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“We must not believe the many, who say that only free people ought to be educated, but we should rather believe the philosophers who say that only the educated are free” (Epictetus)
ABSTRACT

This paper will present information relating to the implementation of a new and innovative educational program for young adult offenders in the NSW correctional system. This program commenced in July 2004 and is looking forward to its fifteenth graduation ceremony. This paper will outline the development of this initiative and various outcomes, which have occurred over the past four years.

Key discussion points will include:

♠ Understanding the mindset of this demographic
♠ Key objectives and methodologies of the program
♠ The profile of candidates
♠ Selection process of inmates
♠ The academic and vocational focus
♠ Difficulties encountered with implementation
♠ Various anecdotal evidence of the progression of this program
♠ Recommendations for improvement.

This paper explores the educational practices of a new learning initiative, which has embraced the Epictetus philosophy, amidst the challenges and achievements that have accompanied this innovative program.
Let me firstly provide a brief overview of this government department and its educational infrastructure. The Department of Corrective Services prides itself on its ability to perform its primary community service, which is succinctly outlined in its organisational vision statement: “To reduce re-offending through secure, safe and humane management of offenders, contributing to a safer community through excellence” (NSW DCS, Guide to conduct and ethics).

As with any governmental department funded by the taxpayer, it is imperative to maintain cost effective work practices and to harness the creativity of staff so that innovative developments can be adopted and strategically implemented, thus providing quantifiable value to the public purse.

Governments willingly concede the complexity and diversity of the Justice System and the challenging operational dynamic within this multiple entity framework. This is a fact that I easily concur with; both as a relatively new recruit to the Department of Corrective Services and as an individual constantly intrigued by the learning I am acquiring through this vocation. These experiences have provided me with a valuable insight of this, at times, harsh environment but ironically has also allowed a greater understanding, empathy and cautionary diligence toward persons who have experienced a revocation of their liberty, a societal privilege I often take for granted. The principle absorbed in the wisdom of Mark Twain’s statement, who said that “we should avoid the behaviour of the cat who sat on a hot stove plate – Yes, she has learned to never sit on a hot stove plate again but unfortunately she will never sit on a cold one either”, provides an interesting connection to the potential learning we can gain from our mistakes. The challenge in this educational context is the inherent obligation to cater to the social environment of a prison culture and the necessary conformity to security protocols. Maintaining strict adherence to custodial requirements is a business imperative yet we also need to maintain a balanced firm resolve to ensure each function compliments each other respectfully. By achieving this goal we allow innovative edifying practice to permeate our community focus of rehabilitation, albeit the ever present risk of “sitting on a hot stove”.

Speaking from experience, my level of ignorance of the Justice system presented a challenge in understanding the convolutions of the criminal process and in consideration of other likeminded educationalists; I have attached figure C1 to provide a relatively succinct, yet broad-based operational view of how we acquire our clientele.

A MODEL OF THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

For most people who come into contact with it, the criminal justice system is a sequentially structured process (figure C.1).
This diagram shows the typical flow of events in the criminal justice system. This depiction is broadly indicative and, for brevity and clarity, does not seek to capture all the complexities of the criminal justice system or variations across jurisdictions.
jurisdictions. The purpose in presenting this vignette of the justice system is to provide a basic insight into the challenging environment that an inmate is funnelled through and our role/responsibility in assisting an inmate’s rehabilitation journey. The Intensive Learning Centre aims to fulfil this responsibility by providing an educational program, which is designed to cater to the various learning challenges typical of this demographic.

**EDUCATION WITHIN NSW CORRECTIONAL CENTRES**

Meeting the objective of providing program interventions to reduce the risk of re-offending requires access to programs that address not only the prevention but also the causes of offending behaviour. A high ‘education’ participation rate can assist in maximising the chances of successful reintegration into the community.

The prisoner education rate is defined as the number of prisoners participating in accredited education and training courses under the Australian Qualifications Framework as a percentage of those eligible to participate (that is, excluding those unable to participate for reasons of ill health, relatively short period of imprisonment, or other reason).

