Design Project Study Proposal (Situative Perspective):
Observing Knowledge Building Practices in the Corrections Environment

ED 333A

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July 7, 2003
LEARNING PROBLEM

It is widely known that people serving time in correctional facilities who do not meet the 12th grade educational benchmark standards are more vulnerable to recidivism and re-arrest than those who do achieve these standards. The overwhelming majority of inmates currently incarcerated are from educationally and economically disadvantaged backgrounds. The goal of getting a high school diploma equivalency diploma (GED) while incarcerated is important for many inmates if they are to be released and hope to find work to support families. We believe that people who no longer commit crime and successfully find work in lawful jobs will support their families and benefit society as a whole. It can be stated that inmates who did not graduate from high school clearly had problems in a traditional school setting previous to incarceration. Current GED instruction in the corrections environment is fairly straightforward traditional classroom instruction. California Prison Literacy Statistics show that barely 40% of inmates read at a high school level, yet only 3.5% of inmates earned their GED while incarcerated last year. Statistics also show that around 10% of offenders return to prison each year. It makes sense, then to take a closer look at alternative learning environments as opposed to the current traditional GED classroom environment in the correctional facility.

Incarceration is devastating to one’s individuality and sense of self. The prison environment is set up for maximum security and minimal risk to those serving time, and often inmates are held in individual cells for up to 23 hours per
day. Interaction between people in situations where learning can be most beneficial and impact people most deeply, such as group participation in classroom learning, is generally not being practiced. Inmates are regularly allowed the privilege to weight train and exercise together in close and competitive ways. Therefore, a more cooperative and participatory method of teaching and learning in the academic practices of the corrections environment might be of significant value.

LEARNING AIM or GOAL
Since research implies that prisoners with low educational success or those who do not receive education during imprisonment are more likely to return to prison, our global goal is to reduce recidivism through GED education. Recidivism cannot be reduced solely through correctional education, but we would like to spotlight the process of GED preparation as a measuring tool for progress of individual learners. The GED is our choice because it is an established format and the benchmark by which many are measured to determine opportunities for successful careers or trades. For a youth or adult learner who has historically been challenged academically as most prisoners have been, the preparation and study process for taking and passing the GED requires a change in attitude, behavior, and practice for the individual. The practice of taking and passing the GED is a social act that transitions the relationships between people in prison and greater American society. If prisoners attain no change in educational status or skill, their opportunity position in society is equivalent to the position that led
them toward criminal behavior initially, and quite possibly worse with a criminal record. We resolve that the epistemological identity of the learner impacts the participation of the individual in the prison community and outside society. We hypothesize that participation in GED preparation courses and achieving gradual success influences the epistemological identity of the learner to a positive end, and this can be measured in internal and external community relationships, and academic and personal self-assessments.

We shall focus on the social construction of academic success in various types of GED preparation classrooms and see how the types of instructional settings influence the progress and identity of the learner. The correctional education system was originally designed around individualized instruction, but the numbers of inmates when compared to the actual resources (teachers, materials, money) now force traditional classroom style courses. We want to identify how varied presentation of materials or implementation of instruction influence the construction of academic progress in prisoners.

DESIGN PRINCIPLES

Studying the practice of academic learning and the formation of a learned identity within the corrections setting is a complex task. The United States Corrections environment has been described as a dysfunctional, dynamic, and disempowering system to all participants involved. As non-incarcerated academically-recognized researchers, we have determined the following design principles to be significant guides to our research.
Criminology is socially constructed.

Craig Haney, one of the original researchers in the 1971 Stanford Prison Experiment”, has identified prison as being “a supremely individualistic response to the social problem of crime.” Both the nature of crime and the identity of the criminal are abstracted within the judicial process, making invisible what has been demonstrated through a number of studies—“that manipulations of the immediate social situation can overwhelm in importance the type of individual differences in personal traits or dispositions that people normally think of as being determinative of social behavior.”

The impact of this design principle on our study is in how we understand the identity of the people in our study, as people identified as criminals, as people engaged in academic activities, and as people with a multitude of roles within larger communities.

Learning is constant and continuous; what is learned is socially constructed

“Acquisition of knowledge is not a simple matter of taking in knowledge; rather, things assumed to be natural categories, such as "bodies of knowledge," "learners," and "cultural transmission," require reconceptualization as cultural, social practices.” (Jean Lave)
This design principle radically changes our understanding of what is learning and where it takes place. Given this guide, it is not possible to rely on GED scores as being an absolute measure of learning success. While the perceived concrete nature of GED scores is socially constructed to represent competency as a high school graduate, GED scores tell but one part of the story of learning in the correctional facility.

**People can only learn from the resources available.**

Our proposed study focuses on the acquisition of an “educated” identity within the correctional system. We premise our study on the belief that situated environments shape the actions of the participants acting within them. Thus, in order to understand the factors necessary to form such an identity it will be important for us to gain an awareness of the resources currently available within the corrections environment. As McDermott has observed, “if a particular kind of learning is not made socially available to us, there is no learning to do.” This design principle is helpful in understanding exactly what sort of learning is necessary in order to be considered academically successful, and what resources are necessary to support the transition of an identity from that of “criminal” to “productive citizen”.

