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e-Learning Incarcerated: Prison Education and Digital Inclusion

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Abstract: This paper explores an Australian trial of mobile learning technologies, including internet-independent eBook readers loaded with tertiary preparation materials, which attempted to improve access to tertiary courses and pathways for incarcerated students. Attempts to close the digital gap for incarcerated students however reveal deeper and persistent problems within the digitized and vocationalized university, economy, and society. While delivering economic efficiencies and flexibility for some, the digital revolution may also be reducing opportunities for the most marginalized of students such as incarcerated students and other groups without direct internet access. Education technology interventions which aim to prepare incarcerated students for the digital knowledge economy must also consider the situated context of the postmodern prison and the social, political and cultural practices and problems that emerge around the technology. In the face of neoliberal undercurrents fueling the vocationalization of prison education it is particularly necessary to recognize the inherent personal and social value of a humanities education. The challenge is to ensure incarcerated students are not left behind in this digital age and to balance institutional prison priorities such as order and security against opportunities for authentic and current learning experiences within the Humanities.

Keywords: e-learning, Incarcerated Students, Digital Literacy, Digital Inclusion

Introduction: e-learning Incarcerated

Australian higher education, in the post-modern age of time-space compression, has been remade by e-learning, digital texts, and the digitization of teaching materials and methods. Supposedly, these new technology mediated pedagogies ensure distance is no longer a barrier to full and equitable participation in higher education. Despite the early promise of improved access and flexibility, however, the digital revolution has not radically improved the participation share of disadvantaged, isolated and low socio-economic status (LSES) background students. Australia remains a nation divided along lines of social class and geographic location, where non-traditional cohorts (such as those from rural and LSES backgrounds) face significant constraints and are under-represented in higher education. Australians from low socio-economic status backgrounds and regions, especially Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, are also over-represented in rates of incarceration (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS] 2013; White and Perrone 1997; White and Graham 2010; Vinson 2004; Vinson, 2007). Perhaps the most disadvantaged and isolated of all non-traditional students, incarcerated higher education students are typically from low socio-economic status backgrounds and face further formidable obstacles to tertiary study unique to the correctional centre environment. Moreover Australian prisoners are currently facing emerging and compounding problems related to larger neoliberal economic and political shifts which prevent their full and equitable participation in higher education.

Most prisoners in Australia have no direct access to the internet and must rely on education officers, where available, to print out approved online educational resources upon request. Mobile phones, storage media and internet-enabled tablets are typically banned and cannot be brought into the prison proper, even by staff. While some universities provide distance education students with multi-media course resources on compact discs, not all incarcerated students have access to a computer or even to a CD player. Prisoner access to textbooks and computer hardware may be difficult, especially in “secure” or high security units, due to restrictions and limitations on movement, time, space and technology. As a result, offenders who enter the prison with low levels of digital literacy relevant to the rest of the population are further isolated from

and inadequately prepared for the digital economy and society during their period of incarceration (Huijser, Bedford, and Bull 2008). This period of digital disconnection, which for most prisoners is at least two years, thus further increases the inmate's social marginalization and resulting likelihood of reoffending (Huijser, Bedford, and Bull 2008).

Although in principal most public Australian universities claim to prioritize student equity and recruit and support non-traditional students, in reality the sector-wide move to cut costs by putting distance education entirely online is limiting access for incarcerated students and hence perpetuating inequality. While relatively expensive and inflexible, the traditional delivery method of posting printed study packs to distance education students does at least allow the prisoner to complete the course relatively independently (and alone in his or her cell if necessary) by submitting handwritten assignments and work books. The shift to paperless electronic learning and digital texts, however, will make tertiary study difficult if not impossible for many incarcerated students, especially those without access to an education officer or a computer. If Australian incarcerated students are not to be left behind in the digital revolution, the challenges, issues and contradictions of studying the (digital) humanities while incarcerated and disconnected ought to be explored in more detail.

