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Digital exclusion or learning exclusion? An ethnographic study of adult male distance learners in English prisons

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Previous research has highlighted the value of technology to enhance learning. However, digital inclusion research has argued that many issues such as skills, access, usability and choice impact on the effectiveness of technology to enhance learning. The findings in this paper add to the debate by highlighting the importance of value and context. In particular, the value that institutions and individuals place on the role of further and higher distance learning in a prison can affect technology-enhanced learning in that context. This research identified that despite good IT skills and improved technologies, prison learners' access and use of technology is hampered by conflicting priorities amongst the multiple organisations controlling prisoner activities. This can lead to a prison in which menial work is valued far higher than learning. Technology-enhanced distance learning, perceived by many to be a lifeline in a desolate environment, is heavily restricted in such prisons. The situation is thought to be deteriorating as the number of organisations involved increases and the Government's plans for "working" prisons gather pace.

Keywords: social inclusion; digital inclusion; distance learning; higher education; prisoner reintegration

Introduction

Two-thirds of released adult male prisoners in England are reconvicted within 2 years (Bynner 2009). Education for prisoners is important, not only as a basic human right (United Nations 2009) but in order to break the cycle of reoffending by providing qualifications and skills for employment on release (Department of Business, Innovation & Skills [BIS] 2006) and by providing social and human capital (Prisoners Education Trust 2009; Schuller 2009). Higher education, especially, is considered to be transformative for prisoners (Duguid and Pawson 1998; Wilson and Reuss 2000). However, the bulk of higher education in prison is through distance learning which brings immense challenges. Online delivery for a global market, interactive online learning and collaborative assessment requirements make this mode of study virtually inaccessible to those in prison without internet access (Hancock 2010; Pike 2010). Internationally, technology for learning in prison is improving. Some countries now have secure internet access which enhances prisoners' learning (Eikeland, Manger, and Asbjornsen 2009). In England there is a new resettlement tool, the Virtual Campus, which is being rolled out to most prisons (BIS 2011). However,

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digital inclusion research argues that many issues impact on the effectiveness of technology to enhance learning. This paper provides a background to education in prison, reviewing improvements to technology for learning in the light of digital inclusion literature. The paper then presents research which adopted an in-depth, ethnographic and interdisciplinary approach (as suggested by Seale 2009), to investigate the challenges for higher level distance learners in prison (student-inmates). In particular, the research aimed to identify what technology was available to student-inmates, how it was accessed and used to support learning and the cultural attitudes towards technology-supported learning in prison. Data was collected from ten adult male student-inmates and six staff in three prisons in England. A detailed thematic analysis was conducted (Braun and Clark 2006), and the findings are discussed in relation to Government plans for reform of the Criminal Justice System (Ministry of Justice [MoJ] 2010) and new higher education funding (Browne 2010).

The prison context

Most prisons in England are managed by the National Offender Management Service (NOMS), but 11 prisons are privately managed (see Mehigan and Rowe 2007, for private versus public sector prison debate). The principal aim of prison is to protect the public, but also to rehabilitate (National Offender Management Service 2007). This complex balance between security, control and justice causes tension in determining what prisoners should be allowed to have (Schuller 2009). Adult male prisons are classified according to the security category (Cat) of prisoner they contain, which in turn determines the level of physical containment. High security prisons house longer-sentenced, Cat A, prisoners; Cat B is fairly high security, including local prisons which take prisoners directly from the courts; Cat C are lower security closed environments which often focus on vocational training, and Cat D is the lowest security open prison which allows some prisoners to work outside or get home leave in preparation for release (resettlement). Prisoners move through the categories during their sentence, usually entering a low security prison some time before release**.** However, recent Criminal Justice System reforms (BIS 2011; MoJ 2010) intend to make prisons "places of hard work and industry" (MoJ 2010, p. 1). A new type of prison is being developed in which prisoners work a full working week.

