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Warning - This paper contains a little coarse language.

Those of us who teach or have taught literacy in prisons have learnt a great deal. Not about what is glibly called 'life', or pejoratively 'low life', but about teaching. Literacy teachers develop reserves of humour, tolerance and innovation which help them to counter what many students do well. That is, press buttons that have allowed them to escape schooling aided by an education system that has been only too happy to assist them with a policy of easy expulsion.

I have never been so accommodating as to expel a student or refuse entry to a class. Even to the extent of including a virtually illiterate student in a class on *Hamlet*. He not only came up with the theory that Hamlet's mother, alone, killed Hamlet's father but quoted passages from memory that supported his claim. This showed he had learnt a little about the academic process. The rest of us learnt patience. He took three seconds to read each syllable. If 'To be or not to be?' had been addressed to him, we would have waited as long as Hamlet for the answer.

Another student comes to mind. In a computer class he used the word 'fuck' every few seconds in almost incessant monologues (methadone has a lot to answer for). He was beginning to annoy a few 'heavies' and I feared for his arm bones when I was not around. I explained that the word 'fuck' had been with us at least since the 16th century, was probably the most versatile word in the English language. It could be used in almost every grammatical form. Whenever he said the word I asked him to repeat the sentence so I could see whether he had used it as a verb, a noun, an adjective, adverb and so on. Everybody in the class entered the game good-naturedly, arguing the grammar. The mental challenge so overwhelmed the young man he stopped using the word. This considerably shortened his diatribes.

In teaching computers I was necessarily teaching English, as inmates chose to struggle with letters to judges for their word processing assignments. One kept referring to the 'mortal wound' he had

inflicted on his victim. I asked had he killed the other man. He said indignantly, 'No, it was just a scratch'. I told him, that, although the judge would know this, 'mortal wound ' was an unfortunate phrase to put in his mind or the minds of jury members.

As we gain skills in keeping inmates in classes, and helping them achieve elementary literacy, we find we are faced with a difficult question – 'What is the purpose of literacy in the correctional context'. It can't be just to read forklift instructions, or computer manuals, although that may all be part of it. In one centre I asked young offenders to pick twelve words out of the dictionary for which they did not previously know the meaning. I was shocked at the simple words they chose. When I questioned this, one said in aggrieved tones, 'We don't need to use many words for what we do, Miss. You don't understand. What we do is crime'. A lack of vocabulary suggests a lack of concepts. For these young men crime is both a vocation and a culture. Both need to be rethought. It crosses my mind, that crime may be also a leisure time activity. We need research here.

Outcomes for literacy education can include cultural enrichment, English for Indigenous inmates, improvement of basic skills for the workplace, better management of inmates, better use of leisure time, improvement of employment prospects on release, and reduction of recidivism. Pressures include budgets, global responsibilities and departmental policies. To understand the latter we need to look at education history in Australia during the last decade or so.

In 1989 the Commonwealth formally embraced a competency-based vocational education and training system. (ANTA, 1999:1-7) This began a process of fundamental change for education in Australia including prison education, and impacted heavily on the teaching of literacy.

Paul Brown, in a paper on literacy and behavioural problems, records that in 'The Australian Language and Literacy Policy' released by the Federal Government in 1991, John Dawkins, the Minister for Education and Training, wrote, 'English Literacy proficiency has a vital bearing on the labour market prospects...' (Brown,1997:4-12). This is clearly true but should not have meant that literacy education should be narrowly defined by its usefulness to the workplace.

Unfortunately changes to literacy teaching, frontlining vocation rather than cultural enrichment, has put the focus on fundamental English and easily accessible texts throughout the education system. This has invited mounting academic criticism, and become a matter of public debate. Barry Spurr's recent article in the Sydney Morning Herald, one of a number of similar articles, advocates a return to the teaching of English as a scholarly discipline in schools and universities (Spurr, 2001:8). The public seems to agree. Five supportive letters to the editor against one serious disagreement were immediately printed in response. More articles lamenting the downgrading of literacy have followed.

