

## **'A Centre for Education, Not just an Education Centre'**

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### **ABSTRACT**

At the Dame Phyllis Frost Centre, Victoria's (Australia) Maximum Security Women's Prison, women not only gain knowledge that may improve their basic skills and increase their employability, but just as importantly, learn to trust their own abilities to problem solve, enhance their self esteem and are empowered with a belief that change is possible.

Involvement in Kangan Batman TAFE's educational programs allows women to see themselves and life differently. Education is for life and whilst our courses allow women to attain educational achievements, I believe that it is the social and emotional context in which these programs are delivered that makes it possible for women to maximise their life chances for the future. The journey that women embark upon as Kangan Batman Tafe students is one that encompasses pathways to empowerment and self-reliance by recognising and responding to their individual needs.

Education gives women prisoners the opportunity to become more valued contributors to society and their families as well as raising their own self-esteem whilst incarcerated. The education centre staff at the Dame Phyllis Frost Centre provides hope, support and encouragement to women prisoners throughout this process.

This paper will discuss models of innovative teaching practice, and explore how it is possible to achieve such outcomes by leadership, patience, persistence and caring, set against the historical backdrop of Victoria's first privatised prison.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Where I work the sounds emanating from classrooms are often full of laughter, vibrant chatter and the ever-present public address system. The Dame Phyllis Frost Centre is Victoria's maximum security women's prison. The Kangan Batman Tafe Deer Park Campus is a centre for the women - a place where they are greeted as women, not prisoners, where their opinions, comments, advice and criticism are respected and valued. Women walk past its door on their way to medical, work, visits etc. At the entrance is a painting by an ex-prisoner welcoming, colourful, and embracing.

For the past 16 years I have had the privilege of working with women offenders/prisoners. My journey as a prison educator started in 1989, the year that TAFE (Technical and Further Education) became the vocational training system for Victorian prisons, taking over the role of corrections education provision from the Primary Schools Division. I started by teaching computers but very quickly learned that these women and their learning styles, abilities, fears and insecurities were not that different from the women I had taught in other adult learning centres.

## **HISTORY**

My journey has taken me from the public corrections sector, across to the private sector and back into the public sector. In 1996, Fairlea Women's Prison closed and the Metropolitan Women's Correctional Centre opened – Victoria's first private prison. Four years later, the operation of the MWCC went back to the State Government and in 2001 the prison was dedicated to the late Dame Phyllis Frost – a passionate advocate and champion for the rights of prisoners, especially the rights of incarcerated mothers and their children.

## **KANGAN BATMAN TAFE**

So, who is Kangan Batman Tafe? Kangan Batman TAFE was established by the 1997 merger of John Batman Institute of TAFE and Kangan Institute of TAFE (formerly Broadmeadows College of TAFE). In 1995 the college's name was changed to Kangan Institute of TAFE, in honour of Myer Kangan OBE AO, the man credited as the founder of Australia's TAFE system. I would like here, to acknowledge Kangan Batman Tafe's ongoing commitment to social justice issues.

Kangan Batman Tafe has been the education provider within the metropolitan women's area since 1990. All courses conducted are nationally accredited, giving women the opportunity to gain qualifications and educational achievements that may lead to employment or to complete their training upon release.

Our programs include:

- Literacy & Numeracy
- English as a Second Language
- Koorie Education
- Woodwork
- Computers
- Horticulture
- Asset Maintenance
- Food & Hygiene/Coffee Making

In the delivery of our programs, we try and adapt our courses to the changing needs of the women, within the limitations of our budget.

### **THE INDIVIDUAL**

Education at Deer Park is more than just training. I have often discussed within our Corrections Education Management team, how the approach to women is different to that of men. The women seem to present a need to want to be known and understood as an individual before they are prepared to engage in learning. At the Dame Phyllis Frost Centre, the Kangan Batman Tafe staff recognise that the women we are entrusted to teach have stories to tell. Each woman is treated as an individual and given the space to tell her story and give us insights into her needs and abilities. They are given the space to open up. Programs are tailored to their needs. We are willing to adapt, alter and be as flexible as possible in our modes of delivery, timetabling, and the courses offered, in order that our students are given every possible opportunity to succeed. We not only strive to give the women the opportunity to make educated choices in their futures, but also to entrust them with a sense of hope or individual purpose during their time within the prison system.

How do we do this? Each woman is given the opportunity to speak to myself, or a staff member as an individual where we discuss her past educational experiences, work history and future aspirations. It is in this empathetic environment that a woman is given the chance to interact as a person, not a prisoner - where trust and understanding are paramount.

