

Literacy Work in Wheatfield Prison, Dublin, Ireland

MARY KETT

Abstract

This paper describes literacy provision in Wheatfield Prison in Dublin, Ireland. Literacy is provided as an integral part of a broad education program designed to foster personal development and prepare prisoners for post-release. The program's originality lies in its ability to offer individualized learning programs within a broad basket of choices that link students into the formal education sector. Participatory approaches that build programs around students' own experiences and motivations are favored. Literacy students are not stigmatized or separated, and may participate in certain courses along with other inmates working at high school diploma or further education levels. A holistic approach to education is adopted and literacy teaching is integrated wherever possible into the broader curriculum, including Instructional Technology (IT) and Creative Arts courses.

Literacy is primarily something people do: it is an activity, located in the space between thought and text. Literacy does not just reside in people's heads as a set of skills to be learnt, and it does not just reside on paper, captured in texts to be analysed. Like all human activity, literacy is essentially social, and it is located in the interaction between people (Barton, Hamilton, & Routledge, 1998, p. 3).

Adult Learning is primarily undertaken on a voluntary, self-motivated basis and in a context where the learner rather than the provider is at the centre of the process. (...) Such a user-driven (approach) challenges the predominance of institutional providers in determining the context and methodologies of the learning experience: it transforms the power relationships between the provider and the learner in favour of the learner and it challenges institutions to develop and implement inclusive policies and practice and processes of learner engagement (Department of Education and Science, 2000, p. 32).

Prison Education in Ireland

Education in Irish prisons is provided by Vocational Education Committees (VECs or local education authorities) that also have responsibility for community-based further and adult education. This service is provided in partnership with the Department of Justice. Other bodies such as the Public Library Service, the Arts Council and the Open University also make a contribution but the VECs are responsible for the day to day management and administration of classes in prisons. This concept of education is a very broad one and is founded on a number of principles that are reflected in the Council of Europe (1990) document "Education in Prison." These principles, broadly summarized, are as follows:

- Basic Education and literacy work are prioritized;
- all prisoners are given, wherever possible, equal access to education;
- education is, as much as possible, similar to that provided in the community;
- the focus is on the development of the whole person;
- education and training have equal status. Education is at all times voluntary;
- the focus is as much as possible on preparing prisoners for life after release.

The program does not include vocational training, which is administered separately by the prison regime.

The Context: Wheatfield Prison

There are currently just over 3000 people imprisoned in Ireland, of whom the vast majority are male. Wheatfield Prison was opened in 1989 and holds approximately 370 male prisoners in two segregated groups. The age range is wide—from 16 or over 60—although most prisoners are in their twenties and thirties. Of the 370, approximately 230 use the Education Unit at any given time. At present, sentence length varies enormously, from 6 months to life imprisonment. There is a "turnover" of 15-20 per month and 20-30 percent of the school population stay for one academic year or more.

The education Unit itself is an integral part of the prison building. Like the rest of the prison it is modern and purpose built and provides good facilities, including large general classrooms, small tutorial rooms, and special rooms for Home Economics, Art, Pottery and Photography, Drama and Music, Crafts, Technology, Horticulture, and Science. Instructional technology (IT) classes are offered and the Unit also has an Open Learning Center. There is a large central gymnasium and a theater.

Prisoners are able to attend school during the working day, as education has equal status with work. This means that a prisoner can attend on a full-time or part-time basis, depending on the range of classes he selects, in conjunction with the Education staff. A majority of prisoners would, however, opt to attend on

a part-time basis and divide their time between school and work or vocational training. Classes are offered during 11 months of the year.

The School Program: Essential Characteristics

We place most emphasis on engaging with the prisoner in directly addressing his educational needs. This student-centered approach means that school applicants are interviewed individually and a program is devised with their active co-operation, based on length of sentence, literacy level, subject preferences and personal goals. This initial interview forms the basis of an on-going process of planning, support and monitoring as each individual works toward his objectives. Once enrolled, students are not required to fit into pre-ordained programs. Approximately 80 percent of Irish prisoners have left school before the age of 16 (O'Mahony, 1997). Experience has taught us that young people and adults who are already alienated from mainstream education need to build confidence and motivation by first addressing educational areas that directly motivate them.

