

Selected Research on Educational Topics in Correctional Facilities

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Abstract

According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, in 1997, over 40% of those incarcerated in local jails and State and Federal prisons and 30% of those on probation had never completed high school or demonstrated equivalent proficiency. Nearly all State prisons provide educational programs for their inmates, but only half report having participated in the educational programs offered (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2003). Recidivism rates are lower with those who have completed educational programs or obtained certification in a vocational field (Vacca, 2004), but there are special considerations to be made while developing instructional design for correctional facilities. This paper will explore using a constructivism model for learners combined with a technological pedagogical content knowledge (TPCK) approach for instructors in the institutional setting.

Introduction

Most inmates have little education or employability skills, but prisoners who complete effective education programs while they are incarcerated have lower rates of recidivism (returning to prison after release). Programs that help prisoners' social skills, artistic development, and emotional support strategies are most effective educational programs in prison settings (Vacca, 2004).

The success of educational programs in this context is hinged upon the values and attitudes of those in authority positions. Positive attitudes can create a positive atmosphere which, if not maintained can turn quickly and hamper that success.

Constructivism is based more on the learners' personal needs rather than on universal needs (Land, 2000), although ultimately it is the group (in this case society) that benefits. Constructivist environments favor authentic learning activities over drill-and-practice, rote memorization, and lectures. Instead, one might observe students setting goals and developing ideas through multiple perspectives. According to Land & Hannafin, these learning environments emphasize learning as a goal directed activity, but may achieve the end in myriad ways (2000).

Using a constructivist approach requires having learners think critically and be able to work with others to solve problems, as well as independently solve new problems as they occur. This approach stresses cooperative work with a common goal which can be assessed in a nontraditional manner. Web 2.0 solutions can be simulated in correctional environments, so students can demonstrate proficiency with web pages, multimedia projects, or electronic portfolios.

Incorporating these simulations into the curriculum is key, but many teachers fail to use them. The TPCK model is designed to "capture some of the essential qualities of knowledge required by teachers for technology integration in their teaching, while addressing the complex, multifaceted and situated nature of teacher knowledge." (Mishra, 2006). The TPCK framework helps teachers integrate technology into their teaching by connecting what they know about teaching strategies with their skill and knowledge of technologies. TPCK professional development is most effective when it focuses on technology mapping (Angeli, 2009).

Special Needs and Incarcerated Learners

Because a large portion of juvenile and adult inmates have some sort of learning disability, using a response to intervention (RtI) approach to make connections between learner characteristics and research-based strategies. RtI is used as a framework for “guiding data-based decisions” and for “more adequately identifying student characteristics that contribute to [learning] disabilities” (Gagnon, 2010).

There is more success (fewer rates of recidivism) when offenders are carefully matched to programs in light of their learning styles, their risk level, and the specific needs of the individual based on his or her criminal background (Koetzle-Shaffer, 2009). Current meta-analyses find that few existing programs are meeting their potential for rehabilitation. Programs that offer contextual learning experiences target these problem areas, but in a few cases, students are unable to transfer these skills to real-life situations.

Studies show that in a sample of juvenile offenders with an average age of 15.5 years who are typically in ninth grade read at the fourth grade level with one-third of incarcerated juvenile offenders reading below the fourth grade level. This report exposes the need for literacy and reading interventions among today’s incarcerated youth. Despite the importance of developing and implementing effective reading interventions, it is critical for instructional designers to do the legwork before implementing any reading interventions – both on the group as a whole, as well as on individual members. In addition Krezmien contends that “comprehensive participant descriptions (gender race, or ethnicity, chronological age, grade level, locale, and disability status) are critical to good research examinations.” (Krezmien, 2008)

Platt maintains that literacy is the “single most important skill” that indicates success in life “academically, socially, and vocationally” (Platt 2009). If student are unable to become proficient readers they are at-risk for problem behaviors and delinquency later on in life. Reading

disabilities are rarely isolated. Often, when students suffer from reading disabilities, they also have language skill deficits as well leading to anti-social issues as peers begin to experience success in reading. Especially relevant to instructional design is:

- students with language problems are at high risk for anti-social behavior
- students with language problems are at high risk of behavioral challenges that are left unreported or undetected
- anti-social behaviors may escalate over time
- these deficits affect relationships with family members, authority figures, peers, and society in general

The studies also indicate when youth are limited in language skills, they often resort to physical actions in an attempt to resolve interpersonal problems (Platt, 2009) Identifying limited language skills early may help learners avoid incarceration.

Rutherford and Wolford provide an overview of the need for and provision of special education services in the correctional facilities. There are a number of issues relative to our compliance of correctional education programs – and whether we participate or resist, one of the key recommendations for continued improvement in our expectations of educational experiences for students with disabilities is ongoing teacher professional development.

Professional Development – Training the Trainers

There are unique professional development needs of correctional facility educators. The organizational structure of the classroom in which they teach is less conducive to relationship building and more focused on remediation and vocational skill building. Instead of mandating

that correctional facility educators attend professional development with their public education peers, there are specific principles to keep in mind for this unique group. Correctional facility teacher professional development is most successful when educators participate in targeted programs with other correctional facility educators for collaboration, curriculum mapping, establishing learning goals, and creating comprehensive assessment plans. Because of the isolation that most CF teachers experience, it is important that the professional development be sustainable and on-going to provide time to implement new strategies, evaluate effectiveness and encourage reflective practice (DelliCaprini, 2008). The TPCK framework helps teachers integrate technology into their teaching by connecting what they know about teaching strategies with their skill and knowledge of technologies. TPCK professional development is most effective when it focuses on technology curriculum mapping (Angeli, 2009).

Correctional facility educators face a unique challenge while operating in a very constrictive environment. TPCK professional development helps them to face that challenge.

Conclusion

Multiple studies indicate a low level of academic success among juvenile and adult prison populations. Rather than examining only one discipline (reading, literacy, math, etc) it is paramount that instructional designers analyze the importance of “programs, tools, and resources” in the correctional educational facility in numerous disciplines. Using a constructivist design would facilitate a more relevant and authentic learning environment. Incorporating technology to provide simulations in which learners can develop new skills and reflective opportunities to reinforce the learning follows this model.

For instructional staff to implement these tools, they must participate in focused professional development among peers in order to provide quality programs that promote the use of technology and reflect the values and expectations of the society beyond the prison walls.

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