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Motivation for Higher Education in Prison

Dr. Helen Lepp Friesen is based in the Department of Rhetoric, Writing, and Communications, University of Winnipeg

Introduction

Since the mid-nineties, Adams State University (ASU) in Colorado has been offering long-distance courses to students around the United States. In 2002, they added resources to their correspondence print-based Prison College Program and now offer up to 65 classes per semester. ASU faculty teach the wide range of courses from Freshman Composition, to Business to Kinesiology. With an enrolment of around 1000, students reside in prisons all across the country, including Alaska and Hawaii.

Based on a small pilot study, this article draws on interviews with five teachers who teach classes through the Prison College Program at Adams State University (ASU) in Colorado, and two students who took ASU distance classes during their time in prison. In this study, I asked students and teachers what their motivation was to take university classes while in prison and/or teach students in prison.

Arranged in four parts, this paper first looks at the literature on motivation for education in prisons. Second, I describe the research design and methodology of the study. Third, I present my findings from my research. In the final part, I explain how this study contributes to the broader body of literature concerning the motivation for carceral higher education.

Literature on Motivation for Higher Education in prison

Print-based education provides an opportunity for prisoners to advance their education while incarcerated; it also provides an opportunity for teachers to explore and experience an alternative style of teaching with a different population from the customary university student.

There are many reasons why students take classes while in prison and why teachers choose to teach students in prison. In this section, I look at the literature on motivation.

Motivation

More research is available on practitioners choosing to teach students in prison than why students take classes while in prison. Motivations for educators and administrators cited in the literature included reducing recidivism, participating in social justice, improving future employability, reducing violence in prison for a safer prison environment, and rehabilitation.

Reduce recidivism

Research on recidivism as a measure for correctional education success is a controversial issue.¹ The logic behind prisons is that people are in prison because they have been convicted of a crime, which they either committed, and if they did not, then they were wrongfully convicted. Those that did commit a crime are put in prison to rehabilitate and keep the general population safe from crime, which is their right. Extenuating circumstances complicate this simple logic.

In 2007, the American government passed the Second Chance Act, whose mandate included the improvement of educational opportunities in U.S. correctional institutions.² In 2010, the Bureau of Justice Assistance, with help from the Office of Vocational and Adult Education, awarded the RAND Corporation funding to study the effectiveness of correctional education programs. That report published in 2013 explored whether the education initiatives were achieving the hoped-for goals.³ The result of the meta-analysis was encouraging, showing that correctional education led to more successful re-entry upon release; it did indeed reduce recidivism cost-effectively and increased employment post-release.⁴

For some researchers seeing education as the impetus for reducing recidivism is not looking at the whole picture. Gould⁵ critiques the much-cited 2013 RAND study by Davis et al, as being myopic on its

1. Gehring, T. (2000) 'Recidivism as a measure of correctional education program success', *Journal of Correctional Education*, 51(2), pp. 197–205.
2. Davis, L. M., Bozick, R., Steele, J. L., Saunders, J., & Miles, J. N. (2013, August 22) 'Evaluating the Effectiveness of Correctional Education A Meta-Analysis of Programs That Provide Education to Incarcerated Adults', *RAND Corporation*. Available at: https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR266.html. (Accessed May 20, 2020). (Accessed April 30, 2020).
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Gould, M. R. (2018) 'Rethinking our metrics: Research in the field of higher education in prison', *Prison Journal*, 98(4), pp. 387-404. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0032885518776375> (Accessed May 29, 2020).

position that recidivism is the ideal outcome of 'rehabilitation' because the success or failure of an individual upon prison release depends on so many other factors besides just education. Community support, personal motivation, psychological health are all factors when considering recidivism. Long term prisoner Lyle May writes about the incarcerated experience. He says: 'Higher education is largely able to keep people from returning to prison because it effectively addresses criminality unlike any other program in prison. Students learn critical thinking, communication and social skills, ethics, time management, goal setting, perspective taking, organization, and accountability for one's actions or inaction.'⁶ Education that promotes the skills that May talks about is effective in curbing recidivism because of these acquired skills.