The University of Southern Queensland (USQ) has sought to redress these issues through a number of current and completed projects and partnerships designed to improve access to higher education for incarcerated students using modified digital technologies. One such project was the 2013 *Triple E (Engagement, e-learning and eReaders)* project led by the Open Access College, which distributed 47 eReaders loaded with digital texts to incarcerated USQ tertiary preparation students at five Queensland correctional centers. The leader of this Triple E project and lead author of this paper also visited these centers on a regular rotation to tutor incarcerated university students and to gather qualitative data on the students' experiences of distance education. The authors of this paper also participated in focus groups with incarcerated students enrolled in the University of Southern Queensland's Tertiary Preparation Program which addressed the students' experiences of tertiary education generally, and use of modified digital learning technologies in particular. Tertiary Preparation Program students are also encouraged to keep a regular study journal for the purpose of reflecting on their study experiences, including obstacles and constraints they encounter while completing their program.

Prisons Inc.

As in the United States, incarceration is a growing and increasingly privatized industry in Australia. While the United States has the highest number of prisoners held in privately operated (corporate) prisons, Australia actually has the highest proportion of prisoners (19 percent) in privately operated prisons in the world (Mason 2013). This privatization trend is linked to the global ascendancy of neoliberal ideology over the past twenty years and to cutbacks to the public sector and state services generally. Relatively little is known, even by academics, about the everyday experiences of Australian incarcerated students in the context of the concurrent and compounding impacts of privatization, digitization and neoliberal approaches to education. In part due to their imposed isolation and disconnection, incarcerated students are the virtually invisible and silent tertiary population subgroup of the e-learning age, unavoidably absent from emails, electronic learning management systems (like Blackboard), web course tools, online social forums, electronic course evaluation surveys and online peer support networks (like Facebook). They also make up the missing equity group which, while predominantly from low socio-economic status backgrounds and despite having experienced multiple and severe social disadvantages, rarely rate a mention in national equity policy, objectives and targets. Moreover while privatized prisons in Australia support self-development and education in principle, in reality there may be fundamental tensions between the utilitarian neoliberal imperatives of the (post)modern prison and the humanistic goals of higher education in the humanities disciplines.

Australia's first private prison, Borallon, was established in the state of Queensland in the 1990s and today 24 percent of Queensland prisons are privately operated (Mason 2013, 6). Victoria currently has the highest proportion of privatization at 33 percent, however this lead is likely to be overtaken by Queensland in the apparent planned prison reform or neoliberal 'renewal' to be rolled out by the conservative Newman state government (Mason 2013, 6). The privatization push gathered further momentum when the Queensland Commission of Audit (cited in Alexander and Martin 2013, 32–33) recently recommended that, "the management of all correctional facilities in Queensland" should be opened to a "contestable market" to ensure "value for money." Australia-wide there are eight corporate or private prisons currently operating, managed by GEO Group Australia, Serco Australia, G4S, and GSL Custodial Services (Alexander and Martin 2013, 32). Currently there are 30,775 prisoners held in Australian correctional centers, (with incarceration rates on the rise, especially for women and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples) and the vast majority come from backgrounds of low family income, lack of post-school qualifications, limited education, and limited computer use/internet access (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS] 2013; Vinson 2007; Vinson 2004; White and Perrone 1997; White and Graham 2010). Over 90 percent of Australian prisoners are male, while Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people comprise over one quarter (27 percent or 8,430) of the total prisoner population (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS] 2013).

Prisoner access to technology and higher education varies greatly across the nation's six states, two territories and over one hundred correctional centres. While Australian public policy and individual correctional centres support education in principle, in practice it is increasingly difficult and expensive for incarcerated students to complete postsecondary education, especially for students whose families cannot afford to pay for text books. As an incarcerated USQ student (2014) put it: "I earn \$9 a week. This textbook costs \$136!" Australia's prisoners, like many other non-traditional higher education students, must negotiate a persistent systemic discrimination on the basis of social class. The vast majority of prisoners were unemployed at the time of their incarceration and have limited social support networks—they are Australia's underclass (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS] 2013; Alexander and Martin 2013). Indeed, following the Marxist critique of *The Rich Get Richer and the Poor Get Prison*, social class position and its effects may be the real reason many of them ended up in prison in the first place (Reiman and Leighton 2010).

