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## **Learning for liberation, teaching for transformation: Can education in prison prepare prisoners for active citizenship?**

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### **Abstract**

The idea that education can imbue the learner with the skills, values and attitudes necessary for active citizenship has come to permeate mainstream educational discourse. This paper examines the relevance of that discourse for prison education and considers what it may have to offer the prison learner? It suggests that it has much to offer because 'citizenship' is itself a learning process that instils developmental and transformative change. Thus, prison educators should not only think of learning as a key dimension of citizenship but citizenship as a key dimension of learning. Accordingly, 'civic competency' should be seen to be just one more 'literacy' prisoners need to master in order to lessen their educational, social and political marginalisation. The paper concludes with the argument that civic competency can be taught best within the paradigm of transformative learning because that ideology and approach is focused less on enabling prisoners to know their place in society and more on enabling them re-conceptualise their place in society.

**Keywords:** prison education, citizenship education, active citizenship, transformative learning

### **Introduction**

What is the purpose of prison education?<sup>i</sup> This apparently straightforward question tends to elicit a variety of seemingly disparate responses. Generally, they range from the esoteric view that prisoner education lessens the damage caused by imprisonment (Costelloe & Warner, 2008; Behan, 2007), to the more prosaic suggestion that its function is to up-skill and ready prisoners for employment after release (Schuller, 2009; Dawe, 2007; Harper & Chitty, 2005). Of course, it is tempting to conclude that its purpose lies somewhere along that continuum but this article proposes that perhaps it is something else entirely. That proposition being that prisoner education should be seen as an end in itself and not just a means to an end. That is not to say that the other viewpoints are mistaken. Arguably prisons are inherently damaging as regardless of the quality of regime or facilities, the vast majority of people leave prison more damaged or have a more fractured life than when they entered. Undoubtedly employment is a key factor in reducing recidivism and attempts to improve prisoners' employability are necessary and worthwhile. While prison education can both lessen the damage caused by imprisonment and boost the prisoner's employability, it is a moot point whether either should be its main objective. Perhaps, instead the focus should be on the educative process by and through which the prisoner navigates his way through his sentence and beyond rather than a raging debate on the objectives of prisoner education.

It would seem that as with many of society's ills, for far too long education has been touted as a panacea for tackling crime and criminality. Accordingly, we should be wary of asking too much, and expecting too much, of education. After all, people do not commit crimes simply because they have failed at education, or have been failed by education. And merely filling the education deficit while in prison will rarely prevent further crime. None the less, education in prison can have the most profound impact in bringing prisoners back into society. Not only in terms of reintegration or resettlement but more so in terms of the accepted belief that education, and in particular, lifelong and lifewide learning, has a significant role to play in bringing the disenfranchised, the marginalized, and the disaffected 'back into society' (European Commission, 2010; UNESCO, 2002; Government of Ireland, 2000).

Undoubtedly prisoners are among society's most excluded; if only because the act of imprisonment itself physically, socially and psychologically removes them from society. Social exclusion results in disempowerment, limited life chances and a diminished quality of life. In the case of prisoners, such difficulties are compounded further by sustained negative portrayals of their personal lives, values and communities. This could lead one to suggest that many may manifest feelings of alienation, marginalisation and disaffection; feelings which would appear to be rooted in, and emanate from, a sense of inequality, mistrust and marginalisation. For many prisoners, imprisonment can be viewed as the final manifestation of their deeply held feelings of social exclusion and marginalisation. In addition, it can confirm their misgivings that intrinsically they are not worthy citizens and have little to contribute to society. This in turn feeds their perception that generally they are excluded systematically from society and its accepted values. However, if one holds the view that education can combat the exclusion of society's most marginalised and disenfranchised citizens, then one must also hold the view that education can 'bring prisoners back into society'.