Social Justice

Braggins and Talbot state that 'Although contributing to the reduction of recidivism is of key importance, prison education is about more than just this. It is also important to deliver education in prison because it is the right thing to do' (p. 12).⁷ The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) Article 26 supports the social justice motivation:

'Everyone has the right to education' and 'Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.'⁸

Offering educational opportunities in prison is about the human right of the incarcerated. Education provides incarcerated people with an identity other than a numbered object. The education system identifies the prisoners as students, as learners on the road to developing their potential. 'Prison education might be said to challenge everything that prison institutionalisation is about: control, minimising personal freedom and choice, elimination of decision-

making, and reduction of self-esteem. Prison education, in parallel with the values of adult education, encourages negotiation and choice, tries to build self-confidence and self-worth and develop critical thinking. In some ways then, it might be said to liberate' (p. 160).⁹ Education then fulfills the mandate of the UDHR.

Improved employability

Reduced recidivism and improved employability are interconnected since access to suitable employment reduces the need for procuring finances via unlawful means. 'Prison education can therefore help students to gain qualifications in order to be more attractive to employers; it can, through self-reflection and guidance, assist in personal development; and learning can be encouraged for sheer enjoyment' (p. 163).¹⁰ At times

the motivation is preparation for employment, and the enjoyment of learning new skills and attaining a goal comes as a bonus. Cho and Tyler found that despite there being 'a positive effect on post-release earnings and employment, we do not find any evidence supporting claims that participating in ABE classes reduce recidivism' (p. 1001).¹¹ High school completion falls under the purview of Adult Basic Education, and perhaps for that

reason is seen as something to complete rather than useful to achieve future employment.

Reduce violence during incarceration for a safer environment

Pompoco et al found that prisoners that earned a GED or completed higher education classes 'were less likely than nonprogram inmates to engage in violence during incarceration, whereas completing vocational training and apprenticeship programs had no such effect on any type of inmate misconduct examined' (p. 515).¹² Completing classes provided overall safety for

Prison education
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6. May, L. C. (2020, March 18) 'Resilience and resistance: Fighting for Higher Education in prison', *Inside Higher Education*. Available at: <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2020/03/18/prisoner-describes-his-and-other-inmates-struggles-access-higher-education-opinion> (Accessed May 6, 2020).
7. Braggins, J., & Talbot, J. (2006) 'Wings of learning: The role of the prison officer in supporting prison education', *Prison Service Journal*, 168(168), pp. 33–38. Available at: <https://www.crimeandjustice.org.uk/sites/crimeandjustice.org.uk/files/wings-of-learning.pdf> (Accessed May 6, 2020).
8. Universal Declaration of Human Rights. (n.d.). United Nations. Available at: <https://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>. (Accessed May 7, 2020).
9. Bayliss, P. (2003) 'Learning behind bars: Time to liberate prison education', *Studies in the Education of Adults*, 35(2), 157–172. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02660830.2003.11661480>
10. Ibid.
11. Cho, R. M., & Tyler, J. H. (2013) 'Does prison-based adult basic education improve postrelease outcomes for male prisoners in Florida?' *Crime and Delinquency*, 59(7), pp. 915–1005.
12. Pompoco, A., Wooldredge, J., Lugo, M., Sullivan, C., & Latessa, E. J. (2017) 'Reducing inmate misconduct and prison returns with facility education programs'. *Criminology & Public Policy*, 16(2), pp. 515–547. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-9133.12290>

prisoners themselves as well as a safer environment overall, including for the staff and fellow prisoners.¹³