Some critics even imply changes brought about by Dawkins were not based on empirical evidence, and furthermore involved questionable tactics. Robin Ryan delivered trenchant criticism of Dawkins in 'How TAFE became 'Unresponsive': a study of rationale as a tool for educational policy' (Ryan, 1999:105-124). In 1991 Rosie Wickert wrote 'Literacy workers would do well, then, to refrain from exchanging their educational principles for a chance to ride on the workplace literacy bandwagon without first questioning the motives of both those who are driving and those who are funding its operations' (Wickert,1991:48). Nevertheless governments of the day, and since, have thought emphasising vocational training was the way to prepare for globalisation, and educational organisations particularly those associated with the government felt great pressure to come on line.

Since June 1994 the Adult Education and Vocational Institution (AEVTI), a Registered Training Organization (RTO) with the NSW Vocational and Education Training and Accreditation Board (NSW VETAB), has delivered basic literacy within the 26 correctional centres of the NSW Department of Corrective Services. (DCS). It does this through Reading and Writing Levels 1 to 4 of the Certificates in General Education for Adults (1996). The emphasis is on the different forms of writing. More advanced language or literacy skills can be acquired through distance education principally TAFE OTEN courses.

In 1998, Professor Andrew Gonczi, was appointed the independent chairman of a review of education and vocational training in NSW Correctional Centres. The review was commissioned by the Department of Corrective Services. Professor Gonczi, while pointing out inadequate terms of

reference, wrote that the Department's submission to the review took the position that 'courses should be competency based, recognized by industry, accredited, modular and presented flexibly...'. It also stated that there should be exclusion of 'personal development programs unless they (were) part of an integrated program approach' ie the wider case management process (Gonsci, 1999: 5). Yet, if duty of care is to be taken seriously it must include healthy relaxation and the nurturing of prisoners' minds, as well as the protection of their bodies and preparation for future employment. All of these concerns are intimately connected to education in prisons.

Literacy in corrective services is taught mostly by contract teachers who have little opportunity to question departmental directives, but who believe cultural and recreation courses are not only legitimate in their own right but essential for the management and well-being of inmates This contributes to the dynamic security of prisons. Such security is of course of paramount importance to any government. Apart from other serious consequences, prison unrest can cause damaging political fallout.

A study of 371 US prisons concludes, 'even after controlling for other institutional characteristics, prisons, in which a large number of the inmate population was involved in educational, vocational and prison industry programs, reported lower rates of violence against inmates and staff ', and that 'order was best promoted when prisoners were involved in meaningful programs offering opportunities for self-improvement and not just structure and 'keep busy' assignments' (McCorkle et al, 1995:325).

A report commissioned by the NSW Attorney General's Department concludes that 'prisons that provide more opportunities for inmate participation in education and vocational programs and promote self-sufficiency, generally report reduced levels of rule violation and violence (Gerber and Fritsch, 1995; McCorkle et al., 1995; Wright, 1993)' (NSW Attorney General's Department: Crime Prevention Division: Preventing Violence, 2001 p.1.).

One of the concerns of the NSW Teacher's Federation is the security of its members working in prisons. The Federation's contribution to the Education Review, as reported by Dr Gonsci, emphasised not only that education was a right but it was vital for providing skills to help cope with life inside and outside gaol (Gonsci,1999:6).

This is in line with the Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners adopted by the First United Nations Congress on the Prevention of Crime and the Treatment of Offenders in 1955, and approved by the Economic and Social Council in 1977. This resolution, while recognizing both as a right, clearly separates vocational training from education.

It states 'vocational training in useful trades shall be provided for prisoners able to profit thereby especially for young prisoners' [UNHCHR:Work 7.1 (5)]. However, education is in a separate category and states, 'Recreational and cultural activities shall be provided in all institutions for the benefit of the mental and physical health of prisoners' [UNHCHR:Education and Recreation.78] (UNHCHR, 1990:55/77).