Education in prison

Education is a basic human right which is not relinquished upon incarceration (United Nations 2009). Internationally, there is wide variety in the type of education provided in prisons, but there is also a growing recognition of the benefits of education to develop and maintain skill sets which will enable prisoners to take advantage of social, economic and cultural opportunities. The Nordic countries, for example, have incorporated the European Convention on Human Rights into their legislation and provide an education for prisoners which is comparable to that offered to the general public (Eikeland, Manger, and Asbjornsen 2009).

In England, the classroom-based prison education addresses basic literacy and numeracy needs which in the state prisons is provided by the Offender Learning and Skills Service (OLASS) through contracted Further Education providers and in the private prisons is managed by prison-employed education staff. However, a growing

number of prisoners require higher level (post-compulsory) learning (National Audit Office 2008; Owers 2007) which is offered in most prisons in the form of distance learning. There are approximately 4000 prisoners studying by distance learning (Schuller 2009). The Open University (OU) is the largest provider of higher education in prison, with more than 1500 student-inmates across most prisons (Open University 2012), but many other providers offer a variety of higher level courses.

Like all distance learners, student-inmates organise their own learning, but their communication with distance learning providers is complicated by the need to go through an intermediary in the prison; typically the education staff or, more recently, the Careers, Information and Advice Service (CIAS) staff who also administer the induction process when prisoners first arrive in the prison. Some distance learning providers, typically the OU, provide additional support to student-inmates, through tutorials which can prove very successful but are plagued by security issues (Watts 2010).

As higher level learning is outside the OLASS education process, student-inmates either fund themselves or apply for funding through charitable trusts such as the Prisoners Education Trust who also manage the Government-funded introductory OU courses. Until recently, continuing OU students in prison could then apply for fee waivers. However, higher education funding in prison, like all other higher education funding in England, is changing (Browne 2011). University fees are increasing, and student-inmates will no longer be eligible for fee waivers, but some, who have less than 6 years of their sentence to serve, will be eligible for Government-backed loans (Open University 2012). As part of the Government's Criminal Justice System reforms (MoJ 2010), the Offender Learning Review (BIS 2011) aims to deliver a curriculum focused on providing skills to perform work effectively, using independent providers who compete for local contracts and are paid on the number of prisoners gaining employment.

Digital inclusion and technology for education in prison

Previous research has highlighted the value of technology to enhance learning (Becta 2008). Internationally, technology for education in prison is improving. For example, Norway has created an information and communications technology (ICT) infrastructure called the IFI (Internet for Inmates) which encourages prisoners to become e-citizens. Student-inmates in Norwegian prisons can access university learning platforms outside the prison, communicate with teachers, upload assignments and research online (Eikeland, Manger, and Asbjornsen 2009).

In England, OLASS has invested heavily in upgrading and replacing its ICT infrastructure in many prisons (Becta 2009). Most education departments now have at least one IT suite which has modern computers, some of which may be internally networked, and ICT skills are offered as a standard part of the curriculum (Learning and Skills Council 2008). Some prisons have Cisco Academies or good Learning Management Systems which allow students to simulate "online" access to uploaded courses and Open Educational Resources. Some learning providers produce CDs or DVDs containing essential online material (Hancock 2010). Acknowledging the benefits of alternative options as valuable, Pike (2009) argues that alternatives such as intranets are not the answer. They are not adequate to prevent student-inmates from being digitally excluded and marginalised in society (Seale 2009).

The "Virtual Campus", a new fire-walled resettlement tool being rolled out to most prisons in England (BIS 2011), provides some education courses and secure web access to job vacancies. The OU is trialling delivery of introductory (Openings) courses via the Virtual Campus server although evaluation is as yet limited. Secure electronic messaging between student-inmates and distant tutors is also potentially available (Open University 2012). However, security concerns with online access to distance learning remains an issue in prison education, and there is added sensitivity due to significant negative public and media opinion (Jewkes 2007). Adams and Pike (2008b) highlight similarities between the prison and the health service domain where the openness of new technologies clashes with the "closed" environment.