Rehabilitation

Anne Reus states that prisons are about punishment, rehabilitation, and deterrence. Still, changing behaviour will not be successful if we don't consider the person as a human being that has a unique history.¹⁴ Although under-researched, higher education in prisons is suggested and conjectured as one of the key rehabilitative methods of incarceration.¹⁵ 'Significant funds have been invested in prisons in recent years to introduce interventions that may broadly be described as 'reformatory'. Investment in literacy and numeracy provision has been one.'¹⁶ Higher education in prison not only has the capacity 'to transform the lives of those who are personally involved with it, but ultimately, to undermine the social and ideological underpinnings of the very practice of incarceration' (p. 353).¹⁷

Methods

It is difficult to gain access to a vulnerable prison population, and if researchers do acquire permission, prisoners are hesitant to become involved.¹⁸ Hence the dearth of qualitative research about the experience of higher education in prison. The current study is a small pilot study designed to examine teachers' and students' experiences in the Prison College Program at ASU. The main objective of this part of the study was to explore the motivation for taking or teaching classes through the Prison College Program. The method of data collection in this study was semi-structured open-ended interview questions using convenience sampling.¹⁹ I conducted the interviews on the phone using regular audio cell service or video calling through zoom. The

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interviews were in between 30 and 50 minutes. My questions focused on the teaching and learning experience, including what motivated students to take classes and why teachers chose to teach in the Prison College Program. My participants in this study were five teachers who taught either face to face, print-based, or both mediums through the host university Adams State University and two students who graduated from ASU and had been released from prison. Both Adams State University and The University of Winnipeg granted ethics approval for this study. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and then coded and thematically organized into categories and relevant themes.

Creswell²⁰ states that a phenomenological study describes a shared experience that the participants have in common. The participants in my research had taught, were teaching, or had been a student in the Prison College Program through Adams State University. In the thematic analysis of the data, I do not claim complete objectivity and acknowledge the impact of my own experiences as teacher and researcher. Still, as much as it is possible, I attempted to look at the data without preconceived ideas or notions about themes or categories. Like Hughes,²¹ I offer my study as rigorous and yet 'unavoidably subjective' (p. 10). Participant names and the classes they taught or took are not revealed here to protect participant identity.

Data Analysis and Discussion

Much of the research on prison education is from policymaker perspectives or practitioners, but not so often from the perspective of the student.²² What do the students think about higher education in prison? What is their motivation for taking classes? Do they think about reducing recidivism or rehabilitation when

13 Ibid.

14. Reuss, A. (2003) 'Taking a long hard look at imprisonment', *The Howard Journal of Criminal Justice*, 42(5), pp. 426–436.

15. Bayless, 2013; Reuss, 2003; Irwin, T. (2008) 'The 'inside' story: practitioner perspectives on teaching in prison', *The Howard Journal of Criminal Justice*, 47(5), pp. 512–528. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2311.2008.00536.x>

16. Braggins, J., & Talbot, J. (2006) 'Wings of learning: The role of the prison officer in supporting prison education', *Prison Service Journal*, 168(168), pp. 33–38. Available at: <https://www.crimeandjustice.org.uk/sites/crimeandjustice.org.uk/files/wings-of-learning.pdf> (Accessed May 6, 2020).

17. Lewen, J. (2014) 'Prison higher education and social transformation', *St. Louis University Public Law Review*, 33, pp. 353–361.

18. Irwin, T. (2008) 'The 'inside' story: practitioner perspectives on teaching in prison', *The Howard Journal of Criminal Justice*, 47(5), pp. 512–528. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2311.2008.00536.x>.

19. Creswell, J., & Creswell, D. (2018) *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, Fifth edn. Los Angeles: Sage.

20. Creswell, J. (2007) *Qualitative inquiry and research design. Choosing among five approaches*, 2nd edn. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

21. Hughes, E. (2012) *Education in Prison: Studying Through Distance Learning*. Routledge.

22. Irwin, T. (2008) 'The 'inside' story: practitioner perspectives on teaching in prison', *The Howard Journal of Criminal Justice*, 47(5), pp. 512–528. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2311.2008.00536.x>.

they sign up for a university class in prison? For the students I talked with, the motivation for them taking classes while in prison included learning skills to gain viable and legal employment upon release, although convicted of a crime, the opportunity to show the penal system the nature of their real character, affordable education to reach a personal goal, and the flexibility to take classes when offered.