The primary aim is to engage the prisoner in the educational process in a meaningful way for the first time. This may involve, in the first instance, putting to one side issues that the educator deems to be most urgent and addressing the prisoner's concerns. For example, adults with literacy difficulties may not initially be attracted to formal classes to improve these skills, but may be attracted to classes in health and physical education, or the creative arts area. Alternatively, students may only wish to attend literacy classes on a one-to-one basis initially, but then become engaged in other activities as they gain confidence. With their previous negative education experience, students may often make several false starts before engaging in any meaningful way in courses. The essential factor is that they are supported in their efforts to find areas of study that are meaningful to them. Specific interest areas could include particular subjects, vocational training, and the ability to help their children.

Our experience shows that education providers simply cannot be too conscious of the negative images of education that many adults bring back with them to the learning process. Many people in prison who initially express great antipathy or distrust toward formal courses and certification can be drawn back into these courses on a gradual basis. The general "basket" of choices that prisoners are offered revolves around the following subject areas: Basic Education: Literacy and Numeracy; Health and Physical Education; General Studies, leading to certification where appropriate; and Creative Activities, including Music, Drama, Art, Pottery and Crafts.

We therefore strive at all times to integrate literacy tuition into the context of this broader curriculum. There now follows a definition of what we mean by "literacy" and a more detailed description of how we teach.

What Is "Literacy"?

The definition used by Irish prison educators follows closely that outlined by the Irish National Adult Literacy Agency, the non-government organization responsible for the co-ordination and development of adult literacy work at the national level in Ireland. It contrasts with that offered by the U.S. National Summit on Adult Literacy:

...an individual's ability to read, write and speak... compute and solve problems at levels of proficiency necessary to function on the job and in society, to achieve one's goals and develop one's knowledge and potential.

It is broader, more student centered, and places far more emphasis on personal development, reflecting the general approach we take to education as outlined above:

All good adult literacy work starts with the needs of the individual. It respects the adult status of the student, his/her prior knowledge, skills and individual life story and encompasses aspects of personal development—social, economic, emotional, cultural and political. It is also concerned with improving self-esteem and building confidence, and goes far beyond the mere technical skills of communication. The underlying aim of good adult literacy practice is to enable people to understand and reflect critically on their life circumstances, to explore new possibilities, to initiate constructive change (National Adult Literacy Agency, 1999, p. 11).

This definition ensures that we place literacy provision firmly in the broader curriculum where students are offered as many learning opportunities as possible: literacy is viewed as a set of enabling skills which enable adults to develop their full potential.

How Many Prisoners Have Difficulty with Literacy? How Are These Difficulties Expressed?

A national study of literacy levels within the prison population is currently being carried out. This study will replicate the International Adult Literacy Survey, the results of which are driving new policy developments within the broader world of Adult Education in Ireland. However, a local survey carried out in Wheatfield in 1993 investigated how prisoners themselves view their literacy and numeracy difficulties (Kett, 1993). The survey showed that 35 percent of those interviewed felt they had problems with both reading and writing. These figures are hardly surprising, given the number of prisoners who have not completed even initial secondary education. More significant that the actual statistics are the insights into how prisoners' (or any adults') attitudes to literacy change with their life circumstances. It was clear that many only became aware of their literacy problems when they were sentenced. Fifty-seven percent of those with reading and writing difficulties said they had these problems in prison, as against 26 percent who said they had problems outside prison. Many specifically mentioned letter writing and official letters of request to

the Governor. Others said that literacy problems increased the tension and frustration of prison life.

A number of those who had problems with reading and writing pinpointed areas of practical difficulty: interviewing for jobs, filling out forms, and functional reading. Fifty percent predicted that they would have problems in release, in relation to employment or further education.

There was a striking difference between the number of those who had sought help outside of prison, as opposed to inside: only 12 percent as compared with 67 percent. One older man said that he had tried “many times to get help—but daily living, job, family, other things got in the way” (Kett, 1993). In contrast, a large majority had availed themselves of educational opportunities through the Education Unit. The findings of this research study confirm the need for the long-established priority given to literacy within the school curriculum and the importance of taking the student’s priorities and motivations as the starting point for tuition.