Australian prisons operate in accordance with international human rights conventions under legislation and principles which provide access to education as a basic human right. Moreover both private and state run facilities value education in principle as a cornerstone of successful social integration, rehabilitation and reentry. In practice, however, incarcerated students may not receive the time, space and technology necessary for equitable or comparable participation in higher education. Moreover neoliberal and utilitarian approaches to education typically frame higher education in the humanities as a luxury or a privilege rather than a realization of human rights. The competing priorities of the post-modern corporate prison are perhaps most evident around access to higher education and access in opposition to security. While correctional centers must attend to their core business of maintaining order and control, these same security measures have undoubtedly made access to technology enhanced learning within prisons complex and difficult. Incarcerated students frequently complain about random lockdowns, cell searches and other security measures which derail their study schedules and disrupt their access to peer tutors, visiting teachers, education officers and computers. As one incarcerated student commented: "There are situations that occur in here that result in the facility being locked down. There is no access to the centre's education officer and no access to the postal system" (Incarcerated USQ TPP student 2013).

For the global corporations invested in the Australian incarceration business, inmates are not only offenders to be rehabilitated, they are also a labour force to be utilized. Incarcerated students in privatized prisons often complain about the amount of time they are conscripted to industry

labour despite requests for more study time. The corporate line is that prisoners are being prepared for the “real” world where they must balance full time work with study commitments. However, this level of focus is often difficult to maintain in the noisy, crowded and sometimes hostile environment of a prison where students are subject to movement restrictions and transfers, often without warning. While it is often assumed prisoners have plenty of time to study, in reality incarcerated students frequently complain that they are too tired, distracted or medicated to study for university after completing their industry work and required training. As one incarcerated USQ TPP student (2013) commented: “They *make* you work here. I work 30 hours a week in here. That’s my biggest concern—trying to balance the work and study (incarcerated USQ TPP student 2013).” Another complained: “the work is mind-numbing, repetitive and mundane. For six hours you do nothing but punch holes in metal and you could be doing it every day for weeks if not years” (Incarcerated USQ TPP student 2014).

Digital Discontents: Indebted and Offline

Like other Australian students, undergraduate incarcerated students have access to the federal government’s Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) which allows them to defer the cost of their higher education fees and pay later through the taxation system if and when their income reaches a threshold level. Although this scheme allows low socio-economic status background students to enter the university system while incarcerated, it does not cover the prohibitive costs of text books, printing or hiring a lap top from the correctional centre. This means many incarcerated students from low socio-economic status backgrounds who start an undergraduate course will find it difficult if not impossible to complete without financial support from sympathetic family members. It also means they acquire a debt which they will eventually be required to pay back if employed upon their release. Incarcerated students are often aware of this accumulated HECS debt and their right to receive a comparable minimum standard of service from their university. The incarcerated students who participated in this trial were also acutely aware that their university study materials and methods were not always comparable to those available to students outside the prison. They were frequently frustrated by the lack of direct and instant email access to lecturers and by broken links or blank spaces where internet links, YouTube videos and other multi-media resources should be. They were also frequently frustrated by long delays in receiving university course materials only to find these materials were not always appropriate or adaptable to an offline study environment. Perhaps due to the ascendancy of neoliberal discourses and attitudes in universities, prisons and other corporatized institutions, incarcerated students tend to frame their complaints (when provided with an opportunity to be heard) in terms of consumer rights rather than human rights. They question for example whether they are receiving good “service” and “value for money” for the education they are paying for (through the Australian government’s HECS system).

