Making connections

Lord Puttnam, Chancellor of The Open University, welcomes the introduction of Inside News. He writes:

As someone who has spent a large part of his working life engaging with different components of the communications industry, I can appreciate the aim of Inside News.

It is always encouraging to see a new initiative in communicating education issues, the more so when it is for a specialised group of students.

I firmly believe that The Open University is playing an important educational role in our prisons and secure units, and I am delighted to see this reflected in this newsletter.

Education is of vital importance in ensuring that prisoners can be accepted into society once they have been released, and we have evidence that it has an entirely positive effect in reducing re-offending rates. I hope that many current and potential students will be inspired by the ever increasing number of success stories.

I appreciate that there are many additional challenges faced by those studying in prison, and I know that The Open University and prison education departments are working closely together to resolve them.

I would encourage all readers to support Inside News and to contact the Editor with ideas and contributions (see back page).

Leaping over the Internet barrier

Course websites, electronic submission of assignments and online quizzes with instant feedback are just some of The Open University course components that may not be available to those studying in prison because they don’t have access to the Internet. This limitation has meant that many courses have become unavailable to students in prison. There are, however, plans afoot to revamp the ‘traffic lights’ list of approved courses into a course classification system based on student needs. If the plans are accepted the decision on whether a student is allowed to study a particular course would be based on his or her individual situation and capability rather than on a blanket categorisation of a course. As a result, many students in prison would have a wider range of OU courses to choose from. But if they are to make the most of their studies they would need alternative approaches to the online course components – approaches that are (continued over)
Are you a ‘fixed’ or ‘malleable’ theorist?

How do you see yourself? There’s one self-perception in particular which has a big effect on you. Psychologists are discovering that how people see themselves as learners (their ‘self-theory’) makes a lot of difference to their ability to learn.

Here are a couple of statements to see what your ‘self-theory’ is. Just answer yes or no to each one:
1. ‘You have a certain amount of intelligence and can’t do much to change it.’
2. ‘When it comes to success, intelligence is more important than effort’

Now if you answered:
● Yes to both, you have a ‘fixed’ theory about yourself. You believe that your intelligence is fixed and you can’t really change it
● No to both, you have a ‘malleable’ theory about yourself. You believe that you can change your intelligence by making enough effort.

This theory seems to apply when people experience a setback such as failing at school. ‘Fixed’ theorists see a set-back as meaning that they don’t have the basic intelligence, so they are not going to succeed whatever they do. ‘Malleable’ theorists just see failure as another experience; they try to learn from the failure and have another go.

Applying the theory
Psychologists have now found that, despite what we’ve always been told, intelligence is not fixed and that effort and hard work can change it. So the malleable theorists are right! They are the people who shrug off a failed exam as just showing that they need to try harder. They don’t take it as a comment on their basic intelligence and ability to succeed. And so they can go on and finally make it.

Studying with The Open University
This is very true of studying with The Open University. We’ve found again and again that people who try hard can succeed, even if they’ve had a previous bad educational experience. And OU students who succeed not only tell us about getting better jobs. They also report other things such as:
● increased personal confidence;
● increased enjoyment of life;
● making new friends;
● better relationships with their partners and children;
● and many other benefits.

So don’t let your previous experience set the pattern for your future. Even if that experience includes prison you can still change your future for the better through learning - you are a malleable theorist!
December before I was released. I’d already committed to the honours year by signing up to a Shakespeare Level 3 course, but I decided to close the prison chapter of my studies by attending the degree ceremony. I took great pride in accepting my degree from the Pro Vice-Chancellor in front of the assembled dignitaries. It was a fitting climax to a lot of hard work.

My Shakespeare year was my first year of study in the community, which I did in a bail hostel, subject to a curfew and without access to a computer or even a video machine. The staff here also supported me greatly. Everyone around me saw the OU work as a key factor in my rehabilitation; it kept me focused and meant I was doing something constructive with my time. Being on licence, I had to get probation and police permission to attend my first summer school in London, and I also got special dispensation to visit the Globe to see Romeo and Juliet.

