
THE CHALLENGES TO NETWORKED TEACHING AND LEARNING IN PRISON

Peter Mortimer – Cned-Éifad – France

Abstract

The paper examines the situation of learners in prison, in France and in a European context. It attempts to identify their aspirations to education and training and in particular to higher education. Certain statistics afford an outline of who the learners are and what motivates them.

The results of research on education in prison sheds light on the access to training, to support and to resources that may or may not be available to offenders. The state of higher education in prison is debated in relation to training in basic skills and secondary education.

The paper reviews government policy towards offenders engaged in learning, the attitudes of prison staff and administration, and the mindset of society in general.

The design of networked learning is examined with proposals for introducing greater flexibility in the courses offered to learners in prison. The distribution of networked learning within the standards of security required in a prison environment is also considered, with reference to pilot schemes already under way. Thought too is given to the specific training required for distance and face-to-face tutors dealing with networked learners in prison.

The papers upholds the premise that offenders preparing to return to life in the 21st century need to master its channels of communication – the internet, intranets, and mobile phones – and that enabling networked learning in prison, notably in the field of higher education, is the means of achieving this.

Keywords

Prison – Networked Learning – Distance Learning – Internet – Higher Education – Secure Environment

Introduction

Much of this paper owes its inspiration to the conclusions of the EURO DESIP study (Callejo and Viedma, 2007) and to the research carried out in France and the ensuing Country Profile for France (Evreinoff and Mortimer, 2007) that contributed to the study. The paper produced by Pike and Irwin (2008) following the Fifth Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning in London and the in-depth study by Salane (2008) on higher education in prison have also significantly enhanced the thinking behind this paper.

The 21st century draws us all inexorably into closer contact with computers and the internet, at home, at school, at work, at play. Scores of aspects of our Western European life are now channelled through internet sites: shopping, banking, following the news, reading books and articles, checking the weather forecast, listening to music and radio, storing and looking at photos and videos, organising and booking travel, playing games, communicating through text and voice and video, and, yes... learning!

Five years ago, could we have imagined where we would be today? Now let us compress those intervening five years and imagine the situation of offenders leaving jail in 2008 after five years imprisonment. Having had no contact with the innumerable services the internet provides, how can they truly find their feet in a world – above all in a working and learning world – so overreachingly dominated by the internet?

This then surely is the challenge to networked learning and teaching in prison: proving to the man and woman in the street, to society at large, to government, to every prison administration throughout Europe and beyond that no one individual, upon leaving jail, can hope to return successfully to life in the 21st century without some degree of internet literacy gained through learning online during their imprisonment.

Learning in Prison

The learners

It seems appropriate to begin by giving a rough picture of the state of education in French prisons at present. Statistics from the French Ministry of Justice (2006, 2007, 2008) show, over a four-year period, a steady decline in the percentage of offenders engaged in education, dropping from 26% in 2004 to 23% in 2007. This may be due in part, it must be said, to the significant increase in the overall number of offenders rising from 84 710 in 2004 to 90 270 in 2007.

Turning our attention to secondary and higher education in prison between 2004 and 2007, it is worth noting the marked downturn that occurred over these four years in this area (Figure 1).

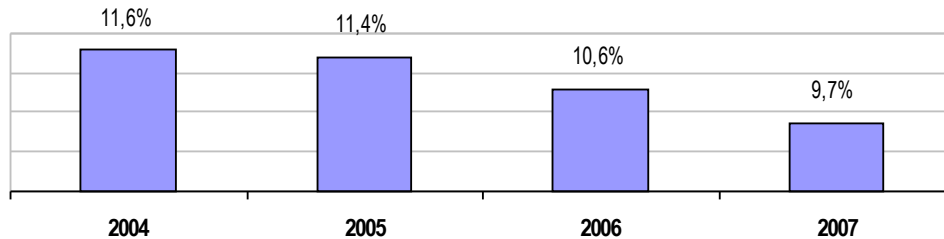


Figure 1. Percentage of offenders in secondary and higher education

The number of offenders engaged in higher education (HE) in 2007 stood at a mere 1,8%, according to the French Ministry of Justice (2007). This figure is a far cry from the 3 to 5% of the prison population in Europe that the EURO DESIP final report (p.114, Callejo and Viedma, 2007) claims could and should be studying at HE level.

