together, as though I was integrated as a person. However my distorted self concept was soon to manifest upon any engagement with conflict. I had learned that violence ensures respect. My lifestyle of social deviance prior to entering prison and a warped and irrational prison culture had impacted on me in ways I was unaware of, until I began the post release transition process. I knew in my heart, prior to leaving prison, that having embraced education and pursuing it post release was the best way for me to live my life. However, whether I was capable of pulling this off was another matter. Thanks to numerous informal chats in the

computing room with the teacher and fellow students, along with a fellow inmate who spent copious hours showing me the folly and destructive nature of aggressive outbursts, I was more equipped to integrate into the community than many of my fellow inmates.

Making the transition was for me a turbulent experience. I have encountered obstacles that most of my former inmates would not have overcome. I have lost count of the number of ex-prisoners I have run into out here and the *potential* temptations that could quite easily have lured me back into the old environment are too many to number. There has been many occasions where I have been in conflict and have had to really harness my aggressive impulses and employ a foreign style of thinking to gain a win-win situation. Amidst all of the difficulties I have encountered post release, there are three things that have provided me with an anchor in rough waters, a foundation on which I could carry on building a productive life: those being a *vision*, I spent many many nights visualising myself at university, conversing with ignorant people and holding down a job, a *transformation of thinking patterns*, and a belief in the intrinsic value of *virtue*.

Although it is generally accepted that people are not born bad; they are also not born virtuous. The issue of teaching virtue has a long history dating back to the pre-Socratic sophists. That one could be educated for virtue was also a belief held by Thomas Jefferson.

To develop character requires internal conflict and hard work, which is a theme consistent with the writings of Aristotle through to Calvin, and even to the present day as noted by Steven Covey in his book 'the Seven Habits of Highly Effective People'. In an analysis that spanned the last two hundred years of motivational literature, he drew a distinction between two approaches to enhancing one's quality of life: those who adopt the personality ethic (predominate in the last fifty years) and those who adopt the character ethic. The former is viewed by Covey as largely superficial and the latter as addressing the core of one's personal constitution.

It appears that the Correctional system, in Victoria at least, is somewhat antiquated in its approach, in so far as its approach is that which Covey refers to as the personality ethic and is therefore primarily designed to address offenders behaviour. My experience has been that for genuine growth to take place in an inmate requires, among a myriad of other things, the correctional system to abandon the personality ethic approach (which unfortunately constitutes the majority of contemporary motivation literature) and begin formulating and implementing an educational curriculum enveloped by the character ethic philosophy. At the operational level this requires the inmate to undergo what Covey refers to as a 'paradigm shift'. This same notion has been the contention of

Duguid (1997) “ Decision making, self esteem and cognitive skills are primary objectives for correctional education, which runs counter to a current tidal wave of concern about literacy and employment training”.

After almost seven years of incarceration, from juvenile institutions through to adult prisons, I can say quite confidently that what I found to be most frustrating, when in dialogue with fellow inmates, was not their lack of intellect, but the distorted paradigm from which they see themselves and the world around them. This perception was also noted by Richard Brown (1990) “...experience suggests that a relatively small proportion of prisoners have below average mental capacities which leave them short of resistance. Most are intelligent and creative above the norm and thus feel acutely the pain of social abuse”

It is my contention that it is only when we come to understand this, that we can begin to understand the psychology of prison, and consequently appreciate why aggression is so pervasive in prison culture. It is this very point that the psychologist Phillip Zimbardo is wanting to illustrate when introducing the ‘principle of psychological reactance’ and ‘learned helplessness’ to loss of control, which tend to manifest in aggressive affect/behaviour. He points out that violence may be the only way that a helpless, powerless person can get others to respond to him (Zimbardo, cited in Wortman and Brehm, 1975).