Why would teachers choose to teach students in prison? Teacher motivation included engagement in social justice work, extraordinary enjoyment and preference for working with the prison population, flexible work schedule, and stimulating professional engagement after retirement. I am presenting the teacher and student perception at the time they talked to me. I also acknowledge the immense pain that victims of crime have suffered.

Student Motivation

Legal employment

Although researchers were of differing opinions when it came to the impetus for higher education to reduce recidivism, the students I interviewed did indeed choose to take classes in prison to gain legal employment skills. Student #1 said:

My motivation for taking classes is because, at the time that I got incarcerated, I told myself that when I get out, I want to be a success. I want to make my money legally. And I feel that the best opportunity for me or any other person who has been incarcerated previously is entrepreneurship. So I wanted to learn as much as possible about business. So I thought a business degree would serve me well.

Student #1 found that what he learned applied to real life. Learning practical skills increased motivation and drive for doing well: 'You're out there in the world applying what you learned, so we did research papers and projects. The projects were really good. They drove me to really learn the application of the skills I was learning in real life.'

Flexible schedule

Wilson says: 'There is little wonder that many (re)construct prison education primarily as somewhere to get warm, be a human being or get away from the

cockroaches as well as a centre for learning.'²³ (p. 191). Although the students I interviewed completed their coursework via print-based distance learning, they indicated having access to a place where they could go to do their coursework. For print-based education, having both a physical and psychological place to escape from the daily routine of 'cockroaches' was immensely valuable to students. Student #2 appreciated being able to study at his own pace without the hindrance of class attendance at a specific time. About his classes, he said: 'They worked great. I was able to set a pace and then stay on pace. I was really vigorous in my pursuit to get the stuff done, so you know. Study at your own pace.'

Student #2 stated that everything worked well for him:

ASU was great. They provided me with all the things that I needed, but I had such an intense schedule that I was trying to maintain that I didn't have time. So saying, the teachers all that stuff was really great and the classes, the coursework was all geared towards what I was trying to do. That was very important because I was on a mission. (Laughs.) To get the courses done. Learn and get it done. Move on to the next thing so. For me personally, it was alright that I didn't have defined classes and going at it in a defined pace.

Although Student #1 did appreciate the flexible schedule, he did value deadlines: 'I liked about the Adams State University courses is that you had a certain time allotment that you had to turn in the homework within.'

Affordability

Classes at Adams State University are not free, but they are very affordable. A print-based course runs \$220 per credit hour.²⁴ Since the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act, passed in 1994, Pell grants are no longer available to incarcerated students.²⁵ Incarcerated students rely on private funds from family or friends to pay for their education. ASU attracts many incarcerated students because the tuition is relatively inexpensive, and a correspondence print-based format is conducive to the unique challenge of incarceration. Student #1 stated: 'Well, first of all, the pricing was great.'

23. Wilson, A. (2007) 'I go to get away from the cockroaches: Educentricity and the politics of education in prisons', *Journal of Correctional Education*, 58(2), pp. 185–203.

24. Prison College Program FAQs. Available at: <https://www.adams.edu/academics/print-based/faqs/>. (Accessed June 1, 2020).

25. Ibid.

Demonstrate to the penal system his real character

About his motivation for taking university classes, Student #2 said: 'I'll show you who I am,' meaning he would show the correctional institution who he really was. The incidents that changed Student #2's life became the motivating force for taking university classes:

So being charged with this crime that I know I didn't commit uhm and kind of hitting rock bottom with that and then reaching out and meeting God were the two driving factors over the next 12 years of my life that led me, you know, that empowered me and led me to do the things that I did. So the motivation was there because I was just hellbent, pardon the pun, uh on showing, you know, these DAs they lied. They did a bunch of evidence. They tried to make me to something I wasn't — for a conviction, and so that just was a fire under my ass to, excuse my language, but it really fired me up to, uh, you know, to shut these guys down. This is not who I am. That's not who I am. I'll show you who I am.