The average learner

The overall statistics from the EURO DESIP report (pp. 57-59, Callejo and Viedma, 2007) enable one to establish a thumbnail sketch of the average offender in learning. He is male (91%) and is aged 33. He is for the most part single (44%) and has no children (63%). His nationality is that of the country in which he is incarcerated (76%). His principal motivation for learning (p. 64, Callejo and Viedma, 2007) is a concern for his future integration into the workforce (35%), followed by a desire for personal fulfilment (29%).

The challenges to learning in prison

The prison context

Figure 1 offers a simple overview of the context offenders in training find themselves in. Acting as a mind map of sorts, it illustrates the immediate influences that can affect offenders' learning within the prison walls.

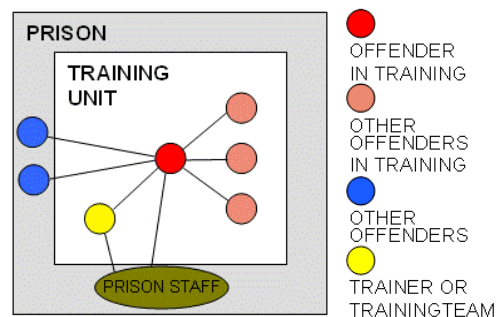


Figure 2. Learning context in prison

The map is to be read centrifugally working out from the offender in training at the heart of it. It serves to open up debate on such issues as peer learning and mentoring within a training unit and the relationship – good or bad – that offenders in learning may have with prison staff and with offenders who are not engaged in learning.

Access to resources, to HE programmes and learner support

The scarcity of resources

If access to resources is considered for the overall population of learners in prison, one offender in two, according to the EURO DESIP report (p.68, Callejo and Viedma, 2007), agrees that it is satisfactory (49%). However, among offenders taking university studies, three out of four of them express disagreement or complete disagreement with regard to the availability of resources (76%). Salane (pp. 17-18, 2008) underlines the consequences this has on learners in distance learning (DL), notably those studying at a higher level.

'There are very few school manuals or works related to HE in the libraries that are present in penal establishments. Offenders, who are thus obliged to get people outside prison to gather information and documentation for them, consequently find themselves locked into a state of dependence which DL is supposed to combat.'¹

The difficulty in accessing Higher Education

Turning our attention exclusively to offenders studying in higher education, statistics show that the majority of these learners – 80% according to Salane (p.9, 2008) – opt for distance learning. The obstacles, however, that beset these offenders are legion. First and foremost, they have to find out what courses are on offer. In French prisons, offenders are met upon arrival by the LHT – Local Head of Teaching – a state education teacher who has chosen to work in prison. The LHT determines with each offender a 'learning path'. However, as highlighted by Salane (p.5, 2008), a 'learning path' beyond secondary education, when one is behind bars, is often jeopardised from the outset.

'[...] certain categories of offenders – those identified as educationally underprivileged – have priority in their access to education. This is the case for those with a poor level of schooling, and even more so for those deemed illiterate and also for under-age offenders. In these circumstances, those people who wish to study at a higher level often have great difficulty in demanding and enforcing their right to education even if there are official texts upholding it.'²

Recognising the specific needs of HE learners

HE learners in prison, studying at a distance, are particularly in need of subject tutoring and motivational support, and to a far greater extent than learners at lower levels. They find themselves isolated in a self-learning 'bubble' without the benefit of the face-to-face teaching and the support that learners at other levels in prison enjoy.

At present, basic skills and secondary education in France mobilise face-to-face teachers in prison and leave them little time to devote to offenders in HE. This situation seems born of the policy advocated in the study on human rights in prison drawn up by The French National Consultative Commission for Human Rights (CNCDH) which stated that: 'People in a state of illiteracy must be given prior consideration for access to education.'³ (p. 32, 2004). There would seem, however, to be an apparent contradiction between this statement and the one later in the same document asserting that '...all offenders must be placed in circumstances [...] enabling them to take part in education...'⁴ (p. 33, 2004).