The Council of Europe Recommendation No R (1989) 12 of the Committee of Ministers to Member States on Education in Prison is even more insistent on education as a fundamental right of prisoners. The Committee recommends that all prisoners should have access to education which helps to humanize prisons. Creative and cultural activities should be given a significant role because of their particular potential for self development and expression. Education should have no less status than work and should not financially disadvantage students. Vocational education should aim at the wider development of the individual, as well as being sensitive to trends in the labour market. (EPEA, 12001:1-2)

The intention seems to be that rather than education being subordinate to vocational demands, vocational education should be more sensitive to cultural needs.

In the realpolitik of educational funding, the United Nations General Assembly resolution that 'all prisoners shall have the right to take part in cultural activities and education aimed at the full development of the human personality' (UNHCHR, 1990: 45/11 Item 6) is often irrelevant. Governments claim a financial imperative to see inmates off social benefits and staying out of gaol.

Although education clearly has a wider value nobody would deny the value of vocational training. The NSW Vocational Education Training Plan Consultation Paper (2001:2) states that all people with recognized qualifications and skills are more likely to get and stay employed and to receive higher salaries. Other factors can impact on employment of ex-prisoners but by and large increased education and particularly literacy would clearly improve their chances also.

The research carried out by the Texas Criminal Justice Policy Council in June 2000 by Martinez and Eisenberg, (2000: 1-30) on the impact of educational achievement on post-release employment which tracked the prison education experience of 32,020 inmates who were released from prison in fiscal years 1997 and 1998 suggest that money is best spent on the literate in terms of future employment. This was referred to as 'best bang for buck'. It also found that Anglos, males and older inmates had the highest wages of those employed in the year after release. By this reasoning more money should be spent on Anglos, males and older inmates as these seem to already have the best chances of improving their situations. Another way of looking at the statistics is that there is a moral imperative to redress the poor opportunities of those ex-inmates least likely to be employed which would include women, and most particularly indigenous women whose job prospects would be even worse than indigenous men, bad as those are.

A position paper prepared in 1998 by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' Training Advisory Council on the development of a National Vocation Education and Training Strategy for Adult Correctional Facilities and Juvenile Justice Centres in Australia quotes that 82% of Indigenous inmates, often repeat offenders, were unemployed at the time of arrest, while fifty-one percent of Indigenous prisoners have only primary or no formal education (p. 18).

The ATSIPTAC paper stresses that Indigenous inmates should be given better advice about the courses and types of employment associated with them (p. 29). In NSW prisons attendance at classes by inmates is usually voluntary. I have observed the same Indigenous inmates who avoid computers and English classes as 'white fella business' are happy to use brushes, canvas and acrylic paints. Not only do they enjoy the activity of painting they can derive money from it.

It is clear that linking education with Indigenous culture can be achieved without diminution of formal education. The Coorong Tongala course delivered by AEVTI is one way that basic skills can be made relevant to Aboriginal inmates. Other courses are available through TAFE for Indigenous students. Having acquired confidence through special programs and the habits of formal learning Indigenous students can appreciate more tenuous links between their cultures and the contemporary workplace.

For instance making the link between digital graphic technology and the dots of traditional aboriginal painting led one Koori inmate at the Long Bay ITC Unit to become proficient in creative computer graphics. Indigenous young people can be persuaded that a mastery of English can help them express emotions common to all young people with as much fluency as their ancestors may have expressed themselves in any of a host of Indigenous languages now lost to us.

This brings me to my second four letter word. I was asked to take over a contract to teach a Koori computer class. When I started towards the end of the contract there were no students. The highly committed Koori delegate shepherded some clearly unwilling students into the class. One well-spoken young man sat sulkily at the computer saying he didn't know what to do. I showed him basic word processing skills and suggested he write a letter. He wrote grudgingly 'Dear Melissa'. I came back to him and he said he was 'stuck for further words'. I suggested he write something about Melissa because 'people always like to read something about themselves'. He wrote, 'Dear Melissa. You are a cunt!'