Generally, the "digital divide" has been discussed at great length. Clark (2008) suggests a socio-economic divide could be reduced through increased access to hardware and skills. Selwyn and Facer (2007), however, argue that access and use of new technology is also related to the cultural and political context in which it operates. Van Dijk (2006) asserts that attitudes towards technology are important and suggests more qualitative research is required to explore this. Eynon (2009) defines the "digital divide" as a "continuum of access and use", suggesting that access, skills and attitudes may explain patterns of use and these align well with proposed concepts of "access", "awareness" and "acceptability" for an e-learning framework in a secure environment (Adams and Pike 2008a). Eynon and Helsper (2011) identified the relationship between digital exclusion and digital choice as important in students' use of new technologies for learning. There is, however, a fundamental assumption in their discussion that people should have empowered and informed choices in how they access or use technology for learning, which is not necessarily the case in a prison context.

The research presented in this paper sought to advance understanding of these issues by investigating access and use of technologies by male distance learners in prison in England. The specific research questions were as follows:

- How do student-inmates access and use technologies for learning in prison?
- How do they develop the skills required to use technologies for learning in prison?
- What are attitudes towards technology-supported distance learning in prison?

Methodology

The prison, being an almost "total institution" (Goffman 1961), is a difficult environment to research. A qualitative approach was considered most appropriate as it would be flexible and sensitive (Mason 2002) to the complexity of the closed social world of prison. A multi-method, ethnographic approach (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007) was employed to provide multiple perspectives of the technology supporting the distance learning journey in prison. In-depth interviews were used as the primary data collection method in order to produce rich accounts of access and use of technology as well as attitudes towards technology-enhanced learning (Van Dijk 2006). However, in-depth interviews could also provide data which was not directly observable such as in other prisons and in-cell activities. Additional data was generated from participant observation and informal conversations with staff and students, providing direct situational information and ideas to bring meaning to the interview data. Policy documents were also examined where appropriate.

The research adhered to British Educational Research Association (BERA) and OU ethical guidelines and was approved by the OU's Human Participant and Materials Research Ethics Committee. However, research involving prisoners is ethically challenging, and a number of specific issues required consideration at different stages of the research. To ensure participation was completely voluntary and student-inmates understood the implications of the research, easy-to-read information sheets were sent in advance, and consent was discussed at length prior to interview. Private space in a prison is difficult to find so to ensure confidentiality, interview rooms were carefully negotiated with prison and education managers, and the research schedule was amended many times to adhere to the strict security regime. All data was anonymised and subject to the requirements of the Data Protection Act, and some demographic data has been withheld to maintain anonymity.

Data was collected from three adult male prisons (including three security categories B, C and D) in England over two visits in June 2010. The selection criteria for the prisons were as follows:

(1) Researcher's ease of access
(2) Technology available for learning
(3) Distance learner numbers
(4) Variety of learning environments.

The initial gatekeeper was a national technical manager who could recommend gatekeepers in prisons which were deemed to be successfully using the Virtual Campus, and this eased access. Distance learner numbers were estimated by analysing distance learning provider data and Ofsted reports.

The all-male student-inmate participants were selected through purposive sampling across a range of prison security categories and distance learning providers. Sampling of the staff was more opportunistic though partially "theoretical" (Strauss and Corbin 1990, p. 177), as data from the first visit was analysed and emerging themes affected further selection. Details of interview participants are provided in Table 1 though some data has been withheld to ensure anonymity.

Interview data was analysed using a thematic analysis approach (Braun and Clarke 2006). Data was open coded by selecting sections of narrative which were given conceptual labels. Words and phrases "coded" were not taken out of context,

Table 1. Prison and participant details.

