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Teaching Postgraduate Students in High Security Prison 2002-2011

Josie Arnold (Swinburne University of Technology, Lilydale Campus Locked Bag 218 Lilydale Victoria 3140 Australia)

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Author(s)

Josie Arnold

Swinburne University of Technology,
Lilydale Campus Locked Bag 218
Lilydale Victoria 3140 Australia
Email: jarnold@swin.edu.au

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Abstract

This paper addresses some of the challenges involved in developing an understanding of the pedagogical practices of teaching in The Dame Phyllis Frost Women's Correctional Centre. It details a significant teaching and learning experience. This paper develops from my interest in developing and teaching in a program that enables both the candidate and the supervisor. This is particularly apposite for students in prison as they have quite specific access and equity needs. This paper leads me to the conclusion that teaching in a high security prison is a learning journey for the teacher as well as the students. The methodology of this paper is to record through 'subjective academic narrative' those challenges that such teaching presents.

Introduction

Methodology and Some Background

This paper explores how teaching expertise and scholarship are both able to be reframed within a critical framework provided by anecdotal theory. In doing so, it proposes a methodology of 'subjective academic narrative'. The 'subjective' refers to acknowledgement of the inevitability of the personal being an integral part of research; the 'academic' refers to the analytical and the intellectual ambience in which university research takes place; and the 'narrative' refers to the story, that is, the way in which we re-tell all of our research (Arnold, 2007; Ulmer, 1985, 1994, 2005; Midgely, 2004; Gallop, 2002)

I began the Master of Arts (Writing) as a totally online course in 2002. (Arnold 2003; 2005) In 2003, one of our students was sent to jail on remand for fraud-related charges. She contacted us through Beth O'Brien, a remarkable Education Leader from Kangan Batman TAFE. Her practical experience in 20 years of prison education assures her that education plays a significant role in enabling prisoners within jail and ensuring skills for employment outside which reduce recidivism. Women prisoners in this high security jail do not have access to the internet or to virtual

(Cameron 2001:4) Beth explained that our student (I will call her Niri) felt that she would only retain her sanity if she could continue with her course. Prison inmates have varied views of education, but '...problems expressed by inmates, particularly in New South Wales and Victoria, concern officers' attitudes, poor communication and the general environment' (Easteal 1992:6) Beth personally overcomes these problems and drew us in by challenging us to bring the University into the prison. So we set up a date to visit the jail. It is important to note that Niri was originally of foreign citizenship: the problems facing overseas-born women in prison are many. (see Easteal 1992a) 'These women often do not conform to the more normative background factors for female inmates...and for many their time in prison is more difficult than for others: language problems, deportation status, and subcultural shock impact greatly on their time inside.' (Easteal 1992:3)

The Master of Arts (Writing)

As our course is delivered in cyberspace through WWW sites, virtual lectures on CDROM or DVD and internet virtual tutorials, we had to adjust it to a face-to-face delivery. CDROMs or DVDs. Hence, they can only have access to the 3,000-5,000 word lectures

that accompany the virtual lectures through their tutor bringing them printouts. They cannot participate in the virtual tutorials because these are a-synchronous online chatrooms. Nor can they visit the virtual coffee shop or the online writing workshop spaces for peer reviews of their writing. The subject WWW sites have links to appropriate websites for expert extension work and research. The tutor takes printouts of these to the jail.

This high security women's prison is in one of the dreariest parts of Melbourne imaginable. You approach it through a vista that is largely given over to long narrow roads, quarries and overgrazed grass plains. Even the sparse beauty of the Australian eucalypt is a rarity. A whining wind seems to blow continuously. It is a maximum security women's prison. 'Maximum security translates into high walls of concrete or barbed wire, presence of uniformed officers everywhere' (Easteal 1992:4)

The jail visit itself is very confronting. Even as a visitor, you quickly lose your identity and sense of self. Checking in means divesting yourself of the outside world, the handbag, the phone and any metal objects and being scanned.