Organization of Literacy Provision

New school applicants are interviewed on a weekly basis throughout the year. Every effort is made to respond immediately to a prisoner’s request for help with literacy. Unit officers and other staff are also encouraged to refer potential students for help. We use informal assessment methods, or “self-report,” meaning that we do not use tests or “objective” external standards to measure reading and writing skills. This informal approach is very much the norm in adult literacy work in Ireland. It is also based on our own extensive experience of what works in practice, and is now confirmed by other research findings (Bailey & Coleman, 1998). This research found that adults who wish to return to learning face a range of barriers which inhibit their participation, including shame and embarrassment about their low level of educational attainment, low self-esteem and a lack of confidence in their ability to learn. There is, however, a consciousness of the need to standardize our systems, based in part on the awareness that some prisoners with literacy needs “slip through the net” and do not obtain help. One element of the national study of literacy levels among the prison population referenced above is the development of a “student friendly” screening system in conjunction with the National Adult Literacy Agency. After the initial interview, the applicant is given an individualized learning plan as outlined earlier. Students with very basic skills who cannot deal with simple texts are encouraged to participate in small group sessions, although many are aware of this form of tuition. An alternative can be offered in the form of one-to-one tutorials for short periods. The following case studies illustrate our approach in a more concrete manner.

The Literacy Curriculum: Teaching Practice

Case Study 1: Language Experience

This approach to teaching reading can be used in a variety of ways, for individual and group work. It also

forms the basis for the production of materials for other beginner readers. The student’s own words are written down, adapted and edited with him, line-broken and word-processed with the aid of a computer. The Language Experience method is relevant to both adults and adolescents who are alienated from mainstream culture and education, as other standard texts are often irrelevant and demotivating. It allows their “voice” to be legitimized and valued.

The topics chosen are ones that relate directly to the student’s personal experience. From a practical perspective, this makes reading easier as the language reflects the student’s own speech patterns and vocabulary. A range of exercises to develop sight vocabulary and then independent reading skills can also be devised on the basis of this kind of text. The writings can be personalized, but also functional: the teacher and student mutually determine the kind of texts most suitable. A current publishing project in Wheatfield is a series of interviews with students about their school days and motivations for attending classes in prison. An accompanying tape is to be used for “literacy awareness” training for new teachers and officers. In a prison context, however, students may be particularly wary of using personal accounts of life experiences. Childhood or education can stir painful memories, so the teacher must exercise tact and sensitivity. Many other less personal topics can be adapted to this method, including letter writing. Other students’ writings can be used as a lead in, if the student is not at a very basic level (Shrapnel-Gardiner, 1985). Newspapers, magazines and other functional materials such as application forms can be selected to correspond to the student’s interests, simplified and adapted as necessary.

The Prison Education Service has produced a range of readers in the past 20 years using the Language Experience approach. In most cases the readers are produced locally in Education Units and circulated to others. Some have been distributed through the National Adult Literacy Agency.

A new development of this kind of publishing work in wheatfield is a series of graded readers and workbooks on the theme of the national lottery. In this case, teaching staff have written the texts: the vocabulary is controlled, but is based on the language experience of Irish adults and uses a topic of universal interest that guarantees a familiar storyline. The series is completed with audiotapes and a CD-ROM to encourage independent learning (C.D.V.E.C., 2001).

The more traditional Language Experience approaches to teaching literacy as outlined above can also be adapted using new technologies. Literacy students and teachers in Wheatfield are currently co-operating with others from three other European counties to create exemplary materials for another CD-ROM, including articles and debates that reflect young prisoners’ experiences and opinions. Samples of these materials are available from the Education Unit, Wheatfield Prison.

Kathy Boudin (1993) refers to classroom practice that depends on passivity and the rote learning of isolated skills as running counter to what we know about adult learning in general and how it can be best facilitated. Like Boudin, we try wherever possible to embed literacy acquisition in a broader education that has at its heart problem-posing and critical thinking. There are limitations; some learners do not like this methodology because they find it too demanding and intrusive. However, the basic premise of increasing confidence, and therefore motivation, by focusing on the learner's interests and experiences holds good or many students.