¹ 'Les bibliothèques présentes dans les établissements pénitentiaires contiennent généralement très peu d'ouvrages scolaires ou apparentés de niveau supérieur. Par conséquent, [...] les obligations de déléguer la recherche d'information et de documentation à des personnes extérieures maintiennent le détenu dans un état de dépendance que l'enseignement à distance est censé combattre.'

² [...] 'certaines populations – repérées comme « défavorisées » scolairement – sont prioritaires dans l'accès à l'enseignement : c'est le cas des personnes ayant un faible niveau scolaire, et encore plus de celles repérées comme illettrées ou analphabètes, ainsi que des jeunes détenus. Dans ce contexte, les personnes qui souhaitent suivre des cours à un niveau plus élevé ont alors bien souvent du mal à revendiquer et à faire appliquer leur droit à l'éducation, même si ce dernier est affirmé dans les textes.'

³ 'Les personnes en situation d'illettrisme ou d'analphabétisme doivent être considérées comme prioritaires dans l'accès à l'enseignement.'

⁴ '...tous les détenus doivent être mis en situation [...] de pouvoir bénéficier d'un enseignement.'

A similar and more recent directive in the European Prison Rules (article 28.2, 2006) established by the Council of Europe states that:

'Priority shall be given to prisoners with literacy and numeracy needs and those who lack basic or vocational education.'

If primacy is given to the least literate this inevitably means that offenders wishing to study at a higher level are penalised. Tantamount to a levelling from the bottom, the CNCDH directive and to a lesser degree that of the Council of Europe, leave ruefully unaddressed the needs of those 3 to 5% of offenders, identified in the EURO DESIP findings, who could and should be engaged in higher education.

External influences on learning in prison

Figure 3 reaches beyond the prison walls to point to the support that some offenders may enjoy from their family, friends and relations. One step beyond the offender's personal world, the map serves to raise the question of the attitudes that abound in society at large, attitudes that are, it must be said, for the most part negative.

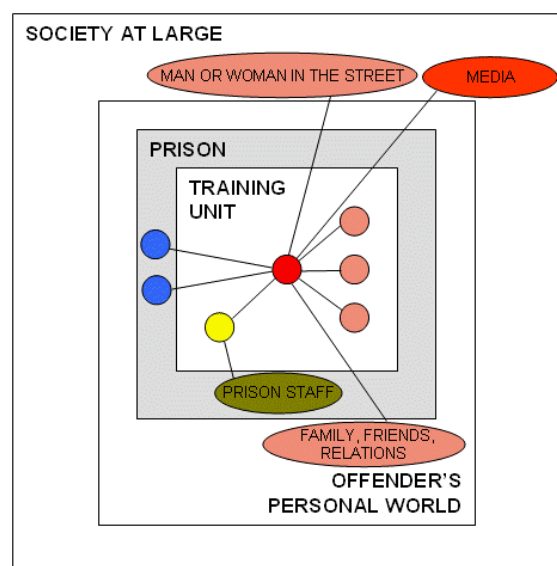


Figure 3. External influences supporting or detracting from learning in prison

Public opinion regarding prisons and prisoners is inevitably fuelled by media representation of the prison environment. With the man or woman in the street unable to see for themselves the reality of everyday prison life, they can only rely on the stereotyped image that the media conveys of 'life inside', presenting it – more often than not – as lurid and sensational. Who among us can recall a recent film, television programme or in-depth newspaper article devoted to learning in prison? A subject just too unglamorous for present-day media consumption, it would seem...

Finally, we reach a wider perspective in Figure 4 (below) which identifies the various entities, at a national and international level, that influence learning in prison.

Within any one country, the challenges to learning in prison – be it networked or otherwise – are the government's policies towards prisons, towards education and specifically towards education in prison. Government policy, however favourable towards offenders in learning, can nonetheless be thwarted if those in charge on the ground choose otherwise. As Pike and Irwin point out: 'The prominence of education within the prison regime, seems to be determined more by the attitude and approach of the local Senior Management Team than by the strict interpretation of Government policy' (p.2, 2008).