This student was not being provocative. He was writing how he felt. Probing showed that Melissa, who lived in the outer metropolitan west, had not visited him lately in his outer metropolitan east prison. Together we created a very different letter which would have brought Melissa running. It worried me that I might be teaching him manipulative instead of abusive English, but at least now he knew the difference. Many Indigenous inmates find letter writing, poetry or songwriting help them express feelings of distress over the difficulty of straddling cultures while others understand the value of practical and critical writing in the contemporary world.

Bettina Arndt in an article entitled 'English as the Key to Progress' in the Sydney Morning Herald interviewed Associate Professor Martin Nakata of the University of South Australia. He is the first Torres Strait Islander to be awarded a PhD. She writes that Nakata while 'fully supporting the preservation of Indigenous language and tradition blames 'white liberals' for telling him his culture must be preserved at all costs'. She quotes him as saying 'They (white liberals) say, 'You don't understand the dangers of assimilation. I say, 'You don't understand the dangers of poverty or the frustrations of exclusion' (Arndt, 26.4.01:11).

The level of literacy in prisons not just among indigenous prisoners, and its affect on crime and recidivism, is still a vexing academic question although literacy teachers are in no doubt that there is a problem. However, after the Australian Adult Literacy Survey allowed a comparison in Australia between prisoners and the general population Stephen Black (1999:3) challenged the notion that 'Our jails are full of people that can't read'. He quotes research by Black, Rouse and Wickert.

As the researchers would acknowledge, the research was limited with subjects chosen from only two metropolitan prisons. The illiteracy of inmates from the country, considering the itinerant work of many country families and attendant broken schooling of children, might be much higher. However the Black et al study was of 200 representative male and female prisoners. The research showed that they performed less well than the general adult population but not to the extent believed. And there was unevenness between results on certain tasks. For example, on job applications, male

prisoners (18-24) performed 44% lower, but in reading pharmaceutical dosage accurately, women prisoners (18–24) performed 21% better than the general populations (Black,1991: 5).

Familiarity with the task may be a significant factor in the results obtained particularly as Black writes that 'Wickert herself draws attention to the poor results in prose and quantitative literary tasks of moderate complexity' (p. 6). The research suggests to me two things. One that the level of literacy in the general public itself may be regrettably low and two that while Black, Rouse and Wickert have done some valuable ground work more research in this area is desperately needed. At the moment we have to resort to utilizing research from other countries.

So, while uncertainty exists over levels of prisoner literacy in NSW, where cost is paramount, research from Texas suggests funds are least well spent on the illiterate in terms of employment after release and earnings - particularly if similar results are shown from their research into recidivism. If this is indeed the main purpose of literacy in prisons then, independent longitudinal studies in NSW on post-release employment, and the factors that reduce recidivism, would better inform those gearing correctional educational policy and curriculum to that end.

To sum up this paper - the view of the NSW government, supported by Professor Gonczi's recommendations, has been that the core of education in prisons should be vocational, and education programs integrated with other programs. The United Nations, Council of Europe, NSW Teachers' Federation and certain research supports a wider view. This is that education for cultural enrichment and self improvement, *plus* vocational education, contributes to the well-being of prisoners, security of prisons, rehabilitation, and the employment of ex-prisoners.

Perhaps provision must be made both for the estimated 85 % who have not attained their School Certificate, yet are mostly capable of higher education, for the intellectually disabled, and for the small percentage of tertiary-educated inmates who often contribute in many ways to the well-being of the prison population and the safety of its officers.

Perhaps in this global world the workplace is changing too rapidly for education to be confidently focused on a narrow concept of vocational training. For instance a global war would destroy the hospitality trade overnight. International uncertainties are doing quite a good job getting rid of it already. It would be useful if a Hospitality graduate could turn his or her hand to other pursuits, say, writing cook books. There is always a market for these in peace time or war time. You get the idea?

Perhaps the emphasis in correctional centres to-day, if not in the whole community, should be for vocational training to be more flexible and cultural and not for literacy to be more basic and functional. Given sufficient funds AEVTI could ensure that vocational training and literacy could both accommodate far wider possibilities than they are able to at the present where too few teachers struggle to cater for too many needs.

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