We recognise that the majority of the women we meet have experienced trauma in the form of drug addiction, domestic violence, sexual abuse and mental health problems etc. To engage women in study with their low self-esteem, guilt and sense of failure to themselves and their families is challenging. It is imperative that the learning environment offers them the necessary

emotional support and encouragement to take the first steps to a different life within and beyond the prison walls.

Women are encouraged to participate in learning without fear of failure, condemnation or unrealistic expectations. We acknowledge that the learning is just as important as any results gained. Students are enrolled in modules or subjects rather than whole courses. In this way they can attain a tangible qualification in a very short time - for some the first successful achievement ever.

We do not work in isolation within the prison. We are part of a team where education is integrated into the holistic offender management strategy within the DPFC and the wider women's region.

### **STAFF ATTITUDES**

It must be emphasised that the role staff play in creating a positive learning environment is crucial. Patience and tolerance and a willingness to listen and respond to our student's needs are the key ingredients to ensuring that the women don't give up! Allowing the women some autonomy in their learning is also a critical feature. Prisons by their very nature do not give women choices, so where possible in our curricula, we encourage the women to make decisions – eg in woodwork, women are encouraged to design their own projects such as a doll's house or jewellery box; in horticulture – to create a vegetable garden/flower bed of their choice.

The selection and recruitment of the appropriate staff is crucially important within our area. In particular, those male staff who come into the prison to work, carry the additional responsibility of being perhaps the first positive non-authoritative male role model the women may have encountered.

Equally as important as the recruitment of staff, is their ongoing professional development. We need our staff to be well informed, enthusiastic and passionate about their roles, as everyday at the DPFC is a first new day at school for someone!

### **INNOVATIVE TEACHING PRACTICES**

As part of our Institute's professional development activities, I along with 15 colleagues participated in 2004 in a professional development program known as 'The Arc' (Action, Reflection, Collaboration). The ARC focussed on the 'The Art and Craft of Teaching' and operated in accordance with the principles of research orientated reflective practice. Through the ARC I was introduced to the Habits of Mind.

In brief, the Habits of Mind described by Art Costa and Bena Kallick (noted educators) are "characteristics of what intelligent people do when they are confronted with problems, the resolutions to which are not immediately apparent." (Costa, 2000, p. 21)

The 16 Habits of Mind as described by Costa and Kallick :  
Persisting; Managing Impulsivity; Listening with Understanding and Empathy; Thinking Flexibly; Thinking about Thinking; Striving for Accuracy; Questioning and Posing Problems; Applying Past Knowledge to New Situations; Thinking and Communicating with Clarity and Precision; Gathering Data Through All Senses; Creating, Imagining and Innovating; Responding with Wonderment and Awe.

Through our approach to education, by incorporating the philosophy of the Habits of Mind, and within the broader offender management framework, I believe that we are enabling women offenders to make better informed choices for life.

#### **FROM A STUDENT'S PERSPECTIVE...**

In conclusion the following passage from one of our students, exemplifies why the Education Centre at the DPFC is a Centre For Education. Her words I believe, give us insights into 'Inside Learning for Outside Living'.

Learning is so much more than education. Education in a prison environment teaches us to become the people we could've been and promotes positive growth into the people we will become.

We learn to forgive the abuse of the past, accept the errors of our ways and begin to embrace a new future. We rebuild, we educate ourselves, we learn.

Slowly, but surely, our words become sentences, sentences become paragraphs, paragraphs, become chapters, and chapters become stories – our stories, stories that can in turn change lives.

The Education Centre at the DPFC is a 'Rebuilding Centre" a teaching, nurturing, listening holistic living creature. We all breathe life into it every day and it cares for us until we leave. The educators within the centre recognise that the human spirit needs to accomplish, to achieve, to triumph to be happy and successful. Through them we learn that our individual happiness comes as a result of one's own efforts and our futures are no longer vague dreams. Here, they place emphasis on our minds and our states of mind. In prison, the mind has its own place and in itself, can make

Heaven of Hell, and a Hell of Heaven. We are guided and inspired at a place between the two..

Through the Education Centre at the Dame Phyllis Frost Centre, I found me. When I step into the building I step into an old and familiar life that I knew on the outside, where women were treated and respected as women. Lessons in life and programs in people skills are not timetabled but they exist in every woman, in every classroom on every day.

Our Education Centre provides us with the three grand essentials to success and rehabilitation - something to do – something to love - and something to hope for.

“Some cannot sing, but the orchard is full of birds and we can all listen”. “Kerry”