Beth O'Brien organized for appropriate students to undertake our course. There is a changing sociodemographic that is caused mainly by drug use but also because of an increase in female violence, white-collar crime, and in truth-in-sentencing legislation. (Easteal 1992:2) Margaret Cameron notes that 'In Victoria, in the year ended June 1999, 76 per cent of women prisoners had commenced schooling at secondary level, but only 20 per cent of women prisoners had completed secondary, tertiary or other post-secondary education.' (2001:3) I am surprised at her use of the word 'only' on this context, as our women students come from this category, which I consider to be quite large.

Students are selected in consultation with Beth, following Swinburne University's policy on 'Recognition of Prior Learning' (RPL) and 'Recognition of Current Competencies' (RCC). These state that RCC may be applied:

'Where a student is granted credit or partial credits towards a qualification in recognition of competencies currently held, regardless of how, when or where the learning occurred. Under the Australian Quality Training Framework, competencies may be attained in a number of ways. This includes through any combination of formal or informal training and education, work experience or general life experiences.' RPL may applied: *'Where a student is granted credit or partial credit towards a qualification in recognition of competencies. Under the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF), competencies may be attained in a number of ways.'* The AQTF states that: *'...this includes from uncredentialed training, work and/or life experience.'*

This is in keeping with International best practice as we see that whilst articulating ideal educational entrance/transition qualifications based on the 2004 'Dublin Descriptors', the Bologna cycle also states that: *'In a fast-changing environment, it is essential to maintain flexibility in admissions to doctoral programs, and full institutional autonomy: diversity of institutional missions and context, and the growing importance of lifelong learning mean that there are good reasons for different access requirements in different institutions and for different programmes provided fairness, transparency and objectivity is ensured...Higher education Institutions need to pay greater attention to the social dimensions of the third cycle. Equality of access to the third cycle is a major concern, whether inequality derives from gender, ethnicity, social or other disadvantage.'* (2007:11)

The Transformative Nature of Education

Our students are amongst those women prisoners who '...regard educational classes highly...' (Cameron 2001:4), and for them the course has been transformative and redemptive. Women without hope, often the victims of domestic violence and worse, have committed serious crimes and are paying for it with their freedom and loss of contact with children and family.

An example is instructive. The young woman, little more than a girl, who is locked in protective custody, cannot move freely even around the jail. She made a very revealing comment about the first subject that she studied. This subject, 'Critical Friends' developed to enable writers to understand that the stress between criticism and friendship was important to explore if they were to value their own writing and that of others. Rather than criticism being always negative, it engages the student in understanding how positive criticism can show the way forward. This young woman wrote that she had never thought this way before. For her, criticism was always negative and often led to violent reactions and responses. Now she has a new way of understanding herself and the world around her. She's a very intelligent person and quickly saw how enriching this attitude is and will always be.

Perhaps the most impressive transformation has been by an indigenous woman who has been the successful instigator of a high-court challenge to legislation that prevented any prisoner in Australia from having a vote in Federal elections. (Kissane 2007; 2007a). The Age August 31st. editorial) At her sentencing, she was described as worthless trash. Since then she has had High Distinctions in all twelve of her Master of Arts (Writing) subjects, and is currently enrolled as a PhD candidate at Swinburne. As an Indigenous woman, she is one of the over-represented demographics in Australian jails. (Snowball & Weatherburn 2006) Indeed, while 'Prison populations throughout Australia continue to increase. Indigenous prison populations are increasing faster than non-Indigenous prison populations'. (Carcach, Grant & Conroy: 6) In 30th of June 2006, the Australian Bureau of Statistics notes that the representation of Indigenous prisoners in Victoria is 15% and Australia-wide is 24%.

