

THRASS WORKS. NOW WHAT?

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Abstract

Education in Northern Territory Correctional services is in a unique position to improve literacy outcomes for its students and also to contribute positively to the communities from which they come.

The THRASS (Teaching Handwriting Reading and Spelling Skills) literacy method has proven to be particularly effective in establishing the core understandings of literacy with beginning students.

This paper considers how THRASS works and the features of the system that make it effective with our students.

The paper then considers:

- the barriers that prevent literacy skills from being developed into full literacy fluency**
- the need to establish partnership between the correctional service education units and communities if the potential established by THRASS is to be realized.**

For nearly three years we have tried a different approach to teaching Literacy at the Alice Springs Correctional Centre. I'm going to reflect on that experience and consider some of the issues that are now arising.

We are using the THRASS. Teaching Handwriting Reading and Spelling System. This is a proprietary, copyrighted product developed in Western Australia. Its various components must be purchased from the company.

Last year the results we appeared to be getting with THRASS attracted a considerable amount of interest. I would like to have the results of a rigorous, independent and comprehensive evaluation of THRASS in our classrooms to put in front of you today. Unfortunately I don't have it. We had negotiated with the University of South Australia, Faculty of Education to do just such a study at the Alice Springs Correctional Centre from the beginning of this year. We believed it would be financed by the Department of Education, Science and Technology, however policy changes in that department killed the project. Some major staff changes have meant that we just haven't had the time to do the evaluation that we think the method deserves. Consequently, our data at this time is mainly anecdotal.

What is THRASS and why does it seem to work so well?

As most of you probably aren't familiar with THRASS, I will briefly explain the concept and why it works so well with our students.

Our Clients

Almost all our students are aboriginal adult males. Over half are from remote communities and have very limited "western" education experience (in some cases, no prior exposure at all).

Petrol sniffing and alcohol abuse are significant contributing factors to the matters for which they have been sentenced. Many have what may be resulting permanent mental impairment. Our students must have the lowest education levels of any group in Australia.

The community indigenous languages, which are the first language of most of our students, are oral languages, so a large number of our students have little conceptual understanding of how a written language operates. This is a significantly different learning situation to working in a regular classroom or with English language acquisition with most migrant groups where the nature of what the teacher is trying to convey is understood.

If THRASS works for these students, and it does, it deserves a close appraisal.

THRASS

How it works.

English

- The alphabet. English uses 26 signs (letters) as symbols for sounds. But the language uses more sounds than this (about forty four discrete sounds, or *phonemes* to use the technical term). Some of the letters can have more than one sound. Some of the letters get combined to make a new sound.
- Because English is a mix of languages and has developed over a long period, there can be many ways of writing the symbol (letter, or group of letters) for that sound.

And that's the core problem for English learners. The complexities, permutations and combinations that have to be understood to decode or encode English when reading and writing seem endless. The number of rules, the exceptions to the rules, the number of words stretch on forever and intimidate learners.

THRASS zeroes in on this key problem for learners. It explains and sets up a relatively simple system to enable the reader to decode and code words.

- THRASS identifies the 44 phonemes we use in English.
- THRASS identifies the different graphemes we use to write each one of these phonemes.
- THRASS ties each grapheme with a key word and picture. The picture cues the student as to how to read the word and the phoneme for the particular grapheme demonstrated in that word.

With a limited number of phonemes to learn, the core information can be shown on two charts, Vowels and Consonants. These charts are the centre of the method and students learn to use them very rapidly. The charts are arranged to group each of the 44 phonemes with the various graphemes that are used to symbolize each of the phonemes.





























































Example: The phoneme represented by the letter “e” in “bed” is the same phoneme as represented by the letters “ea” in bread. The THRASS chart shows this phoneme in a block of two words, bed and bread with an appropriate picture above each word.

The learner knows that every grapheme in the block has the same phoneme. In the initial stage of learning the system, the reader will use the pictures to identify “bed” and “bread”. They rapidly learn to remember the pictures and the “e” and “ea” with the correct phoneme/grapheme association.

In the block on the THRASS charts representing the Phoneme “e” (as the letter is pronounced in the word “me”) there are five words with corresponding pictures: me, beach, tree, key, pony

The pictures enable the students to quickly learn the words and identify the different graphemes all of which represent the same phoneme (which they know because the picture has cued them as to how the grapheme will sound). The student has also learned that the grapheme “e” can have two different phonemes.