The incarcerated students who participated in the *Triple E* eReaders project were also acutely aware that it is part of their punishment to be cut off, without access to ‘smart’ phones, tablets or other internet enabled mobile devices, from the networked online and instant communication of the post-modern world. Indeed their sense that the social and cultural world was moving on without them was one of the most frequently mentioned pains of their imprisonment. As one incarcerated USQ student (2013) commented: “Do you know the first thing I’m going to do when I get out of here? Check my email and Facebook!” In our networked digital age, enforced social and cultural isolation is perhaps the most severe and debilitating of punishments. As another incarcerated student (2013) commented: “It’s so hard to plan ahead in here. At home you can just jump on the net and you’re there. Its information I crave in here.” Another incarcerated student (2013) explained:

I like getting on the computer and searching when I do research. In here I found the information limited in books. It would be a lot easier to study if I had the internet to search. It gives you a lot more information. There are only a limited number of computers and its hard trying to get access to computers. It really is an access issue—access to information and access to help. When I did the tertiary preparation program last time outside I was working as a carpenter and I did it at night. I used to email somebody if I got stuck. You could email the tutors and there was the online forum where students could chat to each other. It's a lot more difficult to study inside, trying to find time when you can study and getting motivated in that time. It's more difficult to stay motivated here than outside. (Incarcerated USQ TPP student, 2013)

It may be possible to provide incarcerated students with a limited degree of internet access for educational purposes without significantly compromising security, as seems to be the case in European prison systems. Moreover, the University of Southern Queensland is currently developing internet simulations on a Stand Alone Moodle learning management system which may run on tablet computers which may also improve digital access for incarcerated students. The University of Southern Queensland is currently running a number of projects funded by the Australian federal government's Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) which will increase the educational access, retention and success of incarcerated students and support their transition from print-based to digital learning environments. These digital innovation and support projects face many challenges however related not just to technology but to larger political, social and economic contexts, pressures and priorities.

Whither the (Digital) Humanities: Education versus Training on the Inside

The humanities disciplines are a popular choice for incarcerated students not only because these programs can often be completed in relative isolation, without field work, complex technologies or compulsory practicum components, but because these disciplines offer a humanistic opportunity for self-expression, self-understanding and self-growth. For incarcerated students in particular, the humanities fulfill a fundamental and very human need to reflect on ourselves and reinterpret our actions, decisions, morality, culture, personal history and social positioning. However, the dominant narrow and neoliberal focus on education for employability has taken its toll on the humanities both outside and inside Australia's prisons. Unlike the vocational training which is valued and valorized by the corporate prison as practical and useful, the liberal arts are subject to reinterpretation as a liberal luxury or (worse) an unprofitable economic inefficiency. The dominance of vocational training over postsecondary humanities education is likely to gather further momentum with the progressive privatization of Queensland prison operations in the coming years. Moreover, this privatization push may lead to further conflict between the more humanistic broad goals of learning for self-development and social engagement versus the restrictive, reductionist human capital imperative of turning prisoners (and other students) into efficient, employable workers fit for the "machine" of industry. Although partnerships with prisons are important and necessary to improve the experiences of incarcerated students, universities must be wary of selling their projects in human capital terms, as this discourse ultimately furthers the agenda of neoliberal reform. Moreover, human capitalization may be counterproductive on its own terms because it does not adequately prepare people (as opposed to workers) for the perpetual change of a postindustrial workplace. Reducing recidivism in a postmodern world requires respecting and recognizing the humanities, and the digital humanities in particular, as a necessity rather than a luxury for incarcerated students.

While employment is undoubtedly a key element in successful rehabilitation and reentry, in the postmodern labour market no degree or certificate is a guarantee of economic security. A humanities education can not only potentially reduce recidivism but also facilitate the critical

thinking skills, sense of self, individual and social understandings which enable individuals to deal with change both inside and outside the prison gates. Prisoners who have been educated or “skilled up” only in a narrow vocational sense may have difficulty adapting upon release if the fast-paced or “speed” economy has moved on without them.

