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Use of Appropriate Learning Techniques for Teaching Adult Residents in a Correctional Setting

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University of Missouri-St. Louis
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USE OF APPROPRIATE LEARNING TECHNIQUES FOR
TEACHING ADULT RESIDENTS IN A CORRECTIONAL SETTING

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ABSTRACT:

There is a high degree of educational need in a correctional setting. In one state, 60% of the total number incarcerated are unable to read and write. The increase of that population is of some concern. In 1925, state and federal prisons held 79 people per one-hundred thousand inmates, and in 1985 the number had risen to 201 per one-hundred thousand.

If adult education has as one of its goals a contribution toward enhancing the quality of individual lives and society in general, then the way in which correctional residents are taught is important.

During the 1989 winter semester, a three semester hour credit course was conducted with residents of The Missouri Eastern Correctional Center to train tutors of adult literacy. Participatory adult training techniques were employed extensively. The students were nearing the completion of a Bachelor's Degree program provided by the University of Missouri-St. Louis. The intent of the penal system in providing this course was that the resident/students could give back something to the society that had provided the opportunity to improve their lives.

Further research is needed to help guide future direction of this course within the degree program. Questions could include: Should this approach be extended to other courses in the program? Will this teaching/learning approach help residents overcome recidivism now and when they are released?

USE OF APPROPRIATE LEARNING TECHNIQUES FOR TEACHING ADULT RESIDENTS IN A CORRECTIONAL SETTING

Description of the concern

There is a high degree of educational need in a correctional setting. In one state, 60% of the total number in the correctional setting are unable to read and write. The ratio would not be very different in other states. The increase of that population is of some concern. In 1925, state and federal prisons held 79 people per one-hundred thousand population, and in 1985 the number rose to 201 per one-hundred thousand.

If rehabilitation and reduction of recidivism (repeat offenders) are goals of incarceration, then appropriate learning techniques for teaching adult residents in a correctional setting is one important concern of practitioners. Some states have recently discussed the possibility of ruling that no resident shall be released without knowing how to read and write. Other proposals for accomplishing this suggest that added to job training might be a gradual increase in personal responsibilities coupled with institutional monitoring of social behavior through progressively less security consciousness.

Adult education programs in correctional settings are on the increase. They range all the way from general adult educational offerings to Associates in Arts, and Bachelor of Arts, or Bachelor of Science Degrees, as well as training for becoming literacy tutors or for new jobs. With this increase, an important question needs to be raised, and that is, whether the theories we adult educators espouse regarding learner participation and involvement in determining the direction of his or her educational program is applicable with this type of student and in this particular setting.

Importance of the concern

If adult education has as one of its goals, the enhancement of the quality of an individual's life as well as the quality of life in society in general, then the way in which correctional residents are taught, (the theory which guides practice as well as the practice itself) is an important contributor to its accomplishment and accompanying results.

Axandorb (1989), a prison inmate, has suggested that prisons damage people. The innate characteristics of punishment are such as to cause pain, a sense of loss and deprivation. The prison subculture is a by-product or informal reaction to punishment and serves as a coping mechanism to both passively and actively offset the punitive measures of pain, loss and deprivation. The inmate subculture is a product of institutionalization itself, so that the institutionalization as a means of rehabilitation is self-defeating from the outset.

Furthermore, he suggests that over time, inmates become more and more responsive to the normative demands of this subculture and succumb more and more to the adaptation of anti-social roles as a consequence. Whatever rehabilitation there is occurs in spite of the system. He states, "The chilling fact is that nine out of ten persons incarcerated will sooner or later be returned

to the community and many to the same community in which they committed their crime."

One other prison inmate states that instructors must accept the adult, (inmate) learner as a unique individual with problems, feelings, and the capacity to change. Also, that the teacher should not be judgmental about persons who are poor, or rich, have past records, or their appearance and moral values.

Adult educators who have witnessed much of what inmate Mr. Axandorb has expressed, would not find difficulty being sold on the importance of the concern. When that nine out of ten get out, it could be hoped that adult educators have done their bit for society and families, and especially done it well.

New approaches tried

During the 1989 winter semester of University of Missouri-St. Louis, a three semester hour undergraduate course for credit entitled: Teaching the Adult Learner Basic Literacy Skills, was conducted for residents of Missouri Eastern Correctional Center, (MECC) Pacific, Missouri. The objective of the course was to train individuals to tutor others in literacy, focusing on the adult as a learner. Seven thousand two hundred of the state's 12,000 prison population or 60% is functionally illiterate if not completely unable to read or write. It was felt that the twenty-three people enrolled in the course the first time it was offered could help make an impact on this situation as a result of their participation. Participatory adult learning techniques were employed extensively, including the use of self-directed learning, and learning contracts. The course met weekly on Saturday morning for two and one half hours over a period of sixteen weeks. The authors were instructors of the course.

All of the participants were nearing the completion of a Bachelor's Degree program in sociology provided by the University of Missouri St. Louis. The adult learning course was offered as an elective in their degree program, which was the first four year degree program ever offered in this state of Missouri for inmates of a penal facility.