Although it is conceded that aggression, and many other forms of social maladjustment exhibited by prisoners, is a behavioural problem, it is my contention that it is first and foremost a cognitive one. My personal experience was one where I *painfully* undertook this ‘paradigm shift’ which was facilitated, ironically, by a fellow inmate. It was when I began addressing my thinking patterns that genuine growth took place. In trying to provide an example, to fellow inmates, of what it means to undergo this transformation of thinking patterns I recall employing the following illustration: If when you get out you decide to go straight because you don’t want to breach your parole, that’s great, it shows you are aware that there are consequences for your actions. However, there remains a problem, that being, you’re still not free, you’re still a prisoner, you’re a prisoner to the law! But, if when you get out you go straight because you truly believe that going straight is the best way you can live your life, then you’re liberated, because even if the law wasn’t there, you would still live that way because you believe that to live other than that is a compromise and consequently you would be short changing yourself.

My experience suggests that until an inmate changes his/her thinking patterns, any encounter with education is, regarding post release, long term social maturity, and personal quality of life, superficial and hence ephemeral. Obviously any

curriculum that produces, at best, ephemeral change, is of no service at all to the problem of recidivism.

It has been argued by Sam Halstead of the Auckland Institute of Technology (1997) that : “By defining social maturity, discussing the competencies, and determining the characteristics of good programs, correctional educators should be better able to create effective intervention strategies”. It seems that one significant intervention strategy is to, as previously mentioned, begin employing the character ethic philosophy by ceasing to address behaviour and start addressing thinking patterns. There are numerous models for cognitive development within a prison setting that, having familiarised myself with their content, I personally would have found to have been of incalculable benefit. Two examples of such models are the cognitive skills program that ran as a pilot project in Canada (Fabiano, E, Robinson, D, & Porporino, F, 1991), and secondly, the ‘Personal Responsibility Curriculum’ (Hsia-Coron, A, 1993). The first program offered cognitive skills training as a component of a living skills program. One of its attractive features is that it has cognitive skills at the core of its program and proceeds to address issues such as parenting skills, anger management, leisure education and community integration on that foundation. It appears intuitively correct and very sensible to structure such a course in this fashion, given that to address behaviour without firstly addressing thinking patterns is like giving someone a software package without firstly providing them the operating system, it may be state of the art software but without the operating system it will not run. We need to see that an individual’s paradigm is analogous to, metaphorically speaking, a road map. If a persons destination is Bourke St in Melbourne, then all the right intentions and all the hard work in the world wont get them there if they’re using a map of Sydney.

The second model is one in which the prisoners participate in the development of the curriculum, and take responsibility for program outcomes. Participants engage in exercises such as role plays and simulations, which are extremely useful tools for developing empathy, goal setting ability and a host of other cognitive skills. Whatever the model, it is fundamentally important that the correctional system recognises the need to address thinking patterns and not behaviour.

The job of providing education within a correctional setting is extremely difficult and enormously complex. The skulduggery, vitriol and general prison politics that correctional educators are confronted with everyday does not make the job any easier. In light of this, I am extremely grateful to those who did in fact offer me academic support and personal encouragement, namely the education staff at H.M. Prison Bendigo.

The difficulty of providing corrections education is compounded by a government that provides no more than a shoestring budget for it programs. We are

unfortunately living the age of 'economic rationalisation' which is a nice euphemism for 'people don't matter'. The task of gaining government funding so that genuine programs can be run in corrections education is uphill to say the least, especially when in Victoria, our honourable premier Mr Jeffrey Kennett showed us just how much he thinks of education by closing down 240 schools and sacking 8,200 teachers.

Given the economic rationalist age in which we live, it would be a futile exercise to proffer an argument for educational reform and government funding on moral grounds, so I won't bother. Suffice to say that even if you eliminate the moral component, and view corrections education in purely economic terms, it is costing a fortune to not educate our prisoners. When it costs \$Aus50,000 p.a. to house one maximum security prisoner, if the acquisition of cognitive skills and those tools necessary for long term social maturity prevent two people from returning to prison per year, and research suggests the number would be greater, then not only will the government have covered the cost of implementing the course, they will in fact have gained a monetary profit. Of course the social implications of a reduction in recidivism would be almost unquantifiable. Hence it appears to make economic and political sense to begin investing in these areas.

The great 20th century prison reformer, Thomas Mott Osbourne, called for prisons to be transformed into educational institutions in 1924. If only the government of the day could hear his echo, society would be indelibly changed for the good.

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