‘Prisoner education’ rates should be interpreted with caution as they measure only participation in accredited education programs, and do not assess participation relative to individual prisoner needs, or measure successful completion of educational programs. In addition, they exclude a range of offence related programs that are also provided in prisons, such as drug and alcohol programs, psychological counselling and personal development courses. Nationally, 36.6 per cent of eligible prisoners participated in accredited education and training courses in 2005-06 (figure 7.11). Vocational Education and Training courses had the highest participation rate in 2005-06 (30.7 per cent) (Corporate research, DCS, pg 1, 2 & 7).

![Graph showing percentage of prisoners enrolled in education and training, 2005-06](image)

**Figure 7.1** outlines the percentage of prisoners enrolled in education and training, 2005-06

a) Excludes the ACT because ACT prison facilities accommodate only remand prisoners. **Source**: State and Territory governments (unpublished); table 7A.21.
As of the 4th May 2008 the NSW Department of Corrective Services was responsible for the management of 9683 offenders. Amongst this population are approximately 262 inmates based at the John Morony Complex, which is a medium level security gaol for males, located North West of Sydney’s central business district (JM1 capacity is 289).

The John Morony complex is a working gaol that employs inmates in industrial workshops specialising in Bumper Repair, Metal Engineering, Powder-coating, Packing Shop, Laundry and Ground Maintenance. The Intensive Learning Centre is a purpose built structure with the capacity to accommodate approximately fifty students.

The conception of this learning initiative began in June 2003 with the thoughts of the NSW Commissioner for Corrective Services, Ron Woodham. This concept was to develop an adult learning framework for young adult offenders, which addresses identified deficits in areas related to education, vocational training and employability.

Although the initial intention was to implement an educational structure similar to a high school offering full time classes, the reality is that this program is directed towards an adult education infrastructure, focused on addressing inmates educational shortfalls as part of an integrated whole, within the broader context of the Young Adult Offender Program. A Steering Committee comprising DCS Senior Executives, representatives from Offender Service and Programs, Classification, Corrective Services Industry, Education officers, and John Morony Correctional Centre management developed the plans and procedures for implementing the project.

Approximately 60% of the Young Adult Offender population at John Morony have a literacy/numeracy dearth. The purpose of the John Morony Intensive Learning Centre is to bring these young adults to levels of ability and achievement equal to youths of a similar age group who have successfully completed compulsory schooling. However, it must be understood that this inmate population has a range of specific needs that differentiates them from the population of mainstream schools. The majority of our students have significant skill and experiential gaps in a variety of areas, coupled with low self-esteem. They bring to this learning environment, not only negative attitudes from their past schooling experiences but also a complex mixture of life experiences and anti-social behaviour, often in stark contrast to this typical age cluster. They also have a broad range of social and emotional problems that can impact the classroom dynamic and for all of these reasons they can often surprise, delight and frustrate with equal intensity.

Extensive research has been undertaken to identify the risk factors attributed to offending behaviour in young adults. Low educational attainment, unemployment and little or no formal training are major contributors. Approximately 28% of the total inmate population in NSW are young adult offenders. Research tells us that young adult offenders in custody are more likely to self harm, more likely to commit offences in gaol and have a high risk of recidivism. The following data, drawn from the book “Young Adult Offenders” by Sean O’Toole gives a broad profile of a young adult offender:

* 18 to 24 years old
Many have experienced significant relationship problems with their families and have experienced periods of homelessness.

A large proportion are affected by parental neglect, physical, emotional or sexual abuse, which can result in the harbouring of self-destructive thoughts.

They often find it hard to relate to or to empathise with others, particularly adults and or authority figures.

Bouts of depression, emotional instability.

A significant number report having attempted suicide or serious self injury because they perceive no hope for the future or for themselves.

Many have left school before completing year 8, because they experienced learning difficulties.

Due to their educational deficits and poor self esteem, most have limited employment choices, feel powerless and are socially alienated.

Many act impulsively, have difficulty handling their emotions and behaviour and participate in significant risk taking activities.