The intention of the State Department of Corrections in providing the course cited above, was to allow the residents who became participants a chance to give something of value back to the society which had provided the opportunity for them to achieve a college education. This four year degree program was made possible through federal grant funds and state correctional education budget allocations. The participants would, through the tutor training course be able to help other residents learn to read and write, thus enabling them to have a better self image, and eventually become responsible citizens.

The students were particularly keen on continuing the pedagogical training methods with which they were accustomed. The men raised a hue and cry when told they were going to do their studies in a different manner. However, after two sessions they began to see the value of the method and began responding positively to the adult education approach.

It was with amazing rapidity that the students picked up the adult learning concepts. For the most part, they did much more quickly than their graduate school counterparts on the campus. Because their own learning rested on their efforts and not the instructor, their own feeling of responsibility was enhanced. Insights among the men were increased, and personal motivation and investment in the outcome of their learning was multiplied.

On an evaluation scale range from twenty to one hundred points, following are the items evaluated and their scores given by the participants in the class:

<u>ITEM</u>	<u>SCORE</u>
1. Instructors respect learners' capacity for self-directed learning.	100.00
2. Instructors value learners' experience as resource for learning.	97.33
3. Instructors take risks to experiment with new teaching approaches.	94.67
4. Instructors show skill and commitment in learner involvement.	97.33
5. Instructors establish warm, empathic relationship with learners.	97.33
6. Instructors see world of learning through learners' eyes and are good listeners.	92.00
7. Instructors help learners assume responsibility for own learning.	97.33
8. Instructors provide motivational learning climate.	89.33
9. Instructors show concerns for learner needs and aspirations.	97.33
10. Instructors demonstrate flexibility in content, use of techniques, and learning process speed.	94.67
11. Course learning objectives are clear.	84.00
12. Course program objectives are clear.	86.67
13. Course content organized relevant to learned needs and manageable for learning.	86.67
14. Amount of coursework appropriate for credit received.	<u>92.00</u>
AVERAGE	93.40

When asked how they could use what they had learned in the course, most answered that they would help others become more assured in accomplishing their own goals.

Following are some statements about the impact of this experience upon individual learners as a person:

- Now I think there are very few things I could not learn;
- We are each individuals and have separate learning talents;
- The performance of goals was exceptional and the total learning experience priceless;
- I've collected and increased my confidence tremendously in dealing with adult learners;

- It helped me look at and coordinate my inner and outer self;
- I like the greater degree of responsibility for my own learning accomplishments this course gave me; and,
- I seemed to have learned more and retained more because I picked out learning objectives that were of interest to me.

Relating to conference theme of research-to-practice linkage

This is only one experience set within a larger context. Further research needs to be conducted to help guide the future direction of this course within the degree program. The opportunity has been offered to teach the course again. Some questions for further inquiry would include: Can or should this approach be extended to other courses in the degree program? Will this teaching/learning approach help residents to overcome recidivism (returning to old criminal habits)? What pitfalls need to be avoided in using this approach? Could some other avenues be devised and used that could be even more beneficial? What are the criteria which should be applied in comparing the result(s) of using this approach and other more traditional college teaching methods?

Opinions and conjectures regarding this concern

It is the authors' contention that the normal pedagogical style of instruction lends itself sometimes to just plain memorization, with the resultant lack of deep learning that usually follows. Cheating is sometimes bred by this traditional method at least in the world outside the prison. Creating more anti-social behavior than exists is not the sought after goal.

Observing the inmates demonstrated an improved self-image, a better understanding of individual responsibility, and a heightened determination to increase their learnings for themselves, instead of trying to prove how smart they were in order to impress the other students and the instructors.

A follow up program is essential for a comparative study. As these inmate/students leave their controlled environment for outside residence, monitoring their activities and observing some results pro or con within a short time frame of five years from release date, may begin to indicate their life direction. Such a small group does not furnish enough data for a complete study, but based on subsequent releases of more students taking similar programs, distinct patterns could emerge.

Harold Cushman, MECC education supervisor who indicated in 1986 that the day of the first graduation ceremony of this program would be the ultimate for him, asserted at the first graduation ceremony in 1989 that the program is fantastic and perhaps the greatest accomplishment of his professional career. He said "Higher educational opportunities can give an inmate much more than a degree. We have so many people that are in here because they have no mechanism for evaluation, they acted on emotion or instinct or in the heat of the moment. Education can turn that around. Whether they use their degree to earn a living or not, what we are doing is educating them to the point that they can evaluate themselves" (Dillon, 1987). Lloyd Hargens, participant in the adult learner course, and valedictorian of the 1989

graduating class said, "If rehabilitation is a realistic goal, education will be its touchstone." (Fitzmaurice, 1989)

If this be the case, then it could move one to dedicate to the 1989 graduating class of MECC, the poetic words of PATHLIGHT:

As Evening Shadows fall across the towers
pointing fingers through the yard,
time seems to bend in strange ways.

Dinner, rocky sleep, then eat some grits
whole thing starts again.

Morning sun shadows fall across the towers,
pointing fingers out side the wire,
giving hints of hope where hope is thin.

Library on the hill, are you where my hope is?
are you, repository of knowledge my last chance?
With your books clutched to my chest, please help me.
Enter my mind and guide me out and away.
Please give me a Life somewhere else.

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