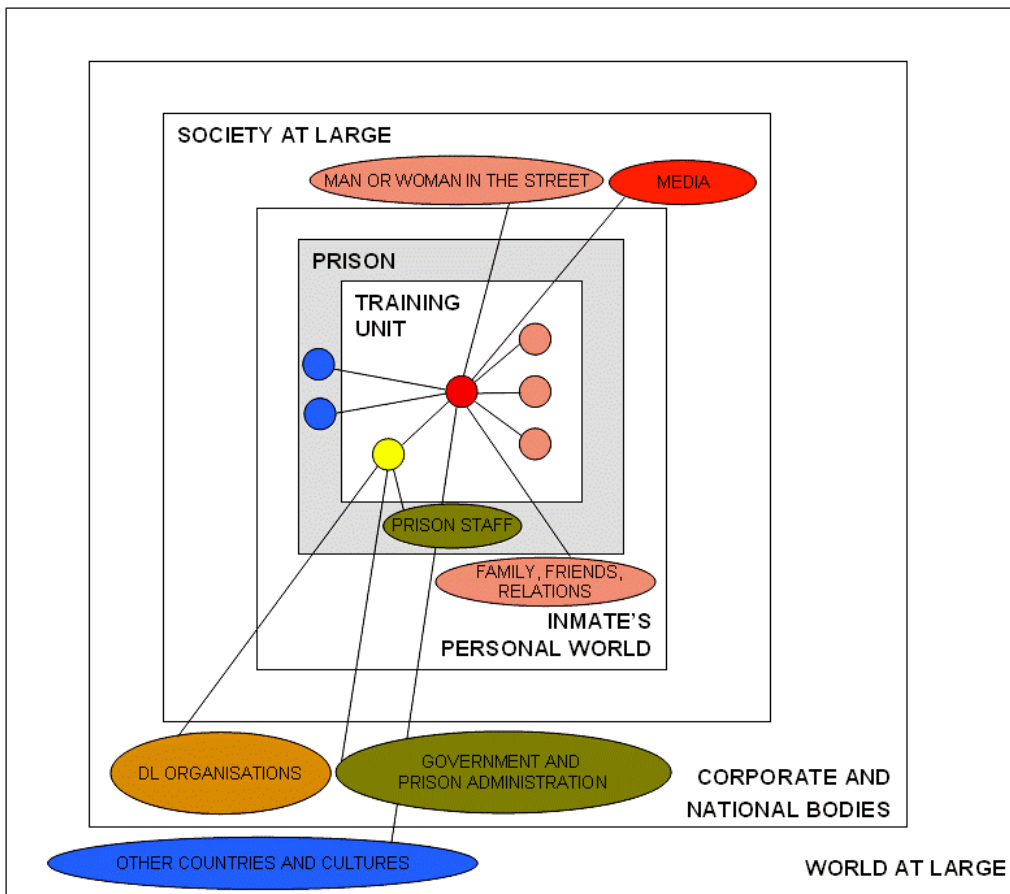


Figure 4: National and international influences on learning in prison

DL organisations have a pivotal role in the provision of learning programmes in prison. The extent to which the programmes they offer are workable within the constraints imposed by prison security is crucial. For example, programmes that require learners to consult resources on the internet, to participate in forums or to collaborate with their peers online, exclude all offenders from enrolling. Similarly, courses requiring periods of training *in situ*, such as work experience in industry, cannot of course be undertaken.

At a European and international level, it is closer cooperation and concerted efforts to promote learning and to exchange best practices, especially in the delivery of 'secure' networked learning, that probably represent the best way forward in improving education in prison.

Facing the challenges to networked learning

Working towards a learning environment in prison

The overriding challenge to networked learning in prison will be the same challenge that face-to-face learning in prison at present faces. That is to say – and as was stated earlier – promoting a favourable learning environment in any one prison depends on the mindset of those who manage it. In simpler terms, if the prison director shares the view expressed by Callejo and Viedma that 'education must be understood as one of the main functions of prisons in preparing the inmates' return to society' (p8, 2007), offenders should find themselves with adequate opportunities for learning with a view to their subsequent reinsertion.