There has been some community discussion on the rights of prisoners to do university and other educational courses while in jail. We can only say that everything that we have experienced in delivering this course has been extremely positive for the women but, more importantly, for the general community. Most

of these women will one day re-enter the wider world, and all of them come from that wider world. It is my belief that their education has enabled them to look at themselves in and of that world in a much more positive way. Eastal's (1992:3) 'guestimate' is that '...79 to 85 per cent of all inmates...' have a history of drug addiction. Having another way to think about themselves through education is obviously important. 'In addition, it is conjectured by inmates and researchers on the subject that a commensurate proportion of the female prison population are victims of incest and/or battering as children or as adults.' (Eastal 1992:3)

The course that our women prison students have undertaken in writing has enabled them to become more insightful about themselves and more culturally aware through their interest in words, language, communication, genre and the many writers that their studies introduce them to...especially themselves. Those who have long jail sentences have been given a small window of hope into a very dark world indeed.

In 2006, four women imprisoned for their crimes in the Dame Phyllis Frost Centre graduated in jail. Swinburne University of Technology took the Academic Procession, the travelling Mace, and the Testamurs behind bars so that the three Master of Arts (Writing) students and one Graduate Certificate of Arts (Writing) student could graduate before staff, family and friends.

This was a wonderful achievement for all concerned. Prison itself is a great punishment. The educational courses that prisoners do mean that they have a chance to be placed back into the community ready for rehabilitation. Eastal notes that 'lack of real work, educational opportunities and counseling translate into poor rehabilitation...women's prisons need to offer better educational, work, counseling and drug rehabilitation.' (1992:7) At the end of the graduation, the three new Masters said they would begin a PhD.

Access and Equity for students in The Dame Phyllis Frost centre.

The report by the anti-discrimination Commission Queensland in 2006 into 'Women in Prison' has good insights into the relationship of 'motherhood' statements to what happens in reality. For example, 'A prison sentence deprives a prisoner of his or her right to liberty. It should not deprive a prisoner of other rights. A basic human rights principle is that all persons deprived of their liberty should be treated with humanity and with respect for the inherent dignity of the person. The legal framework that protects the human rights of prisoners is a combination of State and Commonwealth laws based on a number of international human rights instruments that Australia has signed, acceded or ratified.' (Qld. Pp23) Yet the study goes on to note that '...the critical issue is whether these principles are recognised and applied in practice on a daily basis by all persons responsible for making policy, devising programs, and administering the prison system.' (QLD pp23)

The women in jail have specific practical needs that are quite different from our general student body as they:

Have no access to the internet

This makes e-research and emailing impossible. We have come to depend upon this form of communication and learning, and it is quite difficult for those of us who enjoy its instant results to imagine how difficult it is to work without this facility. We have dealt with this by enabling our students through a research assistant and a postgraduate studies librarian.

Had no regular and assured access to computers until quite recently

We have dealt with this by providing Swinburne computers donated by the TAFE at the suggestion and with the support of the Dean to ensure access and equity for these students as part of the Swinburne cohort. For the first time, these women in jail have received permission to have computers to use as word processors and storage facilities (that is, no WWW or CDROM/DVD access) in their cells. This is very important as they had to

utilise the Education Centre. This is only open in TAFE hours, and TAFE students have precedence.

Have other paid work that they must undertake

Many women in jail have as their only income the paid work that they do for a very small amount of money. From this they must purchase many of their personal requirements. Every prisoner must undertake some form of employment as far as possible. Our students are able to take education as their work, but this places pressure on them to perform.

Have regular musters etc

Prison time is highly utilised as a way in which prisoners are checked and controlled against a given timetable. This is a very significant part of their loss of freedom. They must be aware of the loudspeaker at all times otherwise they might fall foul of the rules and regulations. Our students work around this in a way that indicates how focussed and able they are to concentrate upon the educational/learning matter in hand. A great number of the jailers are sympathetic to the learning ambitions and abilities of the students, and hence are encouraging and supportive. Many of them came in on their own time to attend the first Postgraduate University Graduation ceremony, and they have told me personally how it has impacted deeply upon them and their view of these women students.