THRASS® PICTURECHART

 ant	 baby	 tape	 snail	 tray	 hair	 square	 car	 banana	 bed	 bread	 me	 beach	 tree	 key	 pony
a *	a a-e ai ay *				air are *		ar a *		e ea *		e ea ee ey y *				
 ear	 deer	 teacher	 collar	 doctor	 measure	 zebra	 garden	 fossil	 lion	 circus	 fern	 shirt	 worm	 fur	
ear eer *		er ar or ure a e i o u *								er ir or ur *					
 tin	 rocket	 tiger	 kite	 light	 fly	 frog	 swan	 nose	 boat	 note	 snow	 coin	 toy		
i e *		i i-e igh y *				o a *		o oa o-e ow *				oi oy *			
 book	 bull	 moon	 screw	 glue	 moor	 fork	 ball	 sauce	 saw	 door	 cow	 house	 bus	 glove	
oo u *		oo ew ue *			oor *	or a au aw oor *					ow ou *		u o *		

Most of our students can learn these charts and understand their use in about forty to sixty hours tuition. A few students have been much faster. Students whom we believe suffer from some form of substance abuse impairment are slower, some much slower. But even these students seem to get there. I think damage that we once thought was irreparable, can be rebuilt and that the THRASS process assists this to happen. Although their work wasn't linked to literacy, recent research from Sheree Cairney at "The Menzies School of Health" in Darwin also comes to the conclusion that abstinence from the substance of abuse and some kinds of mental activity can rebuild this type of damage.

Why we believe THRASS is especially effective with our students.

- The concept of "symbols" is central to the art and culture of these students. The core THRASS approach of teaching graphemes/phonemes as symbols representing sounds is immediately understood.
- The THRASS methodology links a limited number of key THRASS words with pictures. This is very effective with our students. Most have excellent visual skills and the picture connection rapidly builds confidence and retention.
- The THRASSWORDS technique means students have a relatively small number of key word/phonemes/graphemes to learn after which they feel that they are reading and writing. Students feel at the outset that this is achievable. Other methodologies appear open ended as though they will stretch on forever. The ability of THRASS to be able to rapidly teach the basic concepts of literacy is critical in giving students with low literacy success levels the confidence needed to take on learning literacy.
- Learning the key THRASSWORDS and phoneme/graphemes can be done with flashcards. This is an easy format for students to do in small groups themselves and increases their feeling that they can do this themselves. It is also a culturally appropriate technique for our students, further building their confidence and feeling of being "at ease" with this methodology.

Some of our success is probably due to our understanding of our students' cultural issues. We are very explicit in discussing cultural differences, the reasons for the differences and the educational implications.

Examples:

The need for students to be able to make mistakes in a classroom, if they are going to make progress, without it being a "shame job".

The role of argument in western thinking - very different from our students' perspective. We teach the need to understand and use techniques of argument in order to participate in "western" life.

This explicit teaching is done in a non-judgemental manner.

Once students have established this foundation knowledge unlocking the reading/writing process, other methodologies can be used to build vocabulary, sight recognition of words, fluency, grammar and punctuation. The students are excited because they now feel that they are reading and are eager to work on stories and texts accessing written accounts of their own culture/experience. Whole word and frameworking methodologies seem to work well at this point.

THRASS bridges the *whole word* and *phonics camps* in the eternal debate the debate on literacy methodology.

THRASS within a prison system.

One of the problems of teaching literacy in a prison is the unfortunate predilection of the legal system to start our students' sentences and release them on timelines that vary all over the place. Until courts give everyone uniformly long sentences, with blocks of students all starting and finishing at the beginning and end of school terms, we will have problems with continuity in our classrooms.

THRASS is flexible. Because that core collection of phonemes and graphemes can be learnt relatively quickly, illiterate students who aren't with us for very long can leave feeling that they are in control of the key mystery. Further, it is not too difficult to teach those basic concepts to a beginners' group with students at many different levels at the same time. The chart-mastering activities lend themselves to self directed small group work in which students can assist each other. Most other methodologies for beginning readers are much more dependent on teacher direction and therefore harder for teachers to cater for the ever-changing clients that are a fact of life in a prison setting.

As prison educators, we have one huge advantage. We can get our students into a classroom, every day of the week, enthusiastic and ready to learn. In my discussions with other providers of indigenous (and especially indigenous remote) education, I find that they all envy this advantage we have. Education in Correctional Services is uniquely able to address adult literacy issues. If improving education and Literacy is seen as a key to improving outcomes for Australia's indigenous citizens, then the prison education system must be our most underused asset.

We need a change of mind set. Think of us as a big, multi-campus boarding school with an old fashioned approach to discipline matters.

But then the problems.