While a higher education in the humanities is a point of access for reflecting upon identity for many students, incarcerated students in particular seem to have a heightened awareness and appreciation of education as a source of personal and social identity and transformation:

“I left school in grade 9 and started working full time. I’ve got six kids now. I figure I should get some education. To prove I can do it and to set a good example for them.” (Incarcerated USQ TPP student 2013)

“Having my kids see me move on to a career so my kids can see I am going to turn my life around. Hopefully I can turn things around because I don’t want them thinking its fine to come to jail because it’s not.” (Incarcerated USQ TPP student 2013)

“Hopefully just to continue my education and proving it to myself. It’s a personal thing for me to prove it to myself.” (Incarcerated USQ TPP student 2013)

“I love study, I’m getting stronger in mind, and it’s better than weightlifting like other guys around here like.” (Incarcerated USQ TPP student 2014)

“I hope it will give my life a bit of meaning.” (Incarcerated USQ TPP student 2014)

“People don’t know me and what I can do. But I can be good at stuff.” (Incarcerated USQ TPP student 2014)

The humanities disciplines in particular offer work that is fundamental to identity construction and reconstruction, such as writing and talking through self-narratives; stories about who we are, where we have been and what has shaped us along the way. The story and identity of ‘student’ is particularly meaningful within prisons not only because it determines the inmate’s allocation of time and relation to industry but also because it legitimates the inmate’s construction of a new identity, more productive social relationships and a more positive life course. Higher education can be an opportunity to rewrite one’s self-narrative or life story. In our experience, the USQ teaching visits were especially important for the prisoners in part because they provided them with a fresh audience for their renewed identity and fledgling performance of ‘university student,’ as well as an expert (and, in their eyes, relatively unbiased) “other” to legitimate that role. The identity of student therefore, becomes a marker the individual uses to distance himself (or herself) from the adverse experiences of incarceration. As UK researchers such as Wilson and Reuss (2000), Watts (2010), and Pike and Adams (2012) have pointed out, the identity of student becomes a foundation stone in building rehabilitation out of incarceration.

Vocational training and parole programs alone cannot provide the same space of self-determination and self-development which higher learning in the humanities allows. As UK researchers such as Wilson and Reuss (2000), Watts (2010), and Pike and Adams (2012) have suggested, a sense of control over one’s future and one’s future self is fundamental to successful rehabilitation and social reentry. Planning for successful resettlement in the long term requires facilitating self-management and a sense of control, yet sadly, “In here we have no control over anything” (Incarcerated USQ TPP student 2013). As Watts (2010, 62) has argued, fostering healthy self-identities must be an essential component of prison pedagogy. As Reuss (2000) explains, truly transformative education must address the life story and life history of the prisoner as a person. It follows, facilitating digital literacy behind bars also necessitates social and cultural literacy in context as part of a broader education in the humanities. Moreover, as Reuss (2000)

and Wilson and Reuss (2000) have argued, if prison education is to break the revolving door of disadvantage and recidivism it must recognize the inherent personal and social value of holistic teaching and learning. The humanities and the digital humanities in particular, have the potential to be an important part of this rehabilitative project in Australian prisons.