But education in prison can only achieve that aim if the education provided ensures prisoners come to find societal values meaningful and relevant to them. Without this, they will never become active citizens and indeed why should they? Therefore the type of education provided is the key to the solution. If prisoners are not made to feel a part of society, if they are not encouraged to be active citizens, if they fail to see any benefits accruing from active citizenship, then they will continue to reject society and its values. However, prison education can help counter such rejection by preparing the prisoner for active citizenship. It can do so not simply by nurturing and exemplifying the knowledge, values, skills and ideological frameworks necessary for good citizenship; but because citizenship is itself a learning process that imputes a developmental and transformative impact on the learner (Delanty, 2003). The remainder of this paper explores the idea that prison education that is embedded in the ideals and practices of transformative learning, and which is in turn focused on preparing the prisoner for active citizenship, is the most realistic, appropriate and meaningful to the lives of prisoners before and after release.

Recent developments in mainstream education suggest that concepts such as citizenship, inclusion and democracy have become inextricably linked to changes in educational policy and practice across Europe. A major discursive shift in European education debate has placed a new emphasis on the democratic and civic outcomes of the

education process and has introduced the concept of 'social and civic competence' (Hoskins, 2008). This has led to a prioritisation of education for citizenship and the teaching of democracy as mechanisms for the promotion and support of active citizenship (Council of Europe, 2010; 2009; 2008; European Commission, 2008; 2005a; 2005b). This has translated into practice to such a degree that citizenship education now plays an unprecedented role as a core component in school curricula and is increasingly embedded across provision. The driving force behind this is the desire for increased European cooperation and unity. The rationale is that education can foster the principles of civic responsibility, communal interdependence, diversity, and concepts of freedom and human rights; principles considered to be the bedrock for European social cohesion.

This shift in discourse has meant that the term active citizenship<sup>ii</sup> has become embedded in education policy and practice, and indeed the public psyche. For example, the *Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training* set out four long-term strategic objectives for Member States, one of which is 'promoting equity, social cohesion and active citizenship' (European Commission 2009, p. C119/3). Perhaps of all the current EU initiatives, the European Qualifications Framework (2008, p. 9) best reflects this new emphasis, identifying as it does eight key competences 'which all individuals need for personal fulfilment and development, active citizenship, social inclusion and employment'. Unsurprisingly, 'social and civic competency' is identified as one of the eight key competencies all European citizens should have acquired by the end of compulsory schooling and which they will need to update and maintain throughout life (European Commission, 2008, p. 9).

But how relevant is this rhetoric to the practice and philosophy of prison education? How can concepts such as the citizen learner, or education for democratic citizenship, have meaning for the lives and aspirations of prisoners? And just how effective is 'social and civic competency' in preparing prisoners for life after release, particularly in light of earlier comments regarding exclusion and marginalisation? Perhaps the simple answer suggests that if the aim of the new educational discourse is to foster an informed and engaged citizenry, and an aim of prison education is to foster law abiding citizens, then it would seem to be a match made in heaven as both aims are merely different sides of the same coin. This particular coin being the currency of choice as research indicates that high levels of social participation and connectedness can contribute to the well being of society as well as to the resilience of individuals and communities (NESC Report, 2009; Aabs & Veldhus, 2006; Edwards, 2004; Putnam, 2000). But how can this work in practice, how can education in prison transform so-called 'bad citizens' into so-called 'good citizens', how can it transform disgruntled and marginalised citizens into informed and critically engaged citizens?

Perhaps the first step lies in transforming prison schools. Prisons by their very nature are the antithesis of democracy. According to Wright & Gehring (2008), prison culture is alienating, bureaucratic, status oriented, disciplinary, and brutal in its capacity to strip a prisoner's sense of self, hope and meaning. Imprisonment does little to promote a sense of empathy, agency and autonomy, each of which are prerequisites for democratic action. Therefore, it would seem that there is a role for prison education in providing a counter-balance by creating spaces where prisoners can develop political efficacy and social capital by observing, imitating and practising the skills and competencies

necessary for active citizenship. If prison schools become democratic forums that encourage dialogue, equalise power relations, and provide conditions where prisoners learn about democracy by practising democracy, then the knowledge, skills and habits necessary for good citizenship can be taught and practiced within that context. In short, by becoming democratic forums, prison schools can enable prisoners develop a repertoire of civic dispositions and competencies. The importance of this cannot be overstated if Aabs and Veldhuis (2006, p. 21) are correcting in suggesting that 'competencies are preconditions of behaviour, which result from learning'.

