

ADVANCING EDUCATIONAL VALUES AND ADULT PRACTICE IN PRISON EDUCATION

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It is arguable that Correctional Services in the Western world is in the midst of an extraordinary phase, which is impacting on its role, operations and practices. Prison overcrowding, indifferent and/or opportunistic political pundits, reactionary legislation, sensationalised media tactics and organisational changes have all contributed to the often perceived, “shaky” credibility of correctional services administration.

Australia has not escaped some of these influences. Australian correctional administration has seen an increase in purchaser-provider agreements, escapes, riots, change of governments and policy, and associated problems from dramatically increasing prisoner numbers. All states in Australia over the past 5 years have subjected to an inordinate amount of controversy and challenges in correctional administration and practices. Given all of these influences, I would argue that the intent and purpose of this international conference is necessary, timely and logical.

Appreciating the incredible, yet exciting phase Australian correctional services is currently in, allows for an even greater understanding of the extraordinary pressure and demands being placed on prison service providers. It is well known and significantly researched that prison educators and trainers have been and continue to be subject to untoward criticism, scrutiny and rejection (Craig & Rogers, 1993; Fox, 1991; Gerber & Fritsch, 1995).

The indifference and subsequent marginalisation of prison education and training programs can be viewed from three positions. First, internally, based on the administrative focus of economic rationalism and cost cutting strategies. Second, externally, where society generally believes offenders should be punished. Third, and this position is the underlying theme associated with this presentation, is the overwhelming dominance of the social view that education or training opportunities are a privilege afforded to those who are striving for success and status.

Social values aligned to the status and worth society places on education and training has undermined the role, intent and purpose education and training in prisons has. For society, education, training and educational attainment means success, status, reward and recognition. This is not what society wants for its offenders. I would like to suggest that society prefers to stigmatise, alienate, and isolate offenders and that punishment and retribution is society's pre-disposition in dealing with those who have come into conflict with the law.

Therefore, an interesting proposition emerges. Can we utilise the status and value society places on education and training for the community at large, to education and training offered in a prison environment?

Understanding values

What is our understanding of values? How do values pertain to education and training? *It is important to note that I am not asking what is the value of education.*

The focus of this paper is to *establish an understanding* about the concept of values and *how they impact* on education and training in prisons. I believe having this understanding provides the foundation for:

- § Convincing and advising *correctional management* on *the value of* and role prison education and training plays in advancing individual offender rehabilitation.
- § Enhancing and restoring *the value of* correctional educators and trainers in the *operations and functions of the organisation and institution*.
- § Justifying and advancing *the value of* education and training for incarcerated offenders *within the community*.

I doubt very much if there is not a person in this room who does not remember their own individual and personal experiences with education and training. The concerted efforts placed on projects, disappointments over “average grades” or teacher’s comments like “could do better”. When in your own mind you really believed you had “done your best”. Some may recall parents requesting details on homework schedules, school activities or examination times. From the primary school classrooms, to university or TAFE lecture rooms, or practical training and skill acquisition involvement, we can collectively agree that education and training has and continues to play a prominent part in our lives.

Specific values as they relate to education and training

The eminence and importance education and training accomplishment hold in our lives is *significant*. And this **significance** is *VALUED*. We align this value to the history, effort, commitment, memories, accomplishment and importance education and training has played in our lives.

But can we attach *our* collective appreciation of the *value of significance* of education and training to those who are incarcerated? It can be argued that for the majority of offenders this value of significance is *inconsequential* and generally *meaningless*.

Education and training **does not** project the valued elements of significance you and I attach to them because, for most offenders their experiences with education and training is *insignificant*.

In fact, most offenders typically have a history of negative experiences with education and training which have impacted on *their sense* of significance for any learning opportunities provided for them. Typically, offenders demonstrate major learning problems associated with literacy and numeracy dysfunction (Fox, 1991). Many have been school drop outs (Forster, 1981), some have limited learning experiences due to low socio-economic influences (Gerber and Fritsch, 1995), and others through brain damage associated with drug and alcohol abuse or regular physical conflict have limited abilities associated with learning (Forster, 1981).

Generally, for most offenders their education and training experiences have been negative, and they have not aligned any value of significance to their learning opportunities from an early age. This creates a major challenge for contemporary prison educators and trainers. What strategies can be introduced to overcome the majority of prisoner's long entrenched attitude of **insignificance** toward education and training?

There is no easy answer as to how an educator can make the learning experience a process for establishing the value of significance for offenders.

I would suggest that a more individual focus and consultation process could be the starting point. Taking some time to gain insights and understanding about each individual offender's educational history; could enhance the learning opportunity. This is fundamental for moving into a learner focus mode. Also, utilising specific reliable and valid screening and testing instruments that are designed to assist the educator/trainer in making a rationale, logical diagnosis about the offender's learning abilities and/or problems. Advancing team teaching, peer support, flexible delivery, correspondence and self-directed learning programs are other means for making the learning process significant.

