

Reading a Library – Writing a Book

Prisoners' Day to Day Engagement with Literacy/ies

'I have been coming in and out of prison since 1979 and learnt a great deal about reading and writing. It's all I do. I must have read a library and written a book' (Howard's comments from prison in personal correspondence)

This paper allows me to bring a number of issues to this AEVTI/IFECSA conference 'Learning for New Life – Not Just Doing Time' which currently occupy my thinking. I want to offer my present views on how the system and the professionals within it might view prisons, prisoners and literacy/ies to the mutual benefit of all involved. I also want to emphasise the benefits of sharing global concerns and common experiences with international colleagues. And I want to capitalise on an opportunity to further leverage the traditionally marginalised voice and experience of prisoners by placing them at the centre of this debate. Howard's views, quoted above, together with those of other prisoners continue to drive my understanding of prison literacy/ies and form the rationale for exploring three concepts that I feel we currently take for granted.

Firstly, I want to question our concept of prison as a total institution with a population constructed from predominately statistics and typologies.

Secondly, I want to challenge the notion that literacy is an autonomous skill that can be imposed, tested and evaluated. Thirdly I want to disrupt the notion that literacy and prisoners co-exist only within the prescribed areas of education departments and prison schoolrooms.

Continuing to hold onto these traditional readings raises certain dilemmas for us as we seek to engage prisoners with literacy (ies). If we continue to construct prison as a total institution, distanced from the outside world, how is it possible for Howard to feel that prison is a place where he can engage with activities such as 'writing a book' or 'reading a library'? If we continue to construct literacy only within the parameters of evaluation and assessment, how can Howard's non-testable but very literate practices such as 'reading a library' be properly recognised?

If we continue to link literacy only to education, where is Howard able to engage with literacy so actively that he feels he has 'read a library' or 'written a book? Fundamentally then, my intention here is to use Howard's views, together with my own observations and the experiences of other prisoners as a means of moving debate towards a more grounded understanding of what prisoners can rather than can't do.

My personal research narrative and Howard's remarks are very much intertwined and as a prelude to the discussion I want to give the reader a broad account of what I do and how Howard came into my spheres of existence.

Introduction

Dear Anita Wilson, Thank you for calling by the byway here. I'm glad you enjoyed yourself, so did I, and would be pleased to see you anytime you are able to call by...All that is required is that you ring the front door bell and ask to see me at the visitors reception desk there at the main gate area of the prison.
(personal correspondence 6/8/91)

Over the last 10 years, I have been fortunate enough to be granted generous access to a number of prisons in the UK in which to undertake various research projects. In every project I have enjoyed the unequivocal help of many staff and countless prisoners and our work has gone on to extend academic debate (Wilson 1999¹), inform policy (Wilson et al 2000²) and support staff/prisoner relations (Wilson forthcoming³). My experiences range across the adult and the juvenile estate, and I have worked with male and female offenders, short and long-term, remanded and convicted.

¹ Wilson A. (1999) There's no Escape from Third – Space Theory' in Barton D., Hamilton M., & Ivanic R.(eds.) (1999) **Situated Literacies – Reading and Writing in Context**, Routledge, London

² Wilson A., Dennison C., Lyon J. '**Tell Them So They Listen'- Voices of Young People from Prison**, Home Office Research Study 201, Home Office London

³ Wilson A. (forthcoming) '**Understanding and Working with Women in Custody – Training for Staff**' Trust for the Study of Adolescence/Her Majesty's Prison Service, Crown Copyright

My work began in Glasgow, Scotland where prisoners allowed me three years' access to their therapeutic unit housing a small number of adult male prisoners. They were described by the system as 'management problems', having been involved in various forms of prison protests, hunger strikes etc. I found them to be highly articulate, creative, and philosophical and they gave me an early insight into the fact that prison can be a sociable as well as an antisocial environment.

Although they were involved in creative arts projects there was no prescribed educational provision. From a literacy perspective, however, they regularly engaged with complex legal texts and produced prolific amounts of prose, poetry and drama of publishable quality. Those with whom I spoke said that on reflection their interest in education had stopped at the transition from primary to secondary school when their interests had become channelled elsewhere. I count myself fortunate that some of them continue to act as part of my 'mentoring team'.