Prison Category	Number and type of prisoner	Number of participants	
		Staff	Students
B	1074 remand, sentenced and vulnerable prisoners.	0	1 (OU)
C	170 sentenced prisoners focused on training.	2 (CIAS)	2 (ST) 2 (MC)
D	187 sentenced prisoners in open conditions (with 25% going outside the prison to work or study).	1 (CIAS) 2 (OLASS) 1 (HMPS)	4 (OU) 1 (ST)
	Total	6	10

Note: Staff: CIAS = Careers Information and Advice Service staff; OLASS = Offender Learning and Skills Service contracted education provider staff; HMPS = Prison staff. Students: ST = Stonebridge; OU = Open University; MC = Manchester College.

and happenings before and after the account were also considered with the aim of identifying "situated meanings" (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007, p. 168). For example, it was often necessary to consider the potential effect of rules and relationships on a situation. Later, concepts were grouped according to three themes of "access", "skills" and "attitude" which were drawn from the literature and which informed the research questions. The colour-coded data was copied and pasted into a variety of other documents which were then used to "think" with and look for patterns. Three overarching themes emerged from this analysis: physical environment, student identity and institutional visions.

Research findings

Initial analysis identified some statistics on prior learning experiences and IT skills for the student-inmate participants. These are shown in Figure 1. As expected, the entry qualifications were lower than would be expected for part-time higher education students generally, with most participants having negative experiences of school. Only 20% admitted leaving school with no qualifications, but many of the 50% with General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) or equivalent qualifications suggested that much of their education had been completed in prison or Young Offender Institutes. All participants self-reported IT skills at level 2 or above, though many had developed those skills in prison, and the only student to admit lack of internet skills was in the oldest age bracket. Nonetheless, 60% reported hand-writing all assignments.

Most student-inmates had been learners in prison for many years (sentence lengths ranged from 3.5 years to life), and they provided rich descriptions of learning journeys through the prison system; providing comparisons of their current prison with other prisons and situations they remembered. The three main themes of physical environment, student identity and institutional visions are detailed below

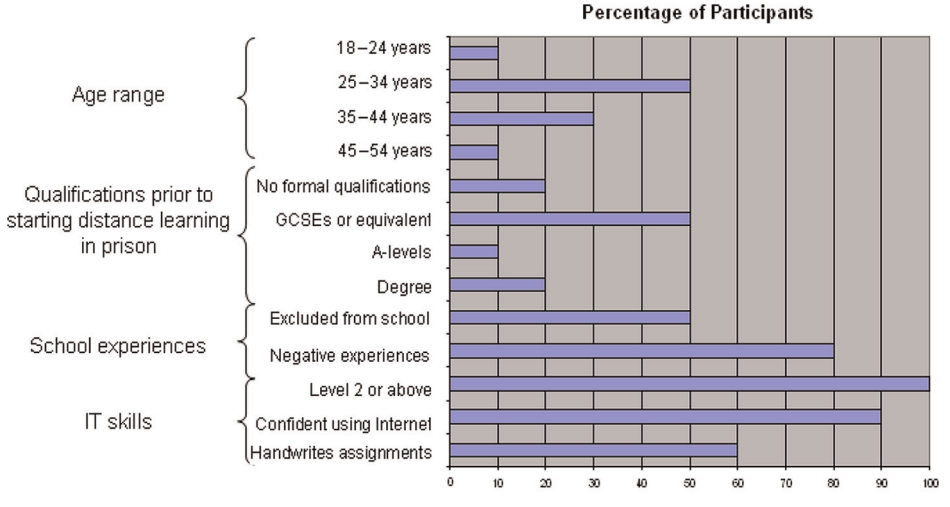

Figure 1. Prior learning experiences for student-inmate participants.

using participant narrative to describe key issues within each theme. In order to ensure anonymity the names used are not the participants' real names.

The physical environment: a desolate landscape

The student-inmates' physical environment varied significantly among prisons. Most participants perceived stark contrasts between those prisons which appeared to encourage technology-supported independent learning, and those that appeared to positively discourage it. To explain this contrast, the terms "learning" and "working" have been used for the prisons at each end of a spectrum. Counter-intuitively, as physical restrictions eased, access to technology appeared to reduce. Thus at one end of the spectrum, student-inmates perceived a "learning" prison, (usually private or high security), providing an environment where student-inmates believed they could learn independently and grow as individuals, through reflection. For example, Freddie told how he helped to design an award-winning magazine, in a fairly high security private prison, with a "magazine team which was active and vital and professional". The higher level distance learning was integrated into the full-time education programme so student-inmates had their own space with "unrestricted" access to distance learning materials, computers and printers.