If they are correct, it would be judicious to suggest the first step is to ensure that prison schools become micropractices of democracy and exemplars of engaged citizenship. Another step would be to extend this beyond the education arena and into other areas and aspects of prison life with the ultimate aim being the transfer into community life following release. In this way, the skills and capacity for active citizenship developed in the education setting would be transplanted and honed in the wider prison environment before being applied and harvested in the community following release. This is why simply placing civic and citizenship classes at the core of the prison curriculum is not enough. And of course, simply promoting and providing a citizenship forum is not enough either. To make citizenship education more meaningful and educative, to ensure it is a learning process rather than just a learning practice, prison education must be grounded in an ideology that is focused less on enabling prisoners know their place in society and more on enabling them to re-conceptualise their place in society.

To enable such thoughtful abstraction and application, to ensure that any such re-conceptualisation is both real and lasting, it is necessary for citizenship education to move beyond the mere acquisitions of skills, and into meaning making, and ultimately application and transfer. This is possible because the learning of citizenship is a developmental phenomenon in itself requiring as it does the development of higher order creative and critical thinking skills within which certain competencies, values, dispositions, knowledge and understandings are embedded. Or as Kymlicka (2002, p. 293) asserts, 'citizenship education is not just a matter of learning the basic facts about the institutions and procedures of political life; it also involves acquiring a range of dispositions, virtues and loyalties that are immediately bound up with the practice of democratic citizenship'. In other words, one should not only think of learning as a key dimension of citizenship but view citizenship as a key dimension of learning.

To explain further, it might be useful to draw an analogy with the varying perceptions educationalists have of the role and significance of literacy learning, in particular, the distinction between functional and critical literacy. Advocates of functional literacy consider literacy to be a cogitative skill; the ability to read and write. It is a skill that can be taught just like learning to drive and nothing more. Critical literacy on the other hand is viewed as intellectual transformation. It is more than the simple acquisition of a skill; instead, through the process of learning that skill, the learner's cognitive and intellectual development is enhanced and transformed. Proponents would suggest that 'reading is understanding the world, writing is reshaping it' (Word Track, 2012, para 5). In this way, literacy is seen as an empowering and powerful tool used to reshape the world in which we live. It is my contention that citizenship learning operates in much

the same manner and is of similarly fundamental importance. Thus it may be useful for prison educators to think in terms of 'citizenship literacy' and consider civic competency to be just one more literacy that their learners need to master.

This type of educational ideology and approach is grounded in the wider paradigm of transformative learning<sup>iii</sup> (Mezirow, 2000, 1997, 1991). While it is beyond the scope of this article to delve in any great depth into that particular theory of education, it is raised here because the crux of this paper is the suggestion that the most appropriate model of prison education should be embedded in the ideals and practices of transformative learning. In short, prison education must have a particular goal, a particular content and a particular style, the particularities of which should be grounded in transformative learning. Quite simply, its appropriateness for prison education is because, as its name suggests, transformative learning can lead to profound change in an individual, change which comes about through a major paradigm shift, the process of perspective transformation. This perspective transformation entails three significant dimensions; psychological, convictional and behavioural (Clark, 1993; Mezirow, 1991) which lead to and mirror three incremental changes in the learner; changes in understanding of the self, changes in world view, and changes in behaviour. Thus we can recognise the possibility for self-transformation and the potential for prison education to bring about significant and lasting change in a prisoner's conscientisation, ideology and direction. Essentially, it can do so because it instils the capacity to transform perceptions of self and others, and it is these perceptions that determine conduct and behaviour. If transformative learning is a realistic paradigm through which prison education can be filtered, if it is the workshop within which the learner's perspective transformations are forged, then citizenship education should be to the forefront of the prison educator's arsenal.