Barriers Faced by Incarcerated Tertiary Students

Although all Australian universities and most staff strive to promote and foster inclusive learning environments, systemic barriers and cumulative disadvantage mean incarcerated students face multiple barriers which many academics are not fully aware of. As one incarcerated student commented: “I really struggled as there was no teacher or anyone to help. It was very slow to get any answers to questions. You need access to a phone or a person to get answers to questions and immediate feedback” (Incarcerated USQ TPP student 2014). While student inmates should theoretically have the same or comparable materials, access and methods as any other tertiary student, in reality, many prisoners do not have the means or opportunity to understand and enforce their education rights. Moreover, most do not have the opportunity to exercise even limited consumer rights, as the (sometimes disgruntled) consumers of higher education commodities and services, until they exit prison, plug in and connect online. Many university lecturers are not aware they actually have incarcerated students in their courses until there is a problem and they are contacted by a corrective services education officer (in the instances when the incarcerated student has some access to an education officer to speak on their behalf). In the main, incarcerated students are invisible and silent in the digital university—they are the ‘lost souls’ of the postmodern academic machine. In the concurrent context of neoliberal reforms to Australian universities, wherein academics themselves are typically overworked, overcommitted and overwhelmed ‘zombies’ (see Ryan 2012), this may not be surprising. In Australia’s digitized, mass, postsecondary education system, increasingly driven by bureaucratization and monetarization, (see Ryan 2012), incarcerated students may be seen to represent an expensive “problem” because they almost always require exceptions to the rules and some degree of individualized attention. In a sense the incarcerated student is also the “canary in the coalmine” of the corporatized, vocationalized and digitized university and its competing priorities of economic efficiency, access and equity. The exacerbated situation of the incarcerated tertiary student also points to persistent problems within an unequal digital economy and society, and those who are left behind. Digital illiteracy is frequently another element of cumulative and historical disadvantage for the incarcerated: “I’ve never owned a Personal Computer... I didn’t use personal computers until I came here—we didn’t have them when I was at school” (Incarcerated USQ TPP student 2014).

At the moment and at the very least, university teachers and course developers need to consider the needs of incarcerated students, who are mostly still offline, when choosing digital sources, digital texts and digital methods. Incarcerated students also require more flexible assessment due dates and institutional flexibility generally, to allow for unanticipated and unpredictable disruptions to their study schedule such as offender locks downs and lay-offs or turn-over of education centre staff. Many incarcerated students cannot afford textbooks and face long delays when ordering library books and course materials through the mail. Many incarcerated students will also be required to work designated hours in industry with limited time and space to study after hours in noisy, shared accommodation. In secure units in some prisons, incarcerated students will not have access to a computer to type on or a desk to write on. On top of this, incarcerated students commonly deal with drug and alcohol dependency issues, depression/anxiety and poor physical or mental health which may require medication which makes it difficult for them to concentrate. Of course these are obstacles, barriers and constraints which may also be experienced to some degree by low socio-economic status background students on the outside as well. This leads to another largely invisible and unspoken issue

incarcerated students commonly face which is implicit discrimination based on their status as offenders or convicted criminals. The current social, economic and political climate of fierce competition and financial hardship feeds a popular misconception that offenders are provided with better access to education than their victims. Hence prison education advocates must be prepared to guard against the assumption that incarcerated students are somehow less deserving of scholarships, resources and exemptions than other students, particularly because education reduces recidivism and leads to a more just and safe society for all.

Technology: Problem or Solution

The USQ OAC provision of eBook readers loaded with course content was an attempt to fill the digital “gap” for offline student inmates and provide a solution of sorts to some of these identified barriers to full participation encountered by Australian incarcerated students. This project was also indebted to a number of larger innovative USQ projects and partnerships with Queensland prisons which are working together to improve access for incarcerated USQ students. Australian incarcerated students in the main are undoubtedly still disadvantaged by unreliable access to the internet and personal computers. One of the common and key learnings thus far however is that the issue of incarcerated students within the digital university is a complex and multifaceted “problem” which cannot be solved by technological interventions alone. For incarcerated students in particular, technology cannot replace good teaching; it can only support it. Moreover the mere presence of the most innovative, mobile, user-friendly technology will not improve access and outcomes if the users on the ground do not have the time, space, resources, energy and motivation to engage it. The technology must also be contextualized or “humanized” which in part is what this article has attempted to do. Moreover, it is important to raise awareness and understanding of the complex social, cultural and political barriers faced by incarcerated adult distance education students to ensure the long term success of e-learning initiatives aimed at non-traditional and isolated students. In our opinion, the way forward is to focus on sustaining and creating social systems which support a higher learning culture, with the technology being an important tool to facilitate this process. Moreover, the humanities, especially the digital humanities, must play a proactive role in humanizing the postmodern prison.

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