Distance Learning for Incarcerated Populations

Christine Bagwell
University of California - San Diego, USA

INTRODUCTION

While many educators focus on bridging the digital divide for rural and disadvantaged students, a few focus on a much more isolated population—those in the U.S. prison system. "The criminal justice system has frequently been referred to as a 'revolving door' where offenders are released, only to be returned over and over again to incarceration" (Daniel, 2003, p. 3). Research shows that educating incarcerated populations clearly lowers recidivism rates at huge savings to state taxpayers. Just as the advent of the Web has revolutionized education's reach, e-learning technologies have the power to extend into the most dangerous and neglected schoolrooms in our country, those of our prisons.

BACKGROUND

Issues with Traditional Teaching Models

Serving prisoners via traditional teaching modes has some inherent drawbacks. Most facilities are purposefully remote, away from cities and with broad land expanses. Educators rarely joined the teaching profession with the intent of instructing prisoners, and many don't want to be on-site. Because of the security risk and low supply of educators up to the task, bringing teachers in-house, or rather in-prison, can be costly. Lacking the resources to stimulate options, course offerings for prisoners don't include a broad range of subjects. Most center around job skills, blue collar trades, and literacy.

Funding and Return on Investment

Each state has its own Department of Corrections (DoC). The state DoCs contract with outside agencies to deliver distance learning to their in-mates. If states will pay for courses and how many courses an inmate can take per term varies from state to state. New Mexican prisoners can take two courses per semester at the expense of the state.

In New Mexico, the recent recidivism rates have been roughly 70% within one year of release. Prisoners who received some education while incarcerated showed a 50% lower rate of recidivism (Howard, 2003). A former warden in the Utah State system estimates that "80% of offenders routinely come back to prison. Among those who get a college education… fewer than 20% return" (Carlson, 2004, p. A33). Aside from the sociological and humanitarian impacts, the state cost savings is compelling. At a cost ranging from $22,000 to $35,000 per year to house an inmate, a lower recidivism rate can easily justify more funds for education. Anecdotal evidence shows that prisoners behave better while in educational programs. There may also be incidental savings in inmate and guard injuries, and prisoners needing less intensive supervision. Lorna A. Rhodes, professor of anthropology at the University of Washington, cited an example in her book, *Total Confinement: Madness and Reason in the Maximum Security Prison,* where educational programs were an important component of better inmate behavior. She studied the " 'control units' or 'super maximum' wings within maximum security prisons" (Monaghan, 2004, p. A14). Four years after educational programs were introduced, along with graffiti cleaning and renovations to better protect prison staff, "the unit was experiencing dramatically less violence and use of force on prisoners. Many inmates who had seemed doomed to spend their lives in control units managed to graduate back to the general prison population" (Monaghan, 2004, p. A16). In addition to prison populations, youth offenders, such as the California Youth Authority (CYA) population, could benefit greatly from better educational opportunities. Sullivan (2004) found that "it costs society more than $1.7 million for each youth that drops out

of school to become involved in a life of crime and drug abuse" (p. 1). She also reported that youths in the CYA have a staggering 91% recidivism rate.

Dollars spent on educating prisoners can be directly seen to save money on incarceration costs. Felons who receive training or education while serving their sentences are much less likely to return to prison. In addition to states seeing savings, neighboring states may see a savings as well. The U.S.Bureau of Justice Statistics found that within three years of release, 7.6% of prisoners (18,460 of 241,810 studied in 15 states) had been rearrested for a new crime in a state other than the one from which they were released (Langan & Levin, 1994). Ohio University's Independent and Distance Learning Programs serve incarcerated populations in Ohio's correctional facilities. According to Don Sebera, Educational Advisor, "almost half of our students come from the following five states: California, Florida, Michigan, Ohio and Virginia" (Sebera, 2004). Prisoners with ties in the states in which they were sentenced, may return after release. In addition to neighboring states, those states exporting prisoners may experience lower recidivism rates.

LIMITATIONS

Eastern New Mexico University (ENMU) received a contract with the New Mexico DoC. Their proposal centered on delivering courseware via the learning management system (LMS), WebCT. Their DoC required that there be no student to student communication and no internet access. There are other detailed restrictions, such as not allowing medical courses. ENMU's program contrasts greatly with Utah State University's (USU) program. Utah State allows inmates to attend classes via "television monitor, microphone, and satellite receiver". The inmates can see and hear the instructor and the undergraduates at the university in real-time. Though students in the university classroom cannot see the inmates, they can hear them through a speaker in the classroom; inmates identify themselves by the prison's city. The USU program mimicked the traditional learning modes of classroom instruction; students listen to lecture with visual aids and are allowed to ask questions (Carlson, 2004, pp. A33-34).

The traditional set of student excuses rarely apply in a prison setting. Other incomprehensible reasons take their place. Lockdowns can occur without warning and for the smallest rule infraction. During a prison lockdown, all prisoners are escorted to their cells and only let out for meals and one hour per day for exercise. Library and computing time is completely cut out from their schedule. The lockdowns are for indefinite periods of time. Throughout ENMU's contract they have seen lockdowns as short as twelve hours and as long as ten days (Howard, 2003). Losing 10 days in a 16 week or less term can greatly impact a course, but worse, a student's opportunity to learn. Using the USU model of attending class in real time, a prisoner would need to have as predictable a schedule as possible to finish a course. The self-paced approach and fully online courses lend best to the realities of prison life — in this regard.

There are definite benefits and drawbacks to letting prisoners attend class in a video/teleconference mode. On the positive side, prisoners are able to listen to the material as delivered by the instructor and are able to ask questions; this may help them to better understand important points they would not have asked for clarification on, if reading alone in the prison library. Jeannie Johnson of USU says "the inmates often come to class with the most perceptive comments—contributions that jar the traditional students into thinking more deeply about the topics at hand" (Carlson, 2004, p. A35). The prisoners that keep the pace with the traditional students, which is often the case, gain a type of knowledge of performance. This knowledge of performance not only aids in the learning process, but can enhance the incarcerated student's self-esteem. Randy Brown, an inmate taking courses through USU noted, "I thought I just couldn't handle school, that I wasn't capable of it. But once I got involved, I found I could do it just as well as anyone" (Carlson, 2004, p. A33). However mixing students and prisoners can have painful consequences, "on one occasion a prisoner ended up in the same class as a family member of one of his assault victims". On another occasion it was an instructor made uncomfortable when an inmate commented on her long blond hair (Carlson, 2004, p. A35).

Aside from disruptions to prisoners' schedules, these programs themselves can be vulnerable. In

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