Have workspaces that are far from ideal.

There is really no study space for students that we could compare to carrels in university libraries or even dedicated spaces in their own homes. Yet our students overcome this by making a space in their small rooms to enable their study.

Have no access to libraries, especially research libraries

This is a significant drawback for students to browse through library catalogues and order the relevant publications, books, papers etc. It is also significant psychologically as they cannot be in a research area in a library and feel the force and power of the intellect both within themselves and within the academy.

This has been addressed by the University tutors and visitors and the University librarian. The students also arrange with the Prison librarian for help in obtaining materials. The ambience cannot, of course, be replicated, but the outcomes can be simulated.

Cannot easily contact their supervisors

Prisoners are unable just to pick up the phone, write a letter or email. It's a great privilege to be able to visit them, and a visit cannot be arranged spontaneously in reply to an identified need that the candidate and/or supervisors may wish to meet. The Education Officer and the University tutor act as messengers for the women to communicate as often as possible.

Cannot easily contact other candidates

Neither in person nor in dedicated PhD chatrooms can the prisoners be seen and heard by fellow candidates. Informal meetings between candidates can be a powerful support for the long PhD process.

Cannot attend PhD colloquia

Each year, students give a presentation of their project and describe where they have been and where they are going. This is a galvanising and dynamic interaction that leads students to reflect upon the strengths and weaknesses of their own work through the prism of other students' presentations and critical friendships. We address this by presenting on behalf of these candidates and by reporting back to them.

Do not have personal meeting spaces within the jail

It is not easy for students to meet as a mini-PhD colloquia or even working group. This is curtailed by a number of issues including the educational spaces being operated by Kangan Batman TAFE and only available through the goodwill of Beth O'Brien. Swinburne students have no allocated times at computers nor spaces within the educational area unless TAFE students are not utilising them.

\ They can only work there during TAFE semesters. The students themselves have addressed this by setting up informal study

sessions with the PhD group in their home/unit areas.

Have intellectual and friendship needs that are disparate, demanding and not easy to meet

The Master's students and the PhD candidates are quite isolated from any intellectual groups and debates across the breadth of their interests. They are forced back on one another and most particularly on the regular meetings with their 2 PhD supervisors and the University tutor.

Have very tight community groups within the jail

The jail interactions and demographics are very particular. There are intense groups who are thrown together for a variety of reasons. These groups are not easy to escape as there is of course nowhere else to go. However, the University students have formed informal study groups where they meet and support one another with their work. The frequent interactions with the supervisors, who meet as a group of 3 candidates, also support this.

Need empathy as they have no other supportive empathic group

A 'hands-on' supervision is important for almost all PhD students. (Sinclair 2002) For these women in jail, it's of immense importance. They have no other access to intellectuals and academics except what we provide them with in our regular visits. One of them said to me 'When you're in jail people who do-good promise you lots. They never do it. You always do what you say you will.' I was immensely touched for myself and the University. More than this, however, I saw quite clearly that our frequent meetings, interactions, listening, story-sharing, joking and laughing were an important and probably essential element of their supervision.

Have no experience of postgraduate education within a university context

The research dynamics of a University, indeed almost any experience of a University, are unfamiliar to these students except in so far as we have been able to simulate it with their tutorials and the print lectures and WWW virtual tutorial printouts and information. It is

difficult for them to have any other view of what a research centre or group could be like.

Have often been RPL'd/RCC'd

This is an important element of all Universities. Our own University policy has enabled us to recognise the life experience and publications of these PhD students.

Depend for their intellectual/educational/pedagogical models on printouts of virtual lectures/lecturers and designated WWW sites, and one tutor who is a PhD candidate in the late stage of candidature

There is no breadth of academic contacts for these students.

Need more empathic disclosures and interactions from supervisors than other students may require

In many ways the teacher is very hands-on within the jail situation. This is because we are the single beacon on the hill for these candidates.