As Registered Teaching Organizations, we can only teach accredited courses within our scope. None of the Certificates has

Literacy modules that are really suitable to THRASS. We can (and do) torture and twist the module outcomes around so they can be argued (with your fingers crossed) to be in line with THRASS development steps. But really, they aren't.

We need some new certificates, or perhaps some modification to modules in existing Certificates. Developing such modules, then approaching the owners of existing Certificates to get them incorporated, would be a very valuable exercise. It might be taken up by a number of Correctional Centre education units. The Institute of Aboriginal development in Alice Springs has also come to a similar conclusion based on its experience in trying to find a suitable Certificate course.

Read that as an invitation to teachers at other centres who might be interested to talk to me further.

We need to be aware of the opportunities our students will have to continue literacy development after they leave us.

We have short term and long term students. The methodology used with long-term students isn't so much of an issue as we can provide consistency of approach. Leni Shilton will be giving a paper on our experience with longer sentence prisoners.

What should be our aim with short term students, that is, those with sentences up to one year?

- If the student is virtually illiterate and there are less than three months available for us to work with them, I really don't see that there is much we can do. Probably the best thing we can do is to try to link them with another agency that can work with them after release.
- With non-impaired illiterate students, we need at least three months.
- If the student has substance abuse impairments, we need to be able to sign him up for at least six months.

In the case of the last two groups, we can realistically aim at using THRASS to achieve understanding of the basic concepts of literacy and to be able to have a measure of independent reading and writing at the end of this time. The students therefore have the tools to become truly literate. But will they?

The biggest issue leading to recidivism in the NT is the reality of life in indigenous communities. Most communities are located in places that have cultural significance to those that live there. "Western" communities, by contrast, grow out of an economic need, or opportunity that makes that place a good place to establish a town. Western cultural attachment to the site then

develops over the years. If the site ceases to have economic meaning, the town declines or may simply be abandoned.

If the community is located close to a physical feature that has tourist potential, or if it happens to have mining or some other resource, then the community has an opportunity to develop business and income independent of welfare.

If the traditional land of the community doesn't have these sort of assets, then it is going to be welfare dependent.

For literacy teaching in correctional services to impact on recidivism, we need to be very aware of the kind of reality our students will go to after they leave us and this is especially true of our shorter term students.

I suggest the following:

We need to know a lot about the communities our men will return to

Specifically, we need to know the nature and size of industries that may be close to where our students will return. With that information and in partnership with the community/employer we can train students for real jobs.

Now our THRASS program has somewhere to go. We can select the vocabulary, manuals, procedures to focus THRASS on that give real point to literacy. Further training back in the community can be designed to build on the learning that has been done with us.

If the community doesn't have job opportunities, how can our students continue to develop literacy after their release? Libraries and reading resources rarely exist outside the schools and even there they are very limited. We need statistics so we know how many do return to their communities. That's what most tell me they intend doing and it is what you would expect given the strength of their cultural attachment to their country.

What possibilities are there therefore for these students to develop the core skills they have learnt with THRASS into full literacy?

- Can we set up partnerships with schools so that our students can get tutoring positions? This might of course be restricted by the nature of the offence our student has committed.
- We could train our students to do basic tutoring roles using THRASS.
- Positions like this would let our students into environments with access to books and encourage our students to continue their own literacy development.
- We could train students to be tutors within their own families. This is likely to be doubly effective if the community school is using THRASS.

I think that most of us believe that the real problems for our clients are the realities of life in the communities. If we accept this, then

any real reduction in recidivism will require that we work in partnership with communities. There is no one formula, one course, one set of skills that we can teach our students that is going to be the answer. We need to tailor what we do to the realities and opportunities in the individual communities to which our students will return.

Establishing partnerships is not going to be easy. Jan Hill is going to give a paper later at this conference discussing the complexities of forming partnerships with communities. It is clear that the present levels of education staffing don't allow staff to do this work.

The prison needs communication with the communities. Sentence planning and the elders visiting program are taking us down this track. But we are going to need more, some sort of liaison unit. At Alice Springs Correctional Centre we are making contacts with groups who provide educational programs to communities. The intention is for us to have a contact point at a community. When one of our students is returning home, we would advise both the student and the contact so that the two could arrange to meet. Hopefully the contact will be able to organize further classes, access to resources for the student.

We think that seeding a core of interested students in a community rather than having returning students feel that their reading isolates them, will help give the student confidence to continue. Additionally, the community is best placed to define just what skills /vocabulary are most needed in that community.

Establishing and maintaining a unit that interfaces between prison education and the communities is going to be an expensive exercise. In the long run it however, it would be very cheap.