



Challenges in deploying educational technologies for tertiary education in the carceral setting: Reconnecting or connecting?

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With the COVID-19 pandemic, educators across the globe pivoted to using educational technologies such as lecture capture, video conferencing and discussion boards to reconnect with learners. For incarcerated learners, this was not an option due to the dearth of technologies and internet access in most correctional jurisdictions. As many tertiary education institutions leverage the affordances of digital technologies to increase access to learning and reconnect with learners, they are inadvertently excluding a large cohort, incarcerated learners. Prisons are typically technology poor and prohibit access, at least to some degree, to the internet. This paper examines some of the common challenges to the deployment of educational technology in prisons to reconnect with incarcerated learners. They are classified as physical challenges, operational challenges, attitudinal challenges, and human challenges.

Keywords: Prison education; carceral education; eLearning; dynamic security

Introduction

Prisons across Australasia deploy tertiary education for people in prison. This usually takes the form of vocational education, pre-tertiary programs and higher education (Barrow et al., 2019). Prisoner engagement with education serves many purposes. Among them, it keeps prisoners occupied and out of trouble (Rochealeau, 2013); it can help create vocational pathways that lead to employment on release (Rosmilawati & Darmawan, 2020); promotes prosocial behaviour among participants (Farley & Pike, 2016); and in and of itself it reduces recidivism rates (Davis et al., 2013). During the prison lockdowns precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic, prisoners were only able to leave their cells for an hour or two at a time, and education providers and volunteers were prohibited from visiting prison sites. This happened in Aotearoa New Zealand and most, if not all, Australian jurisdictions. At the time of writing, educators are still not allowed on prison sites and educational programming has not resumed in many places. While educators 'outside the wire' pivoted to use educational technologies to connect with learners, these options were not available for incarcerated learners (Bradley & Davies, 2021). In Aotearoa New Zealand, Ara Poutama Aotearoa Department of Corrections did consider the rapid deployment of tablet technologies for prisoners, but ultimately it was decided it would be detrimental to rush such an initiative without due consideration to content strategies and a rigorous hardware options analysis. Instead, they opted for the delivery of hard copy activity booklets and a database of resources that could be readily printed off by corrections officers. This strategy has been maintained over the two and a half years of the pandemic.

Especially in the wake of the pandemic, the tertiary landscape is moving away from hard copy materials and face-to-face delivery, to one that is leveraging the affordances of educational technologies (Bradley & Davies, 2021). Even face-to-face programs usually incorporate some online and digitally enabled aspects in a blended learning model, usually requiring access to a learning management system and the internet. Broadly speaking, prisons do not provide access to the internet for learners or access to contemporary digital technologies making it very difficult for prisoners to meaningfully participate in digital tertiary education (Willems, Farley & Garner, 2018), particularly during prison lockdowns precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Video conferencing technologies were introduced to facilitate virtual visits from whānau/family members (Dallaire, et al., 2021), and it was initially envisaged that these could be leveraged for educational purposes, but the heightened demand for family contact, staff availability and site logistics made this option untenable.

Educational technology in the carceral setting

Despite the many challenges, educational technologies have been unevenly deployed across many jurisdictions. The Making the Connection project led by the University of Southern Queensland (UniSQ) provided access to digital higher education through providing servers networked into existing computer labs and laptops that could be used in-cell, preloaded with course materials, and requiring no access to the internet (Farley et al., 2015). The processes and technologies have since been incorporated into standard operating procedures for UniSQ. The Otago Corrections facility in Aotearoa New Zealand has been using virtual reality to teach literacy and numeracy to people in prison. Again, this system required no internet (McLauchlan & Farley, 2019). Across the US and Europe, and more recently in New South Wales, digital tablets have been supplied to prisoners to provide access to entertainment, administrative functions such as appointment booking, and education. These technologies are often supplied free of charge to prisons with the technology companies charging prisoners for access to materials and resources (McKay, 2022). Every prison in Aotearoa New Zealand has Secure Online Learning suites that offer learners access to a limited range of whitelisted websites focused on drivers licensing and literacy and numeracy (McLauchlan & Farley, 2019).

Challenges to the deployment of educational technologies in the carceral space

There is wide agreement that education is beneficial to prisoners and that educational technologies could enhance the delivery of that education. It is also acknowledged that the biggest impacts come with the delivery of tertiary education (Davis, et al, 2013). Given the impacts of COVID-19, it has become necessary to use technologies to connect with learners who have often been restricted to learning from home (Christopoulos & Sprangers, 2021). Ideally, these same technologies would also be deployed with incarcerated learners, however, several challenges remain. Education in prisons is almost always facilitated by face-to-face delivery by external providers or by educators directly employed by correctional jurisdictions. The options for reconnection to learners via educational technologies for prison educators simply do not exist.

Physical challenges

Prisons are designed to be impenetrable fortresses made of concrete and cinder blocks. Many prisons across Australia and New Zealand date back to Victorian times when less thought was given to prison design and the movement of prisoners around a facility. Physical barriers to the outside are made obvious (Engstrom & Van Ginneken, 2022). Though this serves the security demands of a prison well, it is less amenable to the post-build installation of wi-fi to accommodate learner needs. Most modern builds are installing the capacity for either wired or wireless internet, even if the purpose of that has not been determined. Even where attempts have been made to create connectivity, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, access to prisons by outside contractors has been prohibited. This leaves prisons unable to become 'connected' in a timely or efficient manner to facilitate learning.