I then undertook 5 years research in an establishment in the north of England housing around 500 young men – remanded and convicted - aged between the ages of 15 and 21. As a group, they could not have been more different to their Scottish counterparts, but I found that their literacy-related activities and practices were just as prolific and their attitude towards education to be very similar. Educational provision in the prison was excellent, but as reflected on an almost global scale, the needs of the system regularly took priority over the wants of the education department. Classes were often cut due to staff shortages or budgetary constraints and prisoners were re-allocated to other prisons in response to population requirements without giving full regard to the disruptive impact on their studies. The literacy interests of these young men in everyday prison life reflected their outside worlds. They were concerned with graffiti, tattoos, corresponding with their families and friends, and keeping avenues of communication open between each other within the jail (in both approved and non-approved ways!). They generously provided me with a significant amount of observational and actual data including their commitment to a collaborative photography project. Some of them occasionally reappear in my research life where they continue to make significant input.

At this same time I also set up correspondence with a varying number of individual prisoners who elected to be part of my on-going research into the ways that prisoners construct space and time (Wilson 1998)⁴ and how various aspects of literacy were integral to this process. One of them was Howard who went on to stay with the project for about 2 years. Others still continue to generate data and offer their opinions both as to the workings of the system and to how my work should progress.

Most recently I have undertaken a project at Europe's largest female establishment in London, England where I was asking young women about their strategies for coping with prison time. During our conversations they told me their views on prison education and how it helped them manage their time in very positive ways. They also told me about graffiti, correspondence, and various forms of networking, describing their activities in much the same way as those that described by young men.

Methodologically, my work remains undeniably qualitative and always takes an ethnographic stance. This requires me to hold a strong position on the ethics of research at sensitive sites. It also demands a certain amount of tenacity (ethnography is a lengthy business!) and calls for the need to develop a method of data collection dictated by the environment rather than by the research or the researcher (see Wilson 2001b forthcoming for further details)⁵.

My observations have led me to believe that some widely held traditional views of prisoners and their literacy – mostly collated through quantitative analysis - give little or no regard to any human presence within the institution. These views do little more than sustain traditional myths around the place that prison is and the statistical occupants it continues to house. But before going on to discuss them in greater detail I now want to outline Howard's place in my research and the centrality of his views to this discussion.

⁴ Wilson A. 'Three Days and a Breakfast', Research and Practice in Adult Literacy Bulletin, No 37 Autumn p2-4, 1998

'Reading a library' - Howard's place in the research

A study is being done by Anita Wilson in the Linguistics Department at Lancaster University into prisoners' everyday reading and writing activities. She is interested in everything from the reading of library books or newspapers to the writing of letters or graffiti plus everything in between. She would like to hear the views of as many people within the prison environment as possible and can be contacted at

(My advertisement in 'Inside Times' – The UK national prison newspaper)

Howard and I 'met' when I placed an advertisement in a national prison newspaper (quoted above) inviting prisoners to contribute to a piece of work that I was doing. I had already begun to form some opinions and theories about prisoners' abilities from my research with young offenders and existing informants but wanted to 'test out' my ideas with prisoners who did not know me. The response to my invitation was considerable and 5 years on I am still in contact with some of those who took the time to reply.

One such was Howard and during the course of our 'correspondence conversations' he sent me a considerable number of poems that he had written. They were of a very high standard and although he asked me for critical comment I truly felt that there was little that I could suggest that would improve them. In our letters we also talked around the idea of a metaphorical and sometime actual 'third space' in prison wherein it was possible to construct oneself as a 'writer' rather than a 'prisoner'. Our conversations, along with others coming from prisoners in other jails, acted as the catalyst for my subsequent 'third space theory' (Wilson 1999)⁶ to which I refer later in this paper.

In one particular letter I had suggested to Howard that, as he was such an accomplished writer he must have engaged with a considerable amount of reading and writing while he was in prison. Back came his reply

'I have been coming in and out of prison since 1979 and learnt a great deal about reading and writing. It's all I do. I must have read a library and written a book'

⁵ Wilson A. **Researching in the Third Space – Locating, Claiming and Valuing the Research Domain**, Open University Press Milton Keynes

⁶ Op Chit

As in many instances during my research career, Howard's words succinctly encapsulated everything that I was trying to say.⁷ On asking him if it would be permissible to use his words in my work he replied that they were a gift for my friendship through correspondence in difficult times and that I should look on them as something to use whenever I wanted to.

