Students in diverse environments – supporting education in prisons

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As an Associate Lecturer at the Open University (OU), I have had the opportunity to support a Student in a Secure Environment (known as SiSE). There are now over 150 prisons and 50 Secure Hospital Units providing this scheme. This article will discuss the rewards and challenges of supporting students in a prison environment, and will be supported by comments from a current student.

In this article I reflect on the differences, similarities and challenges faced when supporting students in diverse environments, in this case those who are currently in prison.

# Studying whilst in prison

It should be stated that students in prison are some of the most engaged learners one can experience in a Higher Education HE setting.

*‘One of the main challenges of prison life is keeping the brain occupied, and from the outset I wanted to use my time in prison as an opportunity to learn something new.’*

*-Chris, SiSE student*

As distance learning increasingly moves online, tutors who support SiSEs with limited access to technology face new challenges. This programme offers a tailor-made curriculum, where bespoke study packs have been created to support learning outside of the usual OU online systems(The Open University, 2018). This is key to their success in supporting students, as much of the distance learning aspect of the modern OU is now done using a virtual learning environment (VLE) and interactive messaging forums, which offenders have no access to. For those with limited internet access, prison specific VLEs allow students to access their materials in digital format, without interacting with other students on forums.

In theory this system works for all SiSEs, however these systems work at a rather variable rate of success depending on prison facilities. When Chris, quoted above, started his studies, his first prison was not connected to the Open University virtual campus, so all learning was done using paper based materials, which were not quite the same as the online materials. Further, rules about when one is allowed to study are rather institution dependent.

To date, Chris has been in 3 prisons, a Category B, which is a secure prison, but not maximum security, then a Category D prison, and finally now he is in an Open Prison. The difference in policies across prisons can, and in Chris’s case has, caused issues in studying and keeping on top of assignments. Perhaps counter intuitively, in Chris’s case he found that less secure prisons were more difficult to study in because it is harder to find time and space to study due to prison work requirements.

As well as equipment issues there is also the issue of where one is to study, with cells having a number of distractions and limited space. An added issue is that moving prisons can sometimes cause issues in communication between student and tutor.

# Psychology in Prisons

With all these issues in mind, this does mean not all courses are available, however BPS accredited Psychology is one of them.

OU tutorials are often presented in face-to-face sessions, where tutors can easily facilitate discussions and activities. Increasingly there are online alternatives available, taking place in virtual classrooms that allow a similar degree of interaction and discussion. Online tutorials have the added benefit of being recorded, so absent students do not miss out on learning opportunities. In the SiSE system, even if there is limited internet access available, these recorded sessions are not available. Therefore, staff supporting SiSE students have to provide individual tutorials. Where possible this is done by telephone, but for some students this happens face-to-face in prison. Support may also be offered via email through a member of Prison Staff, depending on prison facilities.

# Reflections on teaching methods

My experience to date has been to support a student, Chris, who was granted day-leave to attend University, and study a level-2 Open University module, providing support via telephone. Initially we had email contact through an Education Officer, but more recently via Chris’s University email address, after approval from his parole officer.

The module I teach is entitled ‘The science of the mind: investigating mental health’. Teaching this topic in itself can be rather tricky, as it covers mental health issues and disabilities, which a number of students on the course may have some experience with. During interactive tutorials or forum discussions, personal comments and experiences inevitably come up. This is part of developing personal relationships and rapport with your students. This isn’t as easy with Chris, and adds more complexity to the role. Supporting a student in a secure environment has been a very unique experience because, there is very limited scope for ‘personal’ discussions and disclosures. The main reason for this is that students are not supposed to disclose to their tutors why they are in prison. The motivation for this is fairly obvious, as revealing their offence could cause issues for the tutor and their ability to support learning in an equal and unbiased way.

Student support in my case was provided via telephone, hailing back to more traditional distance-learning pedagogy (Willis, 1993). Contact was limited to week days between 10am and 4pm, as that is when the student was on day-release and had access to a phone. This is already different to work with other students and tutorials are usually run online in the weekday evenings, and face to face at the weekends.

SiSE student contact time varies according to the module they are studying. In Chris’s case, four 1-hour calls were allotted for the whole module. This presented another issue, as there are 4 assignments, and all other students have 7 tutorials lasting a total of 19 hours.