Citizenship education should be the weapon of choice because it is a learning process that develops critical thinking ability, metacognition, and the capacity for reasoned, reasonable and reflective thinking, without which transformative learning cannot operate. The development of critical reflexivity and similar higher order thinking skills being crucial to the success of transformative learning. Critical reflection, fostered by and through citizenship education, forces the learner to challenge the validity of his/her preconceptions and presuppositions and it is this which can lead to perspective transformation. Through engaging in reflective practice, the prisoner becomes armed with the understanding and capacity to become more open-minded and adaptive, and equipped to reject previously held misconceptions and unquestioned value systems. Arising from the critical reflection, conscientization and perspective transformation inherent in transformative learning, any significant changes the prisoner makes in his/her perceptions, attitudes, and worldview will not only be more measured and thoughtful but also more likely to be lasting.

Therefore, as a consequence of transformative learning and through the medium of citizenship education, prisoners can gain the skills and develop the capacity to reveal how their presuppositions are socially constructed, and most importantly, how they can be dismantled. Without this ability and these skills, the prisoner will struggle to become a morally and civically responsible individual who recognises that they are an integral part of a much wider social fabric. The time spent in prison will be a wasted opportunity

and will merely serve to prove to the prisoner that they are not and may never be a valued member of society. They will continue to think of active citizenship as being of little relevance to them, they will fail to recognise that society's successes are theirs also, just as they will fail to understand that society's problems are also their responsibility. They will struggle to consider in any depth the moral and civic dimensions to their actions and behaviours, and thus fail to acknowledge that with rights come responsibilities.

However as we have seen, citizenship education can give the prisoner the space, the skills and the disposition to reconsider their place in the grand scheme of things. Because it develops metacognition and higher order thinking skills in tandem with creating democratic spaces in which prisoners can review their place in society and their role as citizens, it affords prisoners the capacity, desire and possibility to work against negative inevitabilities. In this way, citizenship education equips them with the skills and capacity to review their lives and rebuild them. In essence, it enables prisoners re-evaluate, re-imagine and reshape their lives. What better purpose then for prison education?

#### **Biographical Note**

Anne Costelloe has worked as an educator in Mountjoy prison for over 20 years. She is a former Chairperson of the European Prison Education Association (EPEA), and is the Editor of the Practitioner Section of the Journal of Prison Education and Re-entry (JPER). Dr Costelloe received a PhD for research into what motivates prisoners to participate in education (2003). She has published widely on issues surrounding prisoner education and was a lead contributor to the European Commission report "Prison education and training in Europe – a review and commentary of existing literature, analysis and evaluation" (2011).

#### **Notes**

<sup>i</sup>Prison education is well established in all Irish prisons. Since the early 1970's, the Education and Training Boards Ireland (known previously as the VEC's) have been the primary providers. Additional services are provided by other educational agencies including the Public Library Services, the Open University and the Arts Council. Provision is grounded in an Adult Education philosophy which promotes a student-centred approach focused on the development of the whole person and meeting the needs of the learner. As with all adult education endeavours, attendance is voluntary and the percentage of the prison population that attends classes varies from prison to prison. Perhaps what sets Irish prison education apart is the emphasis on a broad curriculum ranging from courses in basic education to the liberal arts, the majority of which are accredited. Further details can be found at [www.irishprisons.ie](http://www.irishprisons.ie). For an international comparative study see: [http://ec.europa.eu/education/adult/doc/literature\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/education/adult/doc/literature_en.pdf)

<sup>ii</sup>For the purposes of this article, active citizenship infers to "participation in civil society, community and/or political life characterised by mutual respect and non-violence and in accordance with human rights and democracy" (Hoskins et al., 2008, p.11).

<sup>iii</sup>For a more in-depth analysis see: <http://www.transformativelearning.org/>

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