Case Study 2: Extending Literacy Skills with IT

Two of the projects outlined above are using new technology to extend students' learning opportunities. However, most adults with literacy difficulties have no experience of IT and are often initially intimidated by it. The use of computers in literacy classes can easily dispel their fears: students can be introduced to simple keyboard and word processing skills as reinforcement for writing. We have also found that the Open Learning Centre is crucial in encouraging literacy students to widen their involvement in educational activities. The Centre provides open access to a range of multi-media materials and is staffed by teachers who have experience working with literacy students, because those students who are unwilling to work in a group context can often be persuaded to take sessions there. As the work is individualized, no group pressure is felt, and students may progress at their own pace. Many closed bad spellers and others struggling to cope with mainstream courses take advantage of support materials to improve their basic skills.

Case Study 3: Literacy and Drama

Drama workshops are offered as part of a broad creative arts curriculum in Wheatfield. These workshops are open to all students on a weekly basis. Drama can provide a rich source of qualitative experiences for literacy students that build on and extend their existing skills (Hunt, 2000).

A. Using Drama as a methodology for putting learning in context. Drama can be used to create imaginative realities to practice and extend familiar functional literacy "routines." For example, role plays on topics such as buying and selling a car, looking for a flat, or meeting a potential landlady, can be built around other work on form-filling and letter writing. This kind of work challenges students' shyness and builds self-confidence. Most importantly, it provides a living context for learning, within which skills can be practiced and experienced.

B. Creating Plays by using students' experiences. Ideas that students bring can be worked through using a range of drama techniques including improvisation, freeze framing, and thought tracking. Freeze framing involves stopping the action and making "still pictures" with the body. A story can be constructed

with a series of "freezes," like video images. Thought tracking is linked to this technique: it provides a way of getting ideas "out." Other participants, or the teacher, and articulate the individual's thoughts. He can be asked to supply just a word, then a phrase, then a couple of sentences. This method is particularly useful for work with students whose language skills are poor. With the teacher acting as scribe, the ideas can be transformed into metaphor and presented as drama. The students' own words can be extended, and their individual experience transcended beyond literal representation. The end product is then written up, performed, and possibly made available to other learners, both for workshop readings and classroom study (Neelands, 1992).

C. Hearing great language and text. Students can form part of a group working toward a production of one of the great texts in the English language. The focus in this instance is not primarily on the learner's literacy skills, but on his role as a member of a group. The text is made accessible to him by reading aloud or offering a version on tape or video. For example, a recent project adapted Shakespeare's "The Winter's Tale" for performance to both prison and outside audiences. The literacy students involved formed their own interpretation of the story, adapting the universal theme of betrayal and adultery to their own experience. The learner's own spoken version was then recorded by the teacher, using the Language Experience approach described earlier. One student described his experience in these terms: "I think anyone that hasn't done this should give it a go. There's loads of language and it's so different that you can buzz with it. I sing 'He has stockings and smocks and slippers' and I get great enjoyment out of it" (Wheatfield Place of Detention, 2000).

Moving on: Progress to National Certification and Beyond

Of course, a significant number of our literacy students never progress to external certification and we never try to enforce this. Wherever possible and appropriate, however, we encourage students to proceed toward national certification. We use either standard high school examinations that hold real "currency" in today's Ireland, or a relatively new form of certification for adults who have dropped out of the formal system and which can be completed in modular form in three to six months. The education system allows students access to a wide range of vocational qualifications that are interlinked and can be used as stepping stones for further study. Some of these courses relate to Health, Nutrition, Cookery, and Physical Education, and they often attract those who are not initially prepared to admit to needing help with literacy. For further details on these courses, contact the National Council for Vocational Awards on their website: www.ncva.ie. These courses offer another "way in" to adults who have had previous negative experiences of education.

Students work together in groups with the teacher in an atmosphere of informality that differs significantly from the standard classroom approach. As for basic literacy students, the needs and interests of the group are paramount. The teacher must attempt to build on existing strengths, using a “student centered approach” rather than teach the course in a conventional way. Engaging with learners in this way allows them to gradually develop confidence in their own skills and adapt to the external demands imposed by the course. All prisoners engaged in classes are offered the opportunity to take part in pre-release courses and attend the post-release education and guidance center in Dublin city center.