I want to use Howard's words and attitude towards reading and writing to form the basis of this discussion because what he says raises a number of issues around the myths and dilemmas I noted earlier. If prison is an institution, how is it possible to undertake social activities such as 'reading a library' or 'writing a book'? If literacy is defined by testing, where does 'reading a library' or 'writing a book' fit into the assessment process? If literacy is confined to prison education where do Howard's activities fit in to our model of prisoners' engagement with reading and writing?

It is these issues that I want to move on to now.

Prison – Total Institution or Social site?

'All prisons ARE different, very much so. Even though a jail may be the same category as another, none are alike'
(Keith in personal correspondence 24/1/97)

The traditional construction of prison (Goffman 1961⁸; Wallace 1971⁹) makes the assumption that the term 'prison' can encompass all establishments and all regimes. 'Prison' is used as a collective term applied to phrases such as the 'Prison Service', 'Prison Rules', 'going to prison' or 'having a prison record' or even 'prison education'. There is no sign of human life and prisoners are conventionally represented through quantitative information, abstracted into statistical data on rates of recidivism, types of offence or generalisations about the 'prison population'.

⁷ My usual style of title endeavours to use prisoners' language and as illustrated throughout this paper I am constantly at pains to place their words within the body of the text.

⁸Goffman E, "*On the Characteristics of Total Institutions: The Inmate World* in '**The Prison - Studies in Institutional Organisation and Change**," , ed. D. Cressey (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, Inc., 1961)

It would be naïve, of course, to suggest that aspects of 'prison' do not rule the lives of all those who live and work within incarcerative settings at least in part. Prison Rules, for example, are almost universally applied and prison regimes are uniformly implemented. But the experiences taken from my research suggests that the threat of general 'prisonisation' is something which prisoners do their utmost to minimise. Prison as an autonomous institution is rejected by prisoners such as Keith, quoted above, and Al quoted below.

Close study would indicate that inmates at Perth prison (Scotland) reflect local attitudes and values different in distinct ways from inmates in an Edinburgh or a Glasgow prison just as citizens of those cities have their differences (Scotland – in correspondence, November 1996)

Nor does an institutional view of prison bear any resemblance to the prison of Howard's experience as a place where it is possible to 'read a library' or 'write a book'.

Embedded within the myth of autonomous prison is the myth of the autonomous prisoner. It too denies difference, compartmentalising prisoners in institutional terms such as offence, status, category or vulnerability. This myth of 'the prisoner' is easily sustained. The general public is only offered a view of prisons through quantitative data or a view of prisoners limited to media coverage of individual cases. Such views deny the wide variety of prisons, or of the professionals working within them. They certainly do not identify Howard or any space where he could read a library or write a book. So where does Howard, his fellow prisoners and involved professionals live out their incarcerative days?

I would suggest – and have described elsewhere in greater detail (Wilson 1999)¹⁰ - that while prisoners are unable to access their various social worlds and unwilling to be drawn into the realms of prisonisation, they seek to define a third space in which to live out their day to day prison lives. This space is driven by its own culturally-specific and culturally-defined discourse, at the heart of which lies literacy-related activities, practices and artefacts.

¹⁰ Op Chit

The graffiti drawn by young men in prison for example, reflects the contemporary icons and visual markers of their outside worlds but is drawn into the 'third space' of the prison world where it colonises the institutional spaces of pinboards, mattresses and cell walls. In Howard's 'third space' he draws the creative processes of the outside world into the regulated environment of the prison. He occupies his mind with non-institutional activity, transforming the physical spaces of his cell and the metaphorical constraints of prison time into social rather than institutional domains. In Howard's 'third space' the institutional becomes the creative and the dullness and boredom of prison life is transformed into self-generated process and practice. He would say that reading and writing in this space 'makes the time go by' and helps 'to manage his mind'.