Operational challenges

The first purpose of a prison is to keep the community safe and to contain those who are perceived to threaten that safety. People are imprisoned and allocated to a security classification and an individual may move up and down through those classifications, dependent on their behaviour and participation in rehabilitative programs (Tahamont & Frisch, 2019). People from different security classifications are not allowed to meet. In Aotearoa New Zealand, this is further complicated by the necessity to keep members of different gangs apart (Breetzke, et al., 2021). This results in a prison with numerous cohorts. For example, Christchurch Men's Prison has 28 different cohorts that can never meet. This makes movement around the facility difficult; these people cannot meet, even in a walkway or classroom. Moving learner cohorts to classrooms and computer labs becomes a significant challenge, resulting in no or little time in those spaces (Farley & Doyle, 2014). Isolation requirements exacerbate these issues with prisoners being shuffled around to accommodate new prisoners or those exhibiting symptoms suggestive of COVID-19 (Ayhan, et al., 2022).

Corrections officers are needed to accompany learners to computer labs, supervise the use of technologies by prisoners, and sometimes to act as the intermediary between learners and prison education staff. The COVID-19 pandemic has taken a significant toll on frontline corrections officers (Smith, 2022). They often have to wear full PPE all day, they have to deal with prisoners frustrated at not being able to see visitors or engage with programs, and they have to cover for colleagues who have COVID-19 or are too immunocompromised to work

in the prison during the pandemic. This has resulted in a large number of corrections officers leaving due to workload and conditions or leaving because they are close to retirement. Across the world, prisons are reporting being understaffed. In these situations, activities are prioritised and education is usually not near the list of those priorities (Bradley & Davies, 2021).

Attitudinal challenges

'Security' is often bandied about as the reason that educational technologies and internet cannot be introduced (Farley & Doyle, 2014). Unrestricted access to the internet is seen as posing too great a risk to the community and, to victims of crime. Prisoners would be able to monitor victims or potential victims through social media channels, view prohibited content related to their crime, or run illegal businesses. Though there are ways to mitigate risk, for example through whitelisting websites, a blanket ban often persists. Though the public is kept safe by this prohibition, it also excludes access to the websites and learning management systems of tertiary education institutions. Most of these sites are not suitable for whitelisting as they often incorporate third party links and resources, such as journals and rely on dynamic IP addresses (Taugerbeck, 2019). Even when viable solutions are offered, these are often disregarded by those with an incomplete understanding of the technologies and 'security' is usually the excuse proffered.

In most jurisdictions, the relationship between prison education teams and correctional officers is fraught. Education teams are seen to be 'soft' on prisoners. Corrections officers perceive that prisoners receive concessions and opportunities that they, or people on the outside are not entitled to (Novek, 2019). This is frequently a misconception. Prisoners bear the costs of tertiary education and are subject to the same rules as learners outside of prison. Some of this resentment stems from corrections officers, outside of Scandinavian jurisdictions, needing very little education for their role. They become uncomfortable if a prisoner is studying for a higher qualification than the one they hold. This is particularly an issue with higher education incarcerated learners. In addition, corrections officers may poorly understand educational technologies and perceive them as a risk to security (Kerr & Willis, 2018). A personal example illustrates this; I visited an Australian prison to meet with corrections officers about a technology project I was leading in their prison. One of the main concerns I had to address was their perception that phone calls could be made from a scientific calculator. Obviously, this is not true but was a widely held belief in that prison at that time.

Human challenges

Access to technology is not enough to ensure access to learning. Both education tutors and learners in the carceral settings need to understand how the technologies can be used and why they would be used. The lack of digital literacies of both staff and learners have slowed down my own technology projects in the carceral space. People in prison are frequently from disadvantaged communities and have already experienced the digital divide, even before their incarceration. They come to prison without the skills and knowledge they need to fully participate in the digital world (Smith, Willems & Farley, 2021). This is exacerbated by the dearth of contemporary technologies in prison. These people are not given the opportunity to build their digital literacies while incarcerated. This undermines the rehabilitative potential of education; digital literacies are necessary for higher level employment. A lack of digital literacies restricts an ex-prisoner to low paying and often physical jobs that have little impact on recidivism (Bhuller, et al., 2020). When technologies are provided, both staff and learners are unsure how to use them and they may be put aside in favour of hard copy materials (Farley, Murphy & Bedford, 2014).

Conclusion

Incarcerated learners lack the access to the educational technologies that learners 'outside the wire' enjoy. In pre-COVID-19 times, tertiary education was normally delivered face-to-face or supported by education tutors or education officers. During the lockdowns that have resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic, these educators have been prohibited from visiting prisons, forcing them to rely on the delivery of hard copy materials to prisoners by corrections officers. In most cases, the delivery of regular educational programing has ceased, and technological solutions have not been in place. The range of challenges to the implementation of educational technologies that could overcome these barriers have been listed and are broadly categorized into physical, operational, attitudinal, and human challenges. Educators have not been able to reconnect with their incarcerated learners and those learners have been languishing in their cells without the opportunity to learn. If they are to reap the benefits of reduced recidivism rates and dynamic security afforded by educating prisoners, correctional jurisdictions need to address the challenges of implementing educational technologies and recognise the very human foibles that often prevent progress.

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