Student #2 attributes his strength to an encounter with God:

He gave me the strength to beat, you know, all of these insurmountable odds that were stacked against me being a convicted murderer, or I mean, you know first charged murderer and then, later on, I was convicted of a lesser crime, but it was still, I was convicted of second-degree murder, so but that still weighed heavily mentally, physically, emotionally, spiritually and God gave me a bunch of strength to overcome all that and those two things were what really what propelled me over the next two years to get an education.

Student #2 does admit the unfortunate nature of having taken another life, which he says he did not intend to, but 'so much positive stuff came out of it and really not that much negative stuff for me personally. So you know, it was pretty awesome. Yeah, I was able to make great use of the time, and like I said, I came out a lot better for it.'

Teacher Motivation

Students in prison are not the usual on-campus students; teachers shared numerous motivations for their work with incarcerated students, which included

engagement in social justice work, extraordinary enjoyment and preference for working with the prison population, previous prison experience, flexible and practical work schedule, and stimulating professional engagement after retirement.

Social Justice

Of the motivations cited in the literature, social justice was the most prominent motivation for teachers to choose to work with incarcerated students. Teacher #1 states:

A lot of my research around social justice issues uh, issues going all the way back to when I was a developmental teacher in the public schools looking at the numbers of identified gifted and talented students who drop out, the percentages who are incarcerated likely. I knew that kind of information, and that was probably one of the reasons for some of the students for being in prison, to begin with had been not fitting well in the K12 system that we have here, and I think I have just always had a lot of concern or appreciation for marginalized people. So I think a lot of things overlaid and I uhm (pause) yeah I just I read books like the New Jim Crow, and I became yeah very aware of and did research about how racism is being perpetuated through the prison systems in the US.

Teacher #2 concurs:

It's like 90 some odd per cent of the prisoners are coming out, and let's send them out armed with education. You know, let's give them a chance in life, and I'm just so I'm such a proponent for prison programs and I think there should be many many more. And I think that all the trouble it is, the benefits far outweigh everything.

Extraordinary enjoyment

Teachers talked about their teaching experience generating authentic joy. Teacher #3 said: 'For fun. I just did it for fun actually, uhm, then I just kind of stuck around because they always needed someone.' Teacher #4 used the exact words to describe her experience:

It was fun. I mean it was really fun, and they [the students] were very very engaged because a lot of these guys, by virtue of being

in the prison system, they know a lot about the law. And they were all, you know, they would bring in their appeals to me because they're all doing appeals and all of them are in some stage of that. And uhm you know they're smart, smart guys.

Teacher #5 enjoyed working in the Prison College Program so much that she eventually just taught those classes. 'I don't teach on campus anymore. I much prefer working with incarcerated students, so it's my main teaching gig.'

Previous experience working in prison

The teachers in my study were interested in teaching in prison based on previous experience in prison. Teacher #4 had previously had a very good experience volunteering in a prison:

The second major reason for choosing incarcerated students is because back in the early 90s — 1990-1994, I volunteered for a federal women's prison and ended up creating a holistic health program uh for incarcerated women and for the staff.

Teacher #3 had been working with the incarcerated population most of his career starting with living in a halfway house as a young adult:

I mean for me; I've been around prisoners for a long time. Like so after college I lived with people — it was kind of a halfway house and it wasn't. Basically, put students and people coming out of prison in the same kind of setting, a living setting, and so I ended up doing that even though I was the only student, I helped uh you know fix the house, get the house ready. So I have been working in around criminal justice issues for a very long period of time, you know.