At the other end of the spectrum, the participants perceived a highly regimented "working" prison, mostly lower security which provided a strict working environment which did not allow space, time or technology for independent learning. Distance learners were not normally allowed to use the upgraded computers in the education department. They were allowed in the library, but sometimes only for a few hours a week where they shared the limited resources with non-studying inmates. Charlie explained:

> The [only 2 out of 6 working] machines will just have people playing solitaire ... and to say the printer is temperamental is an understatement. (Charlie)

As student-inmates moved through the prison system towards lower security prisons, they expected more freedom to access technology for learning, but that was not their experience. For example, Ethan remembered that in his previous higher security prison, students were allowed laptops for learning in their cell but not in the open prison:

> Getting a laptop in here [open prison] is like asking for early release. You have got to have a really, really good reason. (Ethan)

Ethan considered that the lack of trust reflected how the prison system viewed independent learners

> We are placed in somewhere we can be suitably trusted, in open conditions, but I don't really see that trust. (Ethan)

Student-inmates who were unable to find study time or space during the day could only study in cells at night, but some open prisons had dormitories holding up to 10 prisoners. Student-inmates found it very difficult to study in that environment but sometimes found ingenious coping mechanisms. Duncan coped by completely "switching off" to everything around him,

> This bed space is mine and what takes place in here is me and anything else is outside of that. (Duncan)

However, this was coping without technology-supported learning which was highlighted by Freddie who explained how he coped with another mistake on his third attempt at a hand-written assignment in his cell:

> You ... rip off a little white piece of paper and stick it over the mistake and write on it like it's a little bit of Tipp–ex. It's really medieval. (Freddie)

These reflections highlight a determination among student-inmates to overcome the difficulties and to maintain a "student identity".

Student identity: a lifeline

Regardless of restrictions in technology, student identity was one thing over which the participants reported having some control. In the "learning" prison, student-inmates were provided with an open learning environment in which they could assume the identity of a student and use technology to access much of the information they required. It was "a place to talk to like-minded students", and provided a lifeline in an otherwise desolate environment. In the "working" prison, however, the student-inmates felt deprived of the time, space, technology and information to learn. Although their student identity was harder to establish in this environment it did still appear to exist.

Being one of only a few higher level distance learners in a "working" prison environment was perceived to have its benefits and its drawbacks. The benefits were that student-inmates felt special and prided themselves on their achievements. They sought employment which would allow them to access technology, such as IT classroom or library assistants but also volunteered for mentoring schemes which would allow them to help their less-literate fellow prisoners.

The drawback to distance learning in a "working" prison was isolation from other higher level learners, having very few peers and no access to online forums. Most student-inmates sought peer support from wherever possible. Duncan explained why he enjoyed his OU tutor's visits

> because I can sit there and grill him ... and grill him and take it to all different levels. (Duncan)

However, Charlie considered it very difficult for some student-inmates to express their student identity or simply,

> to put their heads above the parapet and say I want to better myself. (Charlie)

Surprisingly, the findings identified that IT skills were good overall. Most participants had completed computer literacy courses at least once. However, the perceived benefits of technology-supported distance learning extended far beyond IT skills or even the subject-specific knowledge which they gained from their courses. Their perceived student identity also provided them with hope, a lifeline, enabling them to see beyond the confines of their criminal past and potentially providing a route out.

> It makes me feel a lot more like a human being. I'm not a number in a box, I'm an individual. I'm allowed to share and expand my mind. It opens my horizons up. If you have greater horizons there's less chance of coming back to jail and I'll have an actual future instead of more of the same. (Andrew)

However, this view of education was not shared by all within the prison. Charlie's view was that the prison system did not consider anything above basic skills education as relevant.