PROSPECTIVE DESIGN SOLUTION

We do not suggest the task of establishing a new benchmark for training or teaching students, but we resolve that small groups within a traditional classroom setting combined with nonarbitrary presentation of the GED curriculum would increase rate of mastery in certain domains and improvement in epistemological identity. The small groups should not serve as teacher-tutor interaction to avoid authority issues, but the groups should consist of learners with similar challenges so expectations of participation and comparison of skills do not serve as barriers. The materials to be mastered should be presented in real-world situations where the components are integrated. Deficiencies and competencies can be recognized simultaneously, and deficiencies are not a focus, but a piece of a puzzle where the larger picture is visible yet incomplete. Examples include reading a book to create a play involves reading, grammar, spelling, and writing; and planning a party involves budgeting, basic math skills, and problem-solving. In order for the group to progress as a whole, the individuals within the group must contribute and encourage or assist each other. In this manner, individuals can move at his or her pace. However, he or she is accountable to the group goal and may be motivated by successes of one another, supportive of the individual deficiencies, and less likely to be overwhelmed by their personal obstacles. Once the learner is comfortable with his or her present epistemological identity, then confidence about contribution enables full participation in the community of learners.
OBSERVING KNOWLEDGE BUILDING PRACTICES

The following methods should give us appropriate data to provide foundation for the study. We plan to implement the following methods to assess current academic knowledge building activities in the corrections environment. Observation of subjects as well as members of related communities are defined below:

i) Observation of 10 central (inmate) subjects will be an ongoing process over the course of the two year study. The information we will gather is as follows:

(1) Life history data from the subjects themselves, data includes education history as well as social and family history.

(2) At the onset of the study, co-create a situational checklist of environmental influences that could affect their self esteem as well as their level of participation in class. (i.e. “Did you see a lawyer” or “Did you get into a fight”). We will gather this data each week in the form of a check list that subject fills out on his own. This will be a sort of weekly reflection on their personal experience of being incarcerated.

(3) Videotaping the actual GED classes in order to study individual participation and interaction.

(4) Look at test results/scores from the GED
(5) Post-GED test interviews: feelings about the process of studying for the test

(6) Post-release follow-up: If they didn’t pass the GED while incarcerated, did they go on to pursue the GED on their own, outside the prison environment?

ii.) Integral to our study are the perspectives of the teachers, family members, guards, community volunteers and their social networks within the prison that must be looked at closely. We propose to conduct other interviews and focus groups with the following people:

(1) CORRECTIONS EDUCATORS/GED TEACHERS: Interview teachers regarding their own personal perceptions of each subject’s academic capabilities.

(2) FAMILY: Interview family members regarding:

(a) their perceptions of the subject’s academic capabilities

(b) their own personal feelings about education

(c) gather information of the family member’s perspective of the subject’s overall “life story” (preferably a parent or parents of the subject)

(3) GUARDS: Interviews regarding guards feelings about their own education and how they feel about inmates learning in jail

(4) SOCIAL NETWORKS:
(a) Focus groups with large groups of inmates about education and what it means to them to be educated, and their feelings about correctional education programs.

A crucial aspect of our research to note is that we feel that the identity of the researcher in the eyes of the person in jail is relevant to the information we will gather. (Dodson, p246). Dodson states: “History teaches people who are a nation’s “other” class, race, tribe, religion, or ethnic minority that being questioned may be experienced as a humane and respectful inquiry into valued people’s lives or it may be felt as an inquisition. When facing inquisitors, people develop marvelous skills to resist imparting real knowledge.” Therefore it is important for us as researchers to state and be aware that the quality of data we will gather is influenced by our own participation. To this end, we hope that conducting the study over a period of two years will help to create a more authentic data pool. If the length of time for the study is too short, the subjects may be more influenced by the actual study itself then if the study is ongoing and more a part of the fabric of the experience of being incarcerated. We feel an ongoing study allows us as researchers to become less conspicuous, thereby having our presence less influential in the data we collect.

IMPACT OF POTENTIAL FINDINGS
If the identity of the individual is crucial to the participation in the classroom, participation in correctional community, and outside society, then an improvement in identity can strengthen individual practices toward the community and community practices towards the individual. Epistemological identity is a core part of an individual’s self-identity and self-esteem, and how they place value on themselves within society. If mastery of basic skills through small group interaction influence academic progress and a positive identity change, then the correctional education system might consider a shift in structure and presentation of materials to students. The beliefs that currently guide practice may be ones that underestimate behavior and stifle ability in the traditional setting, but challenge and promote growth in the proposed setting. The design solution does not require a major reallocation of funds, but a restructuring of the system and materials presently available.