Many become involved in the abuse of alcohol and other drugs, and seek refuge in a delinquent peer group.

* A Way of Life....

Williams defines culture as “a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period, a group, or humanity in general” (Williams, 1976, p.90). The landscape of the Australian prison population has developed a unique and interesting culture, all of its own. Gaining an in-depth insight into the cultural dynamics of the inmate lifestyle, I came to visualise this demographic as a metaphorical octopus of cultures.

The impact of social structure has the potential to mould inmates into their own implicit cultural identity and margins. Our attempt is to address these challenges, within the structure of a didactic program, although the challenges are much broader than the single issue of education.
Our Role Within the Young Adult Offender Program

The YAOP is divided into five stages:

Stage 1: Metropolitan Regional Remand Centre/Parklea Remand Centre

Both centres are remand gaols where the main focus as part of the YAOP is to identify, assess, refer, prepare and inform.

Stage 2: John Morony 1

Young Adult Offenders are relocated to the John Morony complex, once they have been sentenced. The gaol holds approximately 290 inmates, the majority are Young Adult Offenders, however there are approximately twenty older and more experienced inmates who are “Adult Nucleus” inmates. These inmates apply for, and are especially chosen to live and work with the younger offenders to provide a stabilising influence.

There are a number of other programs conducted at JM1 and are facilitated by key stakeholders such as:

♦ Psychology
♦ Welfare
♦ Drug and Alcohol counsellors
♦ General Education
♦ Probation and Parole officers
♦ Chaplaincy
♦ Health/Nursing
♦ Classification co-ordinators

Stage 3: Oberon

This gaol is a minimum security gaol which holds a maximum of 130 inmates; approx. seventy five of these are YAO who are engaged in the Goornong Life Challenge program. As a location, Oberon is situated 220 kilometres west of Sydney and is located in a pine forest where inmates are also involved in bush regeneration work. During the Goornong Life Challenge program, inmates spend four months in a variety of experiential learning activities that are adventure based and that address their criminogenic needs. The program includes a High Challenge Ropes Course developing teamwork, trust and self esteem.

Ongoing education includes a variety of VET courses such as Forklift, Backhoe, Front End Loader, Horticulture, Bricklaying, General Construction OH&S Induction (Green Card) and Senior First Aid. As in all the centres, ongoing contact with AO&D, Welfare and Psychology are available.

Stage 4: Re-allocation to a Correctional centre

After completion of Oberon program, inmates are relocated to a nominated centre dependant upon their educational, family and classification requirements. Inmates are encouraged to mentally, financially, socially and physically prepare for their imminent date of release and ensure necessary accommodation and employment options are considered and organised.

Once an inmate has achieved C3 classification, they may have granted the permission for day leave, weekend leave, works release or education leave, if certain criteria are met.

Stage 5: Community Support

After release, community support is predominately supported through the Department of Probation and Parole, and with assistance from Centerlink, ex-inmates are given personal advisors to link them with support networks. The department has recently implemented a new initiative entitled the Community Offender Support Program (COSP), which assists with the provision of temporary ex-inmate accommodation, whilst
facing this difficult transitional period of reintegration back into the community.

**CRITERIA FOR ALLOCATION TO ILC**

In addition to our targeting low literacy/numeracy inmates, a number of other considerations are taken into account when assessing student intakes, such as:

- Mental health issues
- Criminogenic analysis reports
- Psychologist reports
- Education levels
- Vocational qualifications
- Custodial reports
- Age groups
- Length of sentence.

On enrolment to the ILC, all students sign a learning contract for the duration of their internship and receive remuneration for their educational attainment. If a student conducts himself poorly or demonstrates non-compliance to mandatory academic standards, a number of punitive consequences could occur. Students are given pay incentives for consistent satisfactory behaviour and educational achievements.

**THE PEDAGOGY & PRACTICALITY OF THE INTENSIVE LEARNING CENTRE**

Due to the horrid educational past of many young adult offenders, the ILC provides an opportunity of redemption both academically and socially.