> Can you read and write? Yes you can? In that case you're educated. As far as anything further, there's not a lot of support. (Charlie)

Institutional visions: conflicting stakeholder priorities

There were many organisations with control over the student-inmates' learning; the Prison Service, the OLASS, the CIAS and the distance learning providers (such as the OU), all of whom had conflicting priorities and different views of the role of higher level distance learning. Amazingly, in a "learning" prison the organisations appeared to work together with one aim which valued the learning. In most prisons, however, and particularly in the "working" prisons, these conflicting stakeholder perceptions resulted in higher level distance learning being marginalised, with a corresponding lack of interest in student-inmates' IT needs.

The Prison Service's priority was to keep order. This research found that higher level distance learning was classed as a pastime, an unpaid recreational activity which helped to maintain order, rather than as a means of rehabilitation. It was not included in prison management targets and had much lower priority than prison "work". Minny, an education staff member, explained:

> ... there is the stigma that it [higher level distance learning] is just recreational ... a lot of the [prison] officers think it is just a case of some purposeful activity that keeps the guys [student-inmates] amused. (Minny [education staff])

The Prison Service respondent below also highlights the lack of value placed on higher education for improved employability.

> Even though they are very well educated we have to sort of sit with them and look at a different career path ... it may be plastering or ... brick-laying, something like that, simply because that's probably where they are going to ... end up. (Peter, [Prison Service staff])

The CIAS staff were often tasked with advising and supporting distance learners. However, their priority was to administer the regimented induction process, and they were perceived to channel prisoners into menial work vacancies, regardless of whether that was appropriate training or not. Although reported to be helpful and friendly, they were thought to lack the knowledge or influence to provide student-inmates with the required technology to support their learning or employment prospects. Freddie explained that he did not want to leave the "learning" prison where he wore his own clothes and did full-time education but he needed to keep moving through "the prison's perceived rehabilitation route", to a lower security prison. However, he was shocked by the "horrible pyjama humiliation" of the "working" prison, where CIAS staff informed him to:

> put on your purple tracksuit ... at HMP X [Cat C prison] you are going to be sewing curtains. (Freddie)

Similarly, Charlie was hoping to get a job in retail when he was released and considered "Power-point skills or something to extend my vocabulary" more useful than "sifting through metal and plastic", which was the prison work he had been allotted.

The OLASS were the gatekeepers of the new technology in the education department, but their priority was to deliver the basic accredited education programmes. Higher level distance learning was not "accredited" and therefore outside of their remit. The OLASS staff sympathised with student-inmates but admitted that distance learning was "not prioritised" and:

> increasingly there is less opportunity for students to access resources where there isn't necessarily accredited learning. (Minny [education staff])

However, student-inmates felt discriminated against as the classrooms which they could not use were only half-filled,

> It [open prison education department] has got a lot of resources and life and a lot of good stuff, but it hasn't got any people. (Freddie)

and the technology appeared to be wasted:

> There are computers in every room in Y [open prison education department] but I think they are just in there for show, the lesson doesn't require them to be used. (Ethan)

Sometimes, supportive education staff bent the rules, enabling student-inmates to "attend" taught accredited courses, which gave them access to a computer. However, despite being grateful to the "friendly and sociable" education staff for this opportunity, student-inmates really wanted their own space where they could access technology for their own study, rather than being "just tagged on":

> Just give us a room, give us a corner ... even old computers with a word-processor would be OK. (Andrew)

The distance learning provider's vision was for global learning through fully online courses so, despite some efforts to provide alternatives to online material, the number of courses available in prison was reducing and student-inmates considered the situation to be deteriorating.

> The window [of opportunity to get a degree] is just closing all the time. (Ben)

This research found little expectation of internet access for learning in prisons in England. Although the Virtual Campus had potential for secure messaging with distant tutors, it could not support research or online assessments and was not considered suitable for higher level study. It appeared to be designed for those with basic skills needs, and Ethan saw the information provided as "quite patronising". He added:

> It [Virtual Campus] doesn't really help me as a person ... it's limited, at the end of the day the internet really means unlimited. (Ben)