Practical

Teaching correspondence courses can be a practical alternative to face to face on-campus classes, whether those reasons are for mobility or scheduling

issues. About her motivation for teaching in the Prison College Program, Teacher #5 'said:

So partly it was a practical matter. I experimented with online but hated it but then decided that print-based; I actually do like old fashioned. It's a completely different approach to teaching class because you have to write. You have to envision the entire class.

For Teacher #1 abrupt retirement and leaving her professional life behind did not sound attractive. Therefore, she 'did sort of a transitional retirement from the English Department and became the uh the liaison, the advocate the VP for equity and inclusion at my university and that was half-time under a grant.' Transitioning to a part-time schedule allowed her time to invest in part-time teaching in the Prison College Program.

Stimulating professional engagement

Teachers found the teaching and learning environment exceptionally stimulating and engaging.

About engagement with students, Teacher #3 said:

It's an enthusiast audience for us as teachers. You're not going to have passive students. You know you might go on campus, and you might teach, you know, whatever. Intro to Philosophy or whatever, and you might have a bunch of passive students that don't really want to be there. You go into prison and you're not. And that actually kind of builds the confidence of the students. But also the confidence of the instructor. Wow. People are interested in something I am interested in. Think about how that'll change you like in your teaching.

Similarly, Teacher #1 evidenced transformative learning that impacted not only the students but her life as well:

It is a privilege to teach them, and their experiences in many cases have led them to have a tremendous amount of insight and empathy and imagination, and many of them

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are devoted to reading before they take my class, you know survival brought them to reading. So some of those first ideas that oh this would be doing that population good. I still believe that, but in different ways.

Teacher #4, who was teaching in prison for the first time, also experienced personal transformation:

It really uh heightens and highlights you know freedom vs. being trapped. There's all these themes that are going through the experience that really have nothing to do with [the class], which is supposedly what I taught.

Engaging with challenging topics in a new way and working with students that were motivated to learn led Teacher #4 to realize that she cared about her students: 'That part is a little difficult because you actually start to care about people. I think that's the nature of teaching, isn't it?' As much as this study was about higher education in prison, it was just as much about the transformation of not only the students, but the teachers through the process of engaging in prison education.

Conclusion

In my study, I looked at diverse teacher and student motivation for teaching or taking classes through the Prison College Program at ASU. My findings suggest that students are motivated to take classes while in prison because an affordable education will help them gain legal employment upon release, the classes offered

fit into a flexible schedule, and getting an education demonstrated a quality of character. Teachers were motivated to teach students in prison for social justice reasons. Previous experience working in prisons motivated some to teach in prison in their retirement, especially because of the practicality. Both teachers and students shared the same motivation when it came to flexibility in schedules.

This study obviously has many limitations. First, the sample size is very small, and therefore, it is difficult to draw conclusions to a wider population. Second, the sample of students that participated were only men, therefore making generalizations not possible. Previously, I acknowledged the difficulty in recruiting students because memories of the past can be triggering. Thirdly, the research for this study was at one university. There are many universities that offer college and university classes in prison, so there are many views on these issues.

Although my study has limitations, it still contributes to the body of knowledge about higher education in prison, especially because it gives voice to previously incarcerated students. Some researchers maintain that incarcerated people may not be a reliable source since their stories may not be credible, or they may be told to gain sympathy; for this reason, the prisoner's voice has mostly remained unrecognized and silent.²⁶ Listening to the voice of previously incarcerated students was an honour. I believed their narratives. I believed that they spoke with honesty because there was nothing to gain from either honesty or dishonesty. I was honoured to speak with highly motivated teachers that were passionate about their work and their contribution to social justice in our society.

26. Irwin, T. (2008) 'The 'inside' story: practitioner perspectives on teaching in prison', *The Howard Journal of Criminal Justice*, 47(5), pp. 512–528. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2311.2008.00536.x>