Understanding Prisoner Learning

Complexities and Barriers
What is Prisoner Learning?

- Learning is at the root of personal change and growth.
- Learning which occurs within prisoners as they experience the social and physical environment of prison.
Informal Learning

♦ Foley (1995) defines informal learning as that which occurs when people consciously try to learn through their experiences.

♦ Formal learning is “approved”, controlled by prison administration – affecting choice, learning climate and learner motivation.

♦ Learning outcomes have moral, cultural and social consequences.
Social Relationships

- The social environment shapes what is learned and why the learning is important.
- Social relations reveal the hidden curriculum
- Social learning theory and crime
Model of Prisoner Learning

- Environmental System – politics, media, government policies, community influence
- Individual System – cognitive style, personality, prior education, age, gender
- Learning System – resources, staff support, learning design, options and choice
- Social System – group dynamics, peer support, conformity pressure
- Organisational System – prison policies and practice, culture, staff attitude and commitment
Figure 2.2  Model of Prisoner Learning
(Adapted from Cooksey & Gates, 1995)
Barriers to Learning

- Situational
- Dispositional
- Institutional
Present Study

- 14 staff, 1 current prisoner, 3 ex-prisoners
- Regional Australian prison
Dispositional Barriers

- Internal to the learner
- Psychosocial – values and beliefs
- Informational – gaining access to knowledge and information
Prior to Incarceration

- Disadvantaged childhoods
- Early traumas resulting in a lack of cognitive development
- Previous educational failure
- Low levels of formal education
- Generational poverty
- Family issues
- Drug and alcohol abuse
- Mental illness and acquired brain injury
Lived Experience of Prison

- Stress of prison life
- Loss, separation and hopelessness
- Loss of privacy, rights and autonomy
- Reinforcement of their beliefs about authority and the „system“
- Lack of access or difficulty accessing services
- Peer influence/pressure
- What to do? Influence of parole
Situational Barriers

- External to the learner and often beyond their control
- Control and approval of learning
- Lack of remuneration
- Sentence length
- Boredom, prison culture and consistency in management
Institutional Barriers

- The practices and procedures of the institution that prevent or discourage participation
- Reliant on the workings of the system, lack of personal power
- Access to health care and leading a healthy lifestyle
- Need for staff to be involved and to be trained, staff turnover and recruitment
- Internal processes, systems and communication
- Prison design and architecture
- Security issues
- Staff attitude and culture
Institutional Barriers

- Access to learning resources
- Access to recreational and sport resources
- Access to library services
- Access to technology and ICT
- Broken promises
Conclusion

- Learning is valued by prisoners
- By working to understand and break down these barriers we can create a better future