In some sense, prison education departments also occupy a third space, located between the pedagogy of the outside world and the constraints of institutional parameters. We contribute to 'deprisonisation' by naming our prison spaces as 'schools' and naming our prisoners as students. Therefore, if we are to look at how educationalists can engage prisoners in expanding their abilities we need to look at the other spaces in which their language and literacy is generated. What is taught during the school day may well be applied after lock-down. Some of the best examples of our educational practice may never be seen in the education departments. Howard, for example, did not see his library as a space that he only visited on the orders of a member of staff at a particular time on a particular day. (As an illustrative aside, I remember once asking a young man if he went to the prison library. 'Oh yes' was his reply. 'What books do you get out?' I asked. 'Oh, I don't go for the books' he said, 'I go because they play great music!')

During my research I learned a salutary lesson one day about the way prisoners construct different spaces. I was discussing poetry with a young prisoner. He told me he wrote three different kinds of poems – one style for the education department 'because they're only interested in the usual kind of things about prison', another for other prisoners to buy and write into their personal letters 'because their girlfriends like a bit of poetry', and yet another for himself 'they're the best ones'.

In the third space which prisoners and I have identified, institutional domains are reassessed, balances of power can be subtly redressed and literacy becomes something to be owned rather than evaluated.

Literacy – assessable skill or social attribute?

'I am in prison, all alone
Surrounded by these four walls of solid stone
When I'm down and feeling low
I think of how I miss you so...
And now I'm here writing this poem
Thinking of you so beautiful sat at home
I wish I could be by our side
And how that thought lingers on my mind'
(young man's poem from prison)

I have argued elsewhere (Wilson 1995¹¹) that prison literacies are both multiple and context-dependant. They cannot be comprehensively studied without taking into account the social circumstances or discursal influences of which they are a part. If we intend to look at prison in new ways, then we also need to take a fresh look at literacy. A comparison can easily be made by linking the institutional/social readings of prison to institutional/social readings of literacy, best located within Street's (1984)¹² autonomous/ideological model of literacy. Just as I suggest prison fails to acknowledge the diversity of its establishments and their occupants, Street suggests literacy - in its singular form - fails to acknowledge the multiplicity of literacies which can and do exist at innumerable differentiated sites and domains. Taking an ideological/multiple stance towards prison literacy/ies shifts attention towards the ideologies at work, identifying imbalances of power and questioning whose 'literacy' is being prioritised or devalued.

¹¹ *Journal of Correctional Education* Vol. 47 Issue 2, June 1996 *'Speak Up, I Can't Write What You're Reading'*

¹² Street B.V., *Literacy in Theory and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984)

However, in the global context, great emphasis continues to be placed on the implementation and results of uniform tests aimed at evaluating prisoners' literacy. Surveys from many parts of the world continue to ostracise prisoners further, suggesting that rates of prisoners' non-literacy are greater than those of the outside world. But I would suggest that prisoners' perceived skills deficit rests more on the results of inappropriate testing mechanisms limited to the assessment of functional competencies and might be better focused towards what prisoners actually 'do' with literacy.

I am not suggesting that there is no place for Basic Skills, Study Skills or evaluation of Basic Education in prisons, only that assessment frequently operates from a deficit model where prisoners are evaluated as much on what they cannot do in tests as what they can in other domains of their social lives. Frustratingly, educationalists, are often unwilling participants in the testing exercise, forced to remain tied to the process because records of achievement and levels of prisoners' literacy are linked to funding or institutional performance indicators.

From Howard's point of view – and mine – literacy research from other contexts such as Kaptiske's (1995)¹³ study of Seventh Day Adventists, or Canieso-Dorinila's (1996)¹⁴ study of island communities give greater support to the everyday practices and highly sophisticated social networks which prisoners engage with on a daily basis. Even within the prison milieu, Black (1989)¹⁵ notes that Australian prisoners who he termed of 'low-level' ability used imaginative means by which to secure their weekly commissary – skills which have also been replicated by prisoners I have known and observed.