I got my honours degree (a first) and then began the quest towards getting a postgraduate qualification. Funding this was going to be the most difficult part, as well as the obvious step up in the standard of work I would be expected to do. OUSET and the probation service combined to pay my tuition throughout my three year study and I will be eternally grateful for this.

After four years of study in prison, I got my degree the researching and writing, I submitted my dissertation last September. In October, when my future seemed more uncertain than ever now that I could no longer rely on the OU to help fill my days, I got a job in a call centre and I’m still working there now. I suppose the skills I’d honed during my study, my organisation skills, hitting deadlines, computing and writing skills and the very fact that I’d achieved success must have counted for something.

I made some great friends at the OU. Tutors have become friends and I’ve befriended and supported fellow students. I also spent some time trying in some small way to give back something by helping on the Peer Support OU website.

My advice to anyone considering taking the plunge of entering into OU study in prison is that it is unquestionably worth all the hassle. It is a solid, practical, life-affirming endeavour. Above all, it gives a great sense of purpose and has knock-on effects to self-esteem issues and self-confidence. For me, it was worth all the setbacks because I have a recognised qualification and, more importantly, a sense of enduring pride.

Furthermore, the whole process walked hand in hand with my desire to change as an individual, reinforcing the fact that I can achieve anything I set out to do. I’m a very different man to the one taking those first tentative steps towards rehabilitation. Along with offence-related courses and the support of the prison/probation services has been my OU odyssey, reaffirming my capacity and potential for change.
Looking to the future

It’s always a good idea to have an objective in mind when following an OU course. Here we hear from a student on an introductory business studies course. B120 is the ideal starting point for the OU’s BA in Business Studies degree. It is also a compulsory course in the Certificate in Business Studies and the Foundation Degrees in Business and Leadership and Management.

My name is Anthony and I am an Open University student in the Midlands Prison in Ireland. Last year I took B120: An Introduction to Business Studies.

In the prison we have access to a computer room in the education unit, but we do not have Internet access. This presented a number of difficulties as the course materials were online and assignments were to be submitted electronically. We were also expected to contribute to online conferencing.

Eamonn, our OU liaison teacher, was a great help to me and downloaded all the materials for me and also submitted my assignments from the school office. He also contacted my tutor, who arranged a short exercise for me so I would not lose marks because I wasn’t able to conference. These accounted for 10% of the marks.

Before I came to prison, I did an apprenticeship as a wood machinist. The course was a great help to me as I hope to start my own business in this area when I’m released. The previous year I completed the MU120 course and I am now eligible for a Business Studies Certificate with the Open University.

In school I always liked maths and when I came to prison I completed it at Leaving Certificate level before I started my Open University studies. I am currently doing an OU course in statistics and hope to start two more in February. These courses can count towards a Diploma in Statistics.

As regards a degree, I’m taking it one year at a time. I still have four years left on my sentence, so with 90 points completed, hopefully I’ll get there before I’m out!

A prisoner’s view

Keith, a student at HMP Long Lartin, has strong views about prison education, which he aired in an article for the prison magazine. He has kindly allowed us to quote from it:

It is inevitable that many ex-inmates will re-offend when they leave prison. Employers are often reluctant to employ ex-offenders.

There is a route that may help overcome a potential employer’s prejudice by making yourself more attractive in the job market. This is by making use of the education facilities in each prison - the provision of Open or Distance Learning Services.

Before you turn your nose up at The Open University simply because it is offered in your prison, think about this. The standard of teaching of the OU is consistently in the top ten of universities countrywide. There is nothing cut-priced or sub-standard about any OU course and their qualifications are recognised as equal to any other university.

Breaking down barriers

The OU is firmly committed to helping students communicate using modern technology.

So we were very pleased to be able to participate in a secure email system pilot at Aylesbury Prisons, designed to enable young prisoners to keep in touch with friends and family while serving their sentences. It uses software similar to that developed for use by the Armed Forces on active service.

The prison is keen to see the system used by OU students and tutors once teething issues have been resolved. Some of these issues were highlighted by a tutor on an Openings course.

We were able to pass this feedback directly to the developers and to the prison; explain the value that a smoothly-running system could offer our students and tutors, and offer to provide information about our requirements as an education provider.

We look forward to a secure email system becoming available more widely, bringing with it all the benefits of modern communications.