We developed a method of working whereby tutorials were a two way discussion. This was different to a usual higher education lecture or tutorial, and rather more similar to tutorials at Oxbridge, whereby a small group of students meet to discuss a lecture topic or academic paper in detail(University of Oxford, n.d.). Chris’s educational experience for this module was rather isolated, as a lot of students have access to forums and social media contacts which enable them to discuss topics with their peers and course mates. This is in addition to regular phone and email contact with tutors. These opportunities are not available to SiSEs. Therefore, in SiSE tutorials I was the peer discussion and tutor support. However, I had to remain mindful that this method of teaching is vastly different to the experiences of other students on the course, so it was necessary to develop a way of supporting students equally, whilst employing different teaching styles.

# Feedback as a teaching method

I, like many other HE teachers, use coursework feedback as a method of teaching and supporting all my students(Gibbs & Simpson, 2005), whilst acknowledging some of the issues associated with this (Orsmond & Merry, 2011). In this way I was able to support my SiSE student in a way that was equal to others on the course. However, submitting coursework is another area of potential issue SiSEs, as many are required to submit their coursework via post. This is done by posting it via the Central OU office who forward it on to associate lecturers. The marked script then has to be returned the same way. This means SiSE students have to wait much longer than others to get their results back. In the present case, we were able to find a way, using the dedicated tutor forums for those supporting SiSE, to email assignments to the online submission team, meaning the challenges of marking via post were avoided.

# Module content challenges in a prison context

An interesting content-specific issue experienced whilst working with a SiSE student was in the context of research methods course work. In the 2018 DART-P conference workshop, the need for teachers to be mindful of different cultures and student backgrounds when designing research activities was addressed and discussed. This, and the issue I will now describe, has led me to re-consider some of the examples I use when teaching research methods generally, and think about applicable and more widely-relatable examples for mature and distance learning students. I experienced a rather unique challenge in delivering this course in a SiSE context, as this course is not usually offered to students in prison. Because of this, some of the ethical issues surrounding a data collection exercise had not been addressed.

Part of a data collection exercise on ‘The science of the mind: investigating mental health‘, takes place in the block of work addressing Addictions and Substance Abuse. The study requires students collect data from three participants, enter it into a group wiki database, and analyse group data. The specific exercise involved asking 2 questions about participant’s smoking and alcohol use in the past year, and these participants had to be aged between 12 to 35+. Usually when this coursework is set, the ethical and reliability considerations are discussed in a group tutorial, including obtaining consent, anonymous data collection, reliability of asking adolescents about these behaviours, and being mindful of cultures where these habits are prohibited and approaching recruitment respectfully. An unexpected but related issue arose for Chris in a prison setting, because this type of sensitive question can be rather provoking to inmates, as drinking is not allowed.

*‘At open prisons alcohol is a real problem…If caught they will get thrown out and sent back to a horrible closed prison. The authorities are naturally very tough on drinkers, as in some cases it's linked to their offending …so going round asking fellow inmates when they last had a drink is a really dangerous thing to do... as prisoners are really paranoid about grasses, so asking too many questions like that could get you labelled as a grass. Which really isn't a very desirable label inside prison.’*

After a discussion we worked out who was best to approach to participate and who was best to avoid, and how to make it very clear that this line of questioning was for OU work.

# Rewards of SiSE teaching

Supporting students in a secure environment is very rewarding and provides good experience in supporting diverse student needs, and has been one of the more rewarding parts of my work with the OU to date. However, it also requires extra effort and varied approaches to teaching, when compared to modern distance learning pedagogy.

As with any teaching and learning environment, each student is unique, but for SiSE students, their circumstances, and the limitations associated with that present a number of extra challenges to supporting distance learning than the usual issues experienced by Associate Lecturers. This is not a role that would suit everyone.

I’m pleased to say that Chris has been one of my most successful students in the two years I have taught this module, and has passed the module with coursework and exam submissions of a very high standard. He will continue his studies in Psychology for one more year in Open Prison, and after his release.

I will leave you with some words from Chris about his experiences

*‘It has kept the upper parts of my brain active for over two years…. It makes a huge difference to be able to say I did something very positive with my time in prison.’*

# References

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