Have many internal pressures in jail regarding status

As these students reach higher degree qualifications, they are separating themselves from many of their fellow-prisoners. This presents particular problems as well as particular advantages. It certainly prepares them well for the transition to parole. The level of recidivism is also lowered by educational achievements.

Have external pressures regarding educational opportunities in jail

The general community may have a problem with offenders having access to higher education while in jail. For example, when the University held the first full Graduation Ceremony in a jail we were not permitted to give this astounding event any publicity as the Government is sensitive to community backlash. As supervisors, we must address these issues and enable the candidates to go forward with their learning.

The artefact element of the PhD by artifact and exegesis

The production element of this PhD model is a piece of writing or other form of communication such as film or DVD suitable for its chosen genre that is ready to submit for publication. It should be of a length appropriate to its genre (e.g. 60,000 to 80,000 words in prose, or equivalent). The artefact and the exegesis must interact in some ways to show that the different authorial voices in the two elements draw them together, that they 'talk to each other' as Practice Led Research. There should be a dialectical relationship between the exegesis and the artefact that is clearly evident to the examiners. There are two voices at work for the candidate, but they are talking to one another. It should be evident that the two elements were done in tandem over the course of the candidature. The work as practice should display itself within its genre as original, vivid, engaging; well-written and well-presented. Appraisals of its success should be made within the accepted practice for the genre. Candidates will clarify this in the preface and exegesis and examiners will bring their own critical expertise to the work itself and its clarification within the exegesis.

Because this is practitioner-based, this production of the artefact was able to be approached as a personal creative piece of writing within the prison. Nevertheless, there were challenges not met by candidates who are free to walk around, to take time off, to visit the country or the beach or to have personal thinking time: 'me time'.

The PhD Exegesis of 20,000 words

The most difficult element for the women in The Dame Phyllis Frost Correctional Centre is the exegesis, as this relies not only upon personal insights, but also on systematic research. The Writing PhD exegesis is an extremely flexible production that retains some elements of the traditional PhD thesis while at the same time transcending that template. In itself it is also a creative work, a parallel piece of writing that sits alongside the above personal product. However, it is not separate from the product itself nor does it act as an academic 'justification' of it. (Harding:1986)

The exegesis acts:

- as an original piece of work contributing something new to knowledge about the process of the production of the work by the individual.
- to enable personal reflections about the production of a text to be made and to then be placed within the broader context of writing about the chosen genre, within the chosen genre and by academics that have reflected upon textuality and discourse itself as well as critically analysed the genre.
- to enable the reader to understand the 'implied author' of the personal/creative product in another and more direct way.
- to enable the PhD candidate to contribute further to an understanding of the 'ideal reader' in the author's mind as she or he develops the work.
- To enter the scholarly debate and to bring forward a reference list and bibliography.

Exegesis Methodology: the reflective journal

Personal insights are available to women prisoners, and this element of the writing PhD data collection is one that they utilise readily and develop fully. Perhaps the most pressing need in this model of PhD supervision is to convey to the candidate an understanding of the relationship of the exegesis to the other PhD component.

In traditional thetic terms, this reflective journal provides the data for the exegesis. It also provides the methodology. In so many ways, then, this activity that goes on at the same time as the production of the major artifact itself is indeed the bridge between the two elements of the PhD by artifact/product and exegesis: it draws together the parallel but interdependent elements of the PhD. (Lincoln & Guba: 1985)

Conclusion

Teaching in The Dame Phyllis Frost Correctional Centre continues to be a transformative experience not only for the students, but also for me as a teacher. In any pedagogy, we are always learning from/about/through our students. As the PhD

candidates take themselves further forward to be experts in their areas having made substantial and new contributions to knowledge, we too are taken forward in our own professional and personal lives. *'Supervising doctoral candidates is among the most important work that university staff can undertake. It is quite rightly regarded as the most significant and intensive teaching and mentoring experience accorded an academic.'* (Denholm & Evans 2007)

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