Does Our Approach Work?

In quantitative terms, enrollments in education represent a very significant percentage of the prison population. Of those enrolled in education, 40 percent are involved in literacy and Basic English classes. Forty percent of our students obtain certification of some form.

Qualitative data from other internal research surveys also demonstrate a high degree of prisoner satisfaction with the instructional methodologies outlined above (Kett, 1995).

For many years, basic education in prisons in Ireland has provided blueprints for the development of adult literacy programs in the community, and has led the way in publishing instructional materials and developing approaches to group and team teaching. Long before the publication of the International Adult Literacy Survey statistics, the Prison Education Service was the first statutory education service in Ireland to recognize the need to devote considerable resources within its programs to literacy and basic education.

We are conscious that there are some inmates who we do not reach. As outlined above, we are currently initiating work on a national literacy screening system and developing new guidelines for what we consider to be a quality literacy service. As well as this, prison education does not and cannot operate in a vacuum. The influence of the wider prison system is felt most keenly at present. Although there is a relative lack of sentence management and treatment programs for offenders in Ireland, there are currently a number of new initiatives that will place far greater emphasis on multi-disciplinary approaches to program development.

Conclusion

The author has sought to highlight the principles that underpin the approach to literacy work in one Irish prison. They are not unique and reflect many of the practices found, not only in other prisons, but also in the broader world of adult and community education in Ireland. Obviously there are many constraints on the provision of education in a custodial setting. There are security demands, constant disruptions, in some cases a high turnover of prisoners, and finally the nature of the regime itself, which punishes by containment. These

very real drawbacks and difficulties demand resilience to overcome. Notwithstanding this, it is our considerable experience that a participatory approach fostering personal development can be a real agent for change among prisoners.

References

- Bailey, I., & Coleman, U., (1998). Access and participation in adult literacy schemes. Dublin, National Adult Literacy Agency.
- Barton, D. & Hamilton, M. (1998). Local literacies: Reading and writing in one community. Routledge: London.
- Boudin, K., (1993) Participatory literacy education behind bars: AIDS opens the door. Harvard Educational Review, 63, (2).
- C.D.V.E.C., Dublin, (2001). It could be you! City of Dublin Vocational Education Committee.
- Council of Europe, Strasbourg, (1990). Education in Prison. Committee, Town Hall, Ballsbridge, Dublin. ISBN 92-871-1816-7.
- Department of Education and Science, Stationery Office, Dublin, (2000). Learning for life: White paper on adult education. Author. ISBN 0-7076-6450-0.
- Hunt, H., (2000). Literacy and drama. “The winter’s tale” program notes. Wheatfield Place of Detention, October 2000. Unpublished report. Copies can be obtained from Wheatfield Prison, Cloverhill Rd., Clondalkin, Dublin 22, Ireland.
- Kett, M., (1993). A survey of prisoners’ literacy difficulties in Wheatfield Place of Detention. Unpublished report. Copies can be obtained from Wheatfield Prison, Cloverhill Rd., Clondalkin, Dublin 22, Ireland.
- Kett, M., (1995). Survey of prisoners’ attitudes to education. Wheatfield Place of Detention. Unpublished report.
- National Adult Literacy Agency, Dublin, (1999). Evolving quality framework for adult basic education. Author.
- Neelands, J. (1992). Learning through imagined experience. Hodder and Stoughton. London.
- O’Mahony, P., (1997). Mountjoy prisoners: A sociological and criminological profile. Stationery Office: Dublin.
- Shrapnel-Gardiner, S., (1985). Conversations with strangers. ALBSU/Write First Time: London.

Biographical Sketch

Mary Kett has worked as a teacher, trainer and organizer for over 20 years, both in prisons and community adult literacy work, in both Ireland and the U.K. She is Principal Teacher in Wheatfield Prison in Dublin and is currently on secondment to the Department of Education and Science as Assistant Co-Ordinator at the National Reading Initiative.