Indigenous considerations

The impact of the *value of significance* is also important when considering indigenous inmates. Aboriginal cultural traditions, expectations and practices in respect of learning and education *are different* to those utilised by non-indigenous education authorities. Indigenous Australians are used to the oral tradition, they respect and adhere to the role and status of elders in the transferring of knowledge, skills and learning. Indigenous people place significant value on what they have been exposed to in the learning process as opposed to what grade or level of attainment they have or are expected to achieve. I am not suggesting that indigenous Australians oppose the non-indigenous education and training curricula. I am suggesting that indigenous people have different values in respect of teaching methods, expectations and outcomes. This difference does not mean that the indigenous people are wrong rather, through their cultural development, traditions and rites the *value of significance* on education and training is based on different criteria due to different cultural influences.

A second value associated with education and training is **WORTH**. We value education as a means for exchange. We exchange our skills, knowledge, abilities and services for remuneration, recognition and acknowledgment. These elements are the *worth* we equate to education and training. The *value of worth* is tangible and something we typically endeavour to expand and develop. This may be through promotion, increased salaries and for some, increased responsibilities.

Our society has used the *value of worth* of education and training by aligning them with status, title and position. Qualifications are aligned to employment and to be considered for some positions we are required to show our *worth* (qualifications, experience, knowledge and skills) in order *to be worthy* to receive a salary, undertake specific duties, hold designated responsibilities and possess acceptable status.

The *value of worth* in respect of education and training for offenders is not as easily defined and recognised. Many offenders do not have any regard for qualifications in light of their negative school/training experiences. In addition, offenders perceive those who have qualifications/training as being associated with their current incarcerated status especially judges, lawyers, police and correctional personnel. Consequently, the notion of “worth” in respect of education and training for offenders is not held in the highest regard.

While the *value of worth* aligned to education and training accomplishment is an accepted norm for society, for many offenders this is not the case. Over a significant period of time they have developed a great sense of indifference and apathy toward education or any form of learning. This is due in part to:

- § Learning problems not addressed at onset
- § Behavioural problems emerging as a result of learning dysfunction leading to being ‘labelled’ difficult as opposed to requiring special learning assistance.
- § Limited or poor support both within the School or home
- § Developed new strategies and ploys to overcome learning dysfunction
- § Poor self esteem and self concept
- § Perceive that they have had negative dealings with those who have successful education and training accomplishment

The list could go on.

As prison educators and trainers, **advancing the value of worth** regarding education and training to offenders is also compounded by the current economic influences of employment and society’s reticence to employ an individual with a “record”.

There is no easy answer to addressing the “employment situation” or the stigma associated with having a “record”. Yet, I believe educators and trainers through their individual approaches, understanding and guidance can influence their students' self-esteem and self-concept. These are the primary building blocks necessary for advancing the value of worth for education and training for incarcerated adults.

The third value associated with education and training in prison is the *value of good*.

For many years the question of what is good has been debated in many arenas including education, law, justice and welfare. We have aligned the value of good to aspects of morality, ethics, beliefs and the notion of what is right (Fox, 1989). While the debate on the **value of good**, especially as it relates to education and training continues, for prison educators and trainers the challenge of advancing the value of good in its association with education and training is difficult. This again, is based on the experiences the majority of offenders have had with education and/or training.

The **value of good** should be advanced from both intrinsic and extrinsic viewpoints. Intrinsically, education and training for offenders may stimulate some sense of enjoyment. The good can be seen in that their learning experiences are perceived as being good because they create worthwhile experiences (Frankena, 1973). The **extrinsic value of good** associated with education and training is easy to understand in respect of how they perceive the *usefulness* of the learning opportunities. Programs become a means to an end for offenders. They are useful in giving the offender something to do. They are a means for breaking the monotony of the day-to-day operations of the institution, and for many offenders they are seen as a means for accommodating "the system" for early release consideration.

The extrinsic value of good in “working the system” may be viewed in a negative light. But, if the offender is being exposed to some knowledge, understanding, skills or learning: are they not moving toward an appreciation of the values of significance, worth and good?

The value of significance is achieved through understanding what, and how the learning can mean ‘something’ for the offender. The **value of worth** is in respect of offenders using their learning for development and accomplishment, and finally the value of good is in their personal enjoyment which they see as being achievable.

New Directions

We are in the midst of exciting times in respect of education and training opportunities for adult offenders. Peach (1999) suggests that the success of corrections is now in the balance and it is worthwhile focussing on rehabilitating prisoners where possible (p.3). The Senate (1996) inquiry into education and training in correctional facilities was the first national examination of education and training of incarcerated young people and adults. This report produced thirty-two recommendations regarding prison education and training programs. Those recommendations regarding program content and intent provide the basis for new directions in correctional education and training. Advancing accredited vocational training opportunities ensures that offenders can see that their learning is germane to what is required in society as a whole. Adult education principles and practices, whereby inmates have a major role in defining and describing their learning needs instils a notion of learner focus. National standards in respect of curriculum content and learning outcomes are advocated and pursued in most Australian prisons.

There are recommendations, guidelines and research available that assists prison educators and trainers in their often undervalued and very demanding work. It is however, pleasing to see that Australian Correctional Administrators are endeavouring to advance the status and importance of education and training for offenders by way of this conference and the make-up of State, Territories and International presenters.

The challenge for all of us involved in the education and training provision for offenders is that it has emerged as a major force in corrective service administration. With the established recommendations from the 1996 Senate Report, and relevant recommendations from the 1999 Peach Review in Queensland, coupled with additional state conferences in prison education and training I believe Australia is once again moving into the role of world leaders in education and training provision for adult offenders.

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