



# Understanding Prisoner Learning

Complexities and Barriers



# What is Prisoner Learning?

- ◆ Learning is at the root of personal change and growth.
- ◆ Learning which occurs within prisoners as they experience the social and physical environment of prison



# Informal Learning

- ◆ Foley (1995) defines informal learning as that which occurs when people consciously try to learn through their experiences.
- ◆ Formal learning is “approved”, controlled by prison administration – affecting choice, learning climate and learner motivation
- ◆ Learning outcomes have moral, cultural and social consequences



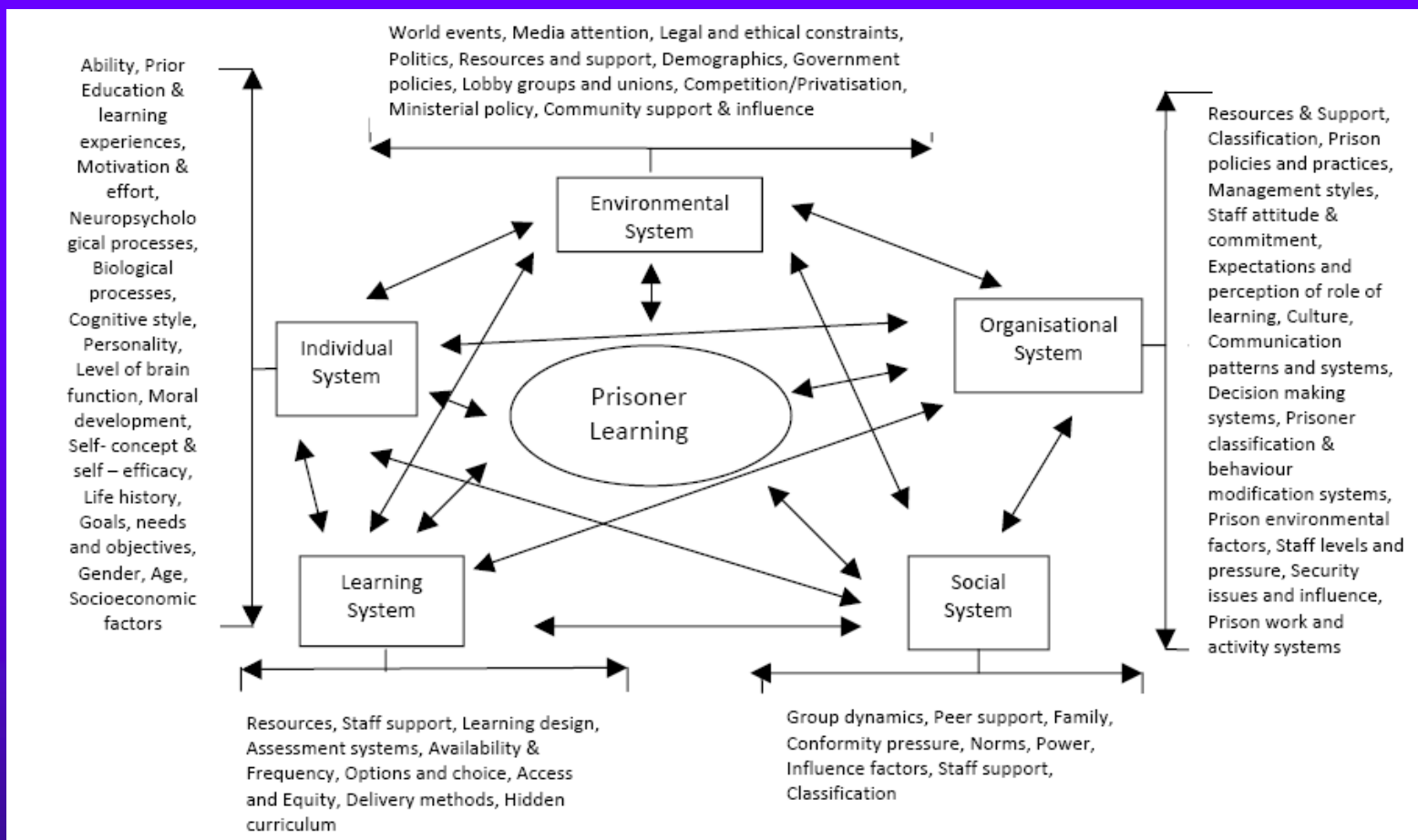
# Social Relationships

- ◆ The social environment shapes what is learned and why the learning is important.
- ◆ Social relations reveal the hidden curriculum
- ◆ Social learning theory and crime



# Model of Prisoner Learning

- ◆ Environmental System – politics, media, government policies, community influence
- ◆ Individual System – cognitive style, personality, prior education, age, gender
- ◆ Learning System – resources, staff support, learning design, options and choice
- ◆ Social System – group dynamics, peer support, conformity pressure
- ◆ Organisational System – prison policies and practice, culture, staff attitude and commitment



**Figure 2.2 Model of Prisoner Learning**  
 (Adapted from Cooksey & Gates, 1995)



# Barriers to Learning

- ◆ Situational
- ◆ Dispositional
- ◆ Institutional



# Present Study

- ◆ 14 staff, 1 current prisoner, 3 ex-prisoners
- ◆ Regional Australian prison



# Dispositional Barriers

- ◆ Internal to the learner
- ◆ Psychosocial – values and beliefs
- ◆ Informational – gaining access to knowledge and information



# Prior to Incarceration

- ◆ Disadvantaged childhoods
- ◆ Early traumas resulting in a lack of cognitive development
- ◆ Previous educational failure
- ◆ Low levels of formal education
- ◆ Generational poverty
- ◆ Family issues
- ◆ Drug and alcohol abuse
- ◆ Mental illness and acquired brain injury



# Lived Experience of Prison

- ◆ Stress of prison life
- ◆ Loss, separation and hopelessness
- ◆ Loss of privacy, rights and autonomy
- ◆ Reinforcement of their beliefs about authority and the „system“
- ◆ Lack of access or difficulty accessing services
- ◆ Peer influence/pressure
- ◆ What to do? Influence of parole



# Situational Barriers

- ◆ External to the learner and often beyond their control
- ◆ Control and approval of learning
- ◆ Lack of remuneration
- ◆ Sentence length
- ◆ Boredom, prison culture and consistency in management



# Institutional Barriers

- ◆ The practices and procedures of the institution that prevent or discourage participation
- ◆ Reliant on the workings of the system, lack of personal power
- ◆ Access to health care and leading a healthy lifestyle
- ◆ Need for staff to be involved and to be trained, staff turnover and recruitment
- ◆ Internal processes, systems and communication
- ◆ Prison design and architecture
- ◆ Security issues
- ◆ Staff attitude and culture



# Institutional Barriers

- ◆ Access to learning resources
- ◆ Access to recreational and sport resources
- ◆ Access to library services
- ◆ Access to technology and ICT
- ◆ Broken promises



# Conclusion

- ◆ Learning is valued by prisoners
- ◆ By working to understand and break down these barriers we can create a better future