A climate conducive to learning in prison is also subject to security officers gaining a deeper understanding of offenders engaged in study. Along the lines of the 'Good Relations' Pilot Project advocated by Irwin and Wilson, there needs to be awareness of the 'powerful dynamics of the unease of difference' (2008) that can reign between prison staff and offenders. A concerted effort is required – within the entire prison service and at grass roots level – through training and institutional dialogue, to forge new relationships in which security officers perceive offenders in learning as students in their own right, and not as simple offenders.

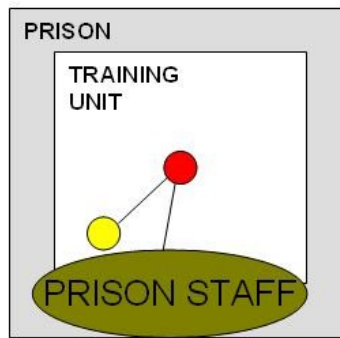


Figure 5 Learning context in prison enhanced by better working relations with prison staff

The new slant on the role of prison staff suggested in Figure 5 in no way implies that they should be backing up the teaching staff. Pike and Irwin speak aptly of the concept of 'learning advocacy' in this context (p.4, 2008), implying simply that staff could be proactive in advising and channelling those offenders they perceive as being susceptible to benefit from engaging in education.

Designing networked learning

Flexibility

Designing networked learning programmes needs to accommodate the particular circumstances offenders in learning find themselves in. The uncertain routine of prison life, with transfers from one prison to another or lockdowns, for example, can seriously disrupt or interrupt altogether the learning schedules that offenders may set themselves. DL organisations need therefore to allow for this by introducing as much flexibility as possible into courses. Flexibility in this sense means:

- giving a detailed overview in the catalogue of courses available to offenders, such as the time needed for each unit, for further reading, for drafting assignments, etc., thus enabling learners to select a course in keeping with the length of their sentences
- avoiding building into programmes strict deadlines for the return of assignments
- building in greater self-assessment exercises or activities, since tutor and peer assessment are lacking or insufficient
- breaking courses into micro-modules that allow offenders to cherry pick according to their needs and professional objectives
- enabling offenders to purchase only certain micro-modules to avoid wasting money on enrolments in full-blown courses that cannot be completed
- offering courses with extended completion dates that give offenders a leeway of a year or two after release in which to pass any mandatory exams or carry out any in situ work experience

Innovation

Networked learning could offer offenders a specific solution for gaining the *in situ* work experience that imprisonment denies them. The answer would be to retail and import into secure prison intranets virtual environments along the lines of Second Life⁵ and Google's recently launched virtual reality world, Lively⁶. An example of interactive interviews with the possibility for the learner to adopt differing reactions and strategies in a given context is well illustrated in the interview simulation for Air France to be found in the Dæsign site⁷.

⁵ <http://secondlife.com>

⁶ <http://www.lively.com>

⁷ <http://www.daesign.com/Current/Fr/index.html>

Similarly, offenders in learning – especially those in higher education – could benefit from adopting the use of ePortfolios to help them put their studies in a lifelong perspective, situating their ongoing learning objectives in the bigger picture of the overall aims of their learning and future job ambitions.

Via a secure, nation-wide prison intranet HE learners throughout the country could then post up their ePortfolios and – using identifiable logins – blog each other on the respective content of their pages. This could be the framework for a measured amount of peer mentoring that is so sorely lacking among HE learners in prison at present. An internet site – Eduspaces⁸ – offering similar facilities to the general public illustrates this principle.

Producing networked learning programmes

The challenge to DL organisations producing networked learning programmes is their ability to respond to the ever changing needs of the labour market. Offenders planning to return to the workforce need to find a catalogue of courses that are in tune with the labour market. DL organisations need therefore to produce short, highly focussed vocational courses, along the lines of Japanese kanban theory, that is to say working on the principle of making a product for demand rather than for stock.