Discussion

The findings from this research highlight the impact of value and context on the effectiveness of technology to enhance learning. In particular, the value that institutions and individuals place on further and higher distance learning in prison can affect access and use of technology for learning in that context. Within other domains, the concept of "value" in technology design and deployment has been highlighted as an often crucial yet overlooked factor (Cockton 2005). Consistent with Hughes (2007), there was wide variation in access and use of technology for distance learning among prisons. A whole spectrum of different learning environments were identified but at each end of that spectrum were so-called, "learning" and "working" prisons. Interestingly, however, the pattern of access and use was counter-intuitive, appearing to be inversely related to the physical security restrictions within the prison and connected to the whole ethos of the prison environment. A few "learning" prisons (mostly higher security or private) provided very good resources and technology for higher level distance learning. Within these prisons the education stakeholder institutions appeared to work together to produce an environment which valued all learning. However, as the student-inmates moved through their sentence and the prison system towards release, access to resources reduced until in the lower security "working" prison with its regimented working culture, there was little time, space or technology for independent learning. Student-inmates appeared almost "invisible" in this environment (see Seale 2009). In these prisons the education stakeholder institutions were found to have conflicting priorities, placing different values on the role of higher level distance learning. The Prison Service saw higher level learning as a pastime, unpaid and unvalued except to keep prisoners occupied. Higher level learning was irrelevant for CIAS whose priority was to fill prison "work" vacancies and the OLASS saw higher level learning as a nuisance which drew their staff away from the priority of basic skills teaching. This low value attributed to higher level distance learning within the prison resulted in a negative impact on access to the technology to support that learning. These findings suggest that, contrary to Clark (2008), good IT skills and improved technology in a prison context do not necessarily widen educational participation. Except in the "learning" prison, where student-inmates had relatively long sentences to serve, they perceived very little choice in what technology they used for learning as access was heavily restricted. In the lower security "working" prison, it was the learning itself that was excluded and poorly valued. So, contrary to Eynon and Helsper (2011), in the prison context, "digital choice" is not an important factor. However, agreeing with Selwyn and Facer (2007), the prevailing culture and politics of the prison environment do appear to have significant influence on the student-inmates' chances for technology-enhanced independent learning.

Furthermore, the situation was perceived to be deteriorating. As the distance learning providers aim for globalised learning with fully online courses and collaborative assessments, there is a reducing number of courses which are available in prison. The Virtual Campus, unlike its Norwegian counterpart, was not adequate for higher level learning needs and remains a poor substitute for internet access. Also, the Government plans for "working" prisons (BIS 2011; MoJ 2010) call for greater emphasis on manual work, with more independent providers competing for local contracts on a payment by results basis. Whilst this may benefit those prisoners who require manual skills, the number of organisations in prison is likely to increase, along

with the working ethos, potentially reducing further the value placed on higher level distance learning. Finally, changes in university fees (Browne 2010) will mean the loss of financial support for student-inmates, and limitations of Government-backed loans mean that prisoners with more than 6 years left to serve (Open University 2012) will be unable to apply for funding. This will impact, particularly, on the higher security ''learning'' prisons with longer-sentenced prisoners.

Despite all these challenges, the student-inmates in this research remained very positive about the benefits of their learning for future employment and life chances. They fought to access the technology-enhanced learning they needed to maintain an essential student identity which was a lifeline in an otherwise desolate environment. That student identity may be fundamental to successful resettlement on release and is therefore the focus of further longitudinal research based on this study.

Conclusion

Within the desolate prison environment, higher level distance learners reveal how they cling onto the lifeline that is their student identity. They value their student identity as a way to reshape who they are and to provide them with hope for a better future. Technology-enhanced learning is seen as a way to facilitate that lifeline by maintaining their student identity. Rather counter-intuitively it is the higher security prisons that support a greater freedom for student identity growth whilst the lower security prisons have a stronger basic skills mentality. Within these ''working'' prisons, there is a devaluing of technology-enhanced higher-level education as only of recreational value. Digital inclusion in this context will require a culture shift at the very heart of the prison system in order to encourage an environment which values all learning. Ultimately, technology-enhanced learning in prison has the potential to transform prisoners' lives instead of simply being used as a pastime.

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