¹³ Kapitske C., **Literacy and Religion - the Textual Politics of Seventh Day Adventism** (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1995)

¹⁴ Canieso-Dorinila M.L., **Landscapes of Literacy - An Ethnographic Study of Functional Literacy in Marginal Philippine Communities** (Hamburg: UNESCO, 1996)

¹⁵ Black S. "Contextual Issues and the Functioning Abilities of Low-Literate Prisoners," **Australian Journal of Adult Education** Vol. 29 Part 2

My main concern with the autonomous view of literacy is that it prioritises forms of literacy drawn from an educational and schooled context. Given the fact that many prisoners have unhappy or incomplete histories of schooling, it seems unlikely that drawing them once again into the parameters of schooled assessment will produce anything that is in any way valid, applicable or appropriate. Again, this is not to say that some assessment of ability is more than necessary, but to re-emphasise a deficit seems to be an unlikely way to promote the self-esteem of a group of people who are already likely to have been exposed to the more negative experiences of life. Again, this is not to dismiss that education departments are tied but to find some additional way of relating the development of literacy ability to the everyday activities of people in prison might be one way of linking relevance to engagement.

My research would suggest that outside the remit of educational assessment, prisoners go about their 'literacy business' in complex and interesting ways, extending literacy beyond the activities of reading and writing, into the uses of the texts themselves. In this final section I wish to highlight some of their complex literacy-oriented expertise.

Reading a library – in school or in cell?

Today after bang-up I read a book about a young adult just being released from jail, and how he lived/survived in the city of Glasgow. I learned from this a great deal about the city and its surroundings. I also learned a lot about myself in the way the boy expressed himself in the book. Both things proved very useful to me and I feel glad to have the ability to write and read.

(George – writing in his prison literacy diary)

It strikes me as ironic that a system that requires its prisoners to engage with so much literacy can then declare the majority of its prisoners to be non-literate. The trick, of course, as the autonomous/ideological model of literacy suggests, is to set the rules as to what counts as literate.

I continue to revise and add to the number of literacies that prisoners actually do engage with during their time in prison. A minimal list would include frequent signature writing, official bureaucracy on reception into and release from the jail, graffiti, letters to family and friends, subversive notes to acquaintances in the jail, reading court depositions, reading official prison documentation, commissary forms, complaints forms, visits requests, tattoos, appeals, poetry, educational pursuit, reading books, magazines and newspapers. etc etc etc. As Howard suggests, the possibilities for metaphorically 'reading a library' are well within the grasp of any prisoner. Looking at all of the literacies that prisoners value, utilise and actively engage with in their everyday prison lives would give a complex and highly sophisticated picture far beyond the limitations of assessment and schooling but well beyond the scope of a single discussion paper. So in the spirit of Howard's comments I intend to focus here only on books and I want to concentrate on just two aspects. The first stays within the parameters of conventional literacy expertise, while the second moves books out into the realms of personal identity and the management of self.

Books as a literacy indicator

When I am banged up in my pad I almost always read, books usually but sometimes papers or magazines that I have borrowed. As far as today goes I have been reading a book called the Bourne Identity - about a man who was shot on a boat and then thrown into the sea, only to be rescued by fishermen and taken to a doctor on a small island in the Mediterranean and after coming out of a coma he finds he has amnesia. That's as far as I have got up to now.
(Mark writing in his prison literacy diary)

Mark's comments reflect my own observations that when prisoners are 'banged up' in their cell they choose to prioritise reading as an activity, and Howard's concept of a 'library' effectively describes the wide range of books that prisoners read. In the 10 years of my research I have noted prisoners reading all types of fiction from 'slush' to classics, legal texts, instruction manuals, poetry, historical texts, reference books, and religious texts.

For example, a prisoner may tell me on the one hand how he negotiates the intricacies of documentation relating to his legal case while on the other he recounts to me details of informative texts on how to keep parakeets or goldfish (and how to fix my car!). There are a number of famous cases in the UK where prisoners have investigated and won their own cases through their meticulous perusal of specialist texts. Kevin Callan (1997)¹⁶, for example waded through a host of detailed medical documents on the causes of child injury before winning his appeal against a miscarriage of justice. Ironically, for many people, coming to prison provides them with an opportunity to read which would be denied them in their outside worlds. A man once told me that the first time he had ever read a book 'right through' was when he went to prison (it was Denis Wheatley's 'The Devil Rides Out' which terrified him at the time, he said, as he was in a single cell!) and many young men and young women have echoed the comments voiced in my conversation with Naomi

- Naomi: When I first come to prison I could never, its only recently I've been able to read books, I could never settle my mind at reading books. Every time I went to read a book, my mind went off onto something else.
- AW: ...So what made you decide that reading was all right do you think?
- Naomi: Well reading good books I suppose, better books that what I was reading on the out.