Distributing networked learning

The challenge of providing secure environments

Networked learning via computers in prison has as yet – in France at least – barely reached the experimental stage. Plans are underway, via the 'Cyber-bases' project, to set up an intranet providing secure access to some thirty or so educational web sites. Two 'Cyber-bases' pilot sites, in Bordeaux and Marseille, should be operational in 2009 with five more following suit at a later, unspecified date. These are positive, yet timid, beginnings. The French prison administration is not, however, imposing the project on prisons; the choice is left to establishments to voice their interest or not for joining it. This again represents one of the major challenges to the widespread implementation of networked learning: convincing the grass roots of its importance. In line with the theory put forward by Pike and Irwin (p.2, 2008), it is a strategic internal communications plan within the prison service that can convince the more reticent local prison management teams of the interest of networked learning:

'It is necessary to raise awareness of the value of higher and distance education among prison managers. [...] This awareness raising should come from many angles. A top-down approach is essential if Government Policy is to be clearly implemented. However an emulatory approach should also be provided. If one prison is acknowledged to be successful by providing innovative, flexible education across the whole learning journey, particularly through the use of ICTs, then others would follow.'

Seeking corporate partnerships

To accelerate the deployment of networked learning, government, hand-in-hand with DL organisations, needs to solicit collaboration with, and sponsorship from, multinational companies such as BT, France Telecom, Intel, Nokia, Sagem, Motorola, for example. Research sponsored by Intel®⁹ aimed at developing innovative technologies to help people 'age in place' is a relevant illustration ¹⁰of such initiatives, as is the overall Intel® Education Initiative¹¹.

Networked learning via mobile telephones and hand-held devices could flourish in a prison context if research were carried out into secure means of locking them to certain numbers thus enabling distance tutoring to be provided to HE learners on courses that require it. Similar restricted access could enable peer collaboration between HE students in geographically distant prisons. Innovation along these lines would allow this tiny percentage of learners in prison to partake of the same sharing and building of knowledge that offenders, at a lower educational level, already enjoy in face-to-face learning environments.

⁸ <http://eduspaces.net>

⁹ http://www.intel.com/community/ireland/pix/2007_04_Spring.pdf

¹⁰ http://www.intel.com/education/index.htm?iid=ed_nav+home

¹¹ http://www.intel.com/community/ireland/pix/2007_04_Spring.pdf

Sharing solutions throughout Europe

Other European countries are at differing stages of advancement in providing networked learning; among them, Sweden, Germany, Great Britain, Spain. An emulatory approach at a European level is now required, communicating across borders and across language barriers, to exchange and encourage best practices: to show and to share each other's solutions to the challenges that abound. One of the means to this end will be the Grundtvig meeting in Lisbon in November 2008¹², devoted to education in prison, with its stated aim of bringing together potential partners for the development of projects within the Grundtvig framework.

Teacher training

One of the greatest challenges in overseeing and supporting networked learning in prisons is the training in new skills that teachers and trainers will require, both those in prison and those who are called upon to tutor them at a distance. This training must not, however, be restricted to mere Information and Communication Technology (ICT) but will need to focus extensively on the theories and practice of networked learning and teaching with particular emphasis on:

- understanding the psychology of the networked learner within the added constraint of a prison environment
- working on learner motivation and the strategies that can enhance it
- developing the role as 'interface' with the outside world that teachers in prison have to in relation to offenders
- improving their skills in information retrieval via the Internet and in identifying best practices for communicating information to offenders

Conclusion

Technological evolution and its impact on networked learning

The final challenge to networked learning, facing not only prisons but all of society, will inevitably be the exponential growth of technology itself requiring us to update ever more frequently our knowledge and skills for coping with it, and similarly our mobile phones and computers to keep pace with change...

Prison administrations, today, struggling against the tide of change as networked learning, via the internet and secure intranets, forces an entry into prisons, will no doubt very soon have other media with which to contend. It would, therefore, seem wise for prison administrations to hastily adopt a reflexive approach and consider their past record on coping with change. Self-appraisal must surely be the best tactic in the face of the quantum leap that technology will impose on networked learning in the very near future and, in turn, impose on prisons themselves.

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