The reading of fiction by young male prisoners raises a particularly interesting point. Research would suggest that in the outside world young men do not read fiction. But in prison many young men tell me that fiction is a useful way to 'escape' the reality of prison life and prison time. Reading fiction in prison is yet another strategy that prisoners use to maintain their position in a third space, drawing outside practices into their prison world and re-shaping them appropriately. There is no more shame or embarrassment for a young male prisoner to read sentimental fiction in jail than there is for him to listen to romantic music or write emotional poetry.

¹⁶ Callan K., (1997) Kevin Callan's Story Little, Brown & Co., London

As I noted in my research journal

[He] is keen to have some more books from the prison library - he has read all he can from the [punishment block] library - when I ask him what sort of books he would like to have- he says poetry - when I ask what sort of poetry, he says 'about love' - from a boy who is up on a charge of billiard balling a fellow prisoner (albeit with some justification) this is very interesting.

Poor histories of schooling seem to be no bar to reading in prison. Self-improvement – on their terms - is seen by a number of prisoners to be valuable. According to the 2001 Annual Report of the Prisoners Education Trust (a charitable trust which supplies distance learning to prisoners in the UK) prisoners were supported in reading books connected to over 100 courses, ranging from composing music to degree courses in health and social welfare.

Of primary importance here is the fact that all these activities take place outwith the confines of the education department. Although prisoners do mention the fact that they are taking courses and have gained certification, reading books seems to be thought of primarily as something to be done privately in the confines of one's person space rather than connected to formal prison provision. The fact that so much reading goes on is significant in itself but the fact that this reading is considered 'more social than educational' makes it even more important.

Prisoners' interaction with books begs certain questions for educationalists - If prisoners are so engaged by the activity of reading, how can their skills be properly validated and valued without extracting them from the social space in which they choose to undertake the activity? How might it be possible to reconcile the 'educational currency' of such prolific reading without drawing it back into 'schooled' arenas which have already ignored or excluded many offenders? How might it be possible to recognise the creativity and imagination which prisoners apply to books – not only as something to read - but also as a useful commodity in their daily prison lives? It is this final question that I want to address in the closing section of this paper.

Books beyond literacy – when is a book not a book?

some-one has just been brought down (to the punishment block) for being a 'tobacco baron' and has a neat log of debts paid and unpaid in the back of a cross-word book - it is ironically pointed out that he has also noted in the front that he mentions NVQ maths although I suspect that it may be a further aide memoir of who is in which class, in order to get the money back - there is a list in the back of an ever decreasing amount of money, a short list of names, and various amounts of money, as well as 1/2 ounce written across from each name - like book-keeping
(excerpt from my research journal)

There are three aspects of books that I want to touch on here which take them beyond the traditional view that books are for reading. Instead these practices show emphatically that for prisoners the parameters of activities associated with books extend far beyond deciphering conventional marks on the page.

Personal books

As the quote above from my research journal illustrates, books are used not only as books but for the day to day (albeit illicit) 'business' of everyday prison life. The young man in question certainly linked his activities to education but only as a place where he could reclaim his debts and go about his other profession as a 'tobacco baron' rather than as an opportunity to develop any traditional literacy skills. Discounting the nefarious nature of his enterprise and focusing on the book itself, his production of a personal book is not uncommon in prison.

A second excerpt from my journal notes illustrates a different approach where a young man sought to create a document of his own

'I was speaking to an officer this morning, who says that one lad had written out a beautiful notebook on how to break into a car - with diagrams and instructions - she says it was very neat and that if he had done it in the education class he would have got a good mark for it as a project'
(excerpt from my research journal)

In both instances, the value of books as places in which to record personal and important information has been recognised by these young men and commodified for their own particular purposes.

Subversive books

Books also drawn into literacy-related activities which involve conventional reading. In a tragi-comic example two young male prisoners were responsible for putting the security of one jail at risk when an alleged coded escape plan complete with instructions for making a bomb was intercepted by a member of prison staff.

It transpired that the plan had been intended as a joke – as noted below

[having spoken to the boys in question] it seems that the 'coded message' was in fact a plan on how to make bombs which had been lifted [copied] from a James Bond book - it contained phrases such as - go to the gym for gelnite - get my mates to bring in 50 boxes of matches - and written in code - I asked how it could be deciphered and he said that they had left page 2 [of the James Bond book] next to it so that it could be understood - he suddenly smiled and I got the feeling that it had been done as a joke - it seems I was right as he then said he could hardly keep his face straight when handing it over (excerpt from my research journal)

it does, however, show a certain amount of initiative combined with an adolescent propensity for acting first and thinking second!

The physical materiality of books is also considered very important. I know of many instances where people have used the blank sheets of paper found in the final pages of a book on which to write letters or subversive notes. Down in the punishment block especially pages are torn out of books in order to provide 'skins' for smoking tobacco.

As an officer noted during one of my visits

'it is sometimes frustrating for lads who read second-hand books down [the punishment block] to find that the last chapter has been ripped out'
(my personal journal)

I have also heard accounts where information, contraband and correspondence have been distributed around the jail secreted between the leaves of books. Although this is not something I have witnessed myself I have no reason to doubt the validity of what I was told. It chimes with practices I have noted in the punishment block where the transmission of messages goes on by one person writing a message on the front or back inside cover of the book or in the margins of the page, which is then lent to someone else who writes another message and so on.

Again, although the books are removed from conventional use, they are still closely linked to literacy-related activity.

Visual books

I have described elsewhere prisoners' overwhelming desire to retain a sense of personal space (Wilson 1999¹⁷) and highlighted the fact that many literacy-related activities and practices are utilised to support them in their endeavours. I have also noted that material artefacts are also drawn into the process (Wilson in print)¹⁸. In addition to personal correspondence, photographs, posters, certificates and cards, prisoner use books to declare and affirm their preferred social identity as someone with links to the outside world. Visual images constructed by prisoners within their cells include the use of books as a way of marking out the identity of the owner/occupant. Arrangements are very specific and while in each instance the intention is to declare a sense of self, each prison has its own specific and culturally defined styles. During my conversations with Stephen – an artist/ prisoner who was involved in my photography project we noted the following:-

we discuss the fact that his cell is full of 'compositions' - he hadn't noticed but says that it is good to look at the photos as it gives a different perspective on his cell - we talk about his books and he says that he likes Camus' 'The Outsider' and the other one ...the name of which he can't remember - he says that he would like to have a library full of good books and a leather chair to sit in

His views reflect not only his personal reading preferences but the status that he accords to the artefacts themselves which he then integrates into an image of how he would like to see himself as a social being.

Books are also used within prisoners' personal spaces to protect other items. Letters are very precious and stealing addresses of personal correspondents is common-place. Some prisoners tell me they 'set traps' in front of their letters, arranging books and other artefacts in complex and complicated ways so that they will know if any item has been tampered with.

¹⁷ Wilson 1999 op cit.

¹⁸ Wilson A. 'Nike Trainers, my One True Love – Without you I am Nothing': Youth, Identity and the Language of Trainers for Young Men in Prison in **Discourse Constructions of Youth Identities** ed. J Androutopoulos (Amsterdam John Benjamins,)

The activities and practices around books that I have chosen for this paper relate to only one aspect of a prisoner's literacy repertoire.

The range of additional literacy-related activities, practices and artefacts exist in relation to a prisoners' wish to remain a social rather than an institutional being. My intention here has been to illustrate that books, conventionally associated with literacy, are taken up by prisoners in what they see as important but not necessarily traditionally academic or educational ways.

Conclusion

Prisoners' literacy is a contentious issue. There is no doubt that greater skills may help to prevent re-offending. However, literacy ability does not begin when the prison gate opens or finishes when it closes. Prisoners engage with many literacy-related activities before, during, and after serving their sentence in order to present themselves as social beings. Educationalists are naturally focused on preserving an academic focus but my intention here has been to illustrate that there is more to prison literacy than testing and evaluation and more to raising ability than identifying skills and competencies. As Howard suggests being in prison can provide the opportunity to 'write a book' and 'read a library'. If prisoners have already worked that out then perhaps it is now up to us as policy makers and practitioners to join with them in order to jointly support their further progress and development.