How is this achieved?

It is obvious that the majority of our students have unhappy memories of school. The Education Profile Interview gives testament to this fact, in 95% or more of cases and thus our key objectives are to alleviate their fears and assumptions of education; to differentiate the methodologies of traditional classroom schooling to the principles of Adult Learning. The emphasis is to allow students to adopt and understand the process of active learning and to accept personal accountability of their learning journey. Taking responsibility for one’s actions is a part of the program that is stressed in all subject areas. For example, it is emphasised that a student is responsible for classroom punctuality, a basic, yet simple life skill that is often underestimated and neglected in a variety of self management contexts. Consequential learning is an essential ingredient to the program’s efficacy but this is also balanced with a relaxed atmosphere that is conducive to a mature social & educational environment. The teaching staff have a deep respect for each other, both personally and professionally and this manifests itself with a flow on effect with student interaction and subsequently demonstrates effective social leadership skills for students to adopt.

In harmony with curriculum requirements and with a dose of creative license we have incorporated a number of reflective learning practices to capture the reimbursement of an inmate’s erroneous life choices, reminding me of the old adage: “Experience is a marvellous thing that enables you to recognise a mistake when you make it again” (Jones, F. P. 2008). Our literacy teachers; Claire Shume and Fiona McGregor have incorporated a learning journal initiative that allows students to benefit from their educational experiences. The learning journal process provides a tool to assist our memories to reflect accurately and constructively “Learning is inherent in any process of expression, that is, in any form of giving to the world as experienced. No matter for what reason we write, the lens of learning is an important way to view writing. This is not to say that learning is the only perspective on journal writing, but to acknowledge that journal writing is
intimately associated with learning, no matter what else it may aim to do” (Boud, D. 2001).

It still touches our hearts when we read directly from a student’s journal and appreciate the wisdom they have gained through their personal hurdles of adversity, for example:

1. One humble student took the initiative to document a compilation of life experiences and draft an autobiography at the ripe old age of 21. This young man is only now coming to terms with his self confessed foolishness of youth; the interesting point about this example is not only his candour but his fervent desire to learn from these poor life choices and redeem himself via his academic accomplishments.

2. This is verbatim from a student’s journal after completion of an afternoon literacy session; (inclusive of grammatical errors) “I feel my memory is at a good stage in my life. I am headwise stronger and at a place I thought I couldn’t be. And discovering a lot about how my brain works. I have nearly come to the end of my math’s class and I have achieved a great deal and I will continue to learn after I’m finished. I am always taking step’s to get me closer to the end and to my freedom. Lesson’s I feel will help me for the rest of my life. I am and will continue to concentrate and put my best foot forward every day! I feel I have achieved a lot more than expected” – Victor.

The idealistic hopes of an inmate is not uncommon to any professional working with this demographic but we must balance our pragmatic scepticism by avoiding the perils of a debilitating mindset of cynicism. The progressional behavioural improvements we are privileged to witness, provide the inspiration of our vocational motivation and thus allow an optimistic approach to infuse our present and future focus.

**Academic Program**

Nationally accredited courses in Adult Education, Employment and Training (AEET) are seen as more appropriate curricula for ILC students, rather than school based curricula such as the NSW School Certificate, and no less advantageous. Nationally accredited VET qualifications at AQF Certificate 1, II or III levels are recognised preparations for further education and or employment. While enrolled at the Intensive Learning Centre inmates complete Literacy, I.T, Numeracy and Communication programs at various certificate levels. These certificates are accredited through NSW TAFE and the Department’s registered training body; AEVTI (Adult Education and Vocational Training Institute).

Vocational Education and Training subjects are also covered by TAFE teachers such as:

- Two Stroke Engine Service and Repair
- Lawnmower Motor Maintenance (a purpose built shed is located at the back of the ILC building where this course is conducted)
- Senior First Aid
- Small Business Studies
- Horticulture and landscaping modules.

Because we are working with a very specific group of individuals, who struggle with a variety of dynamic risk factors such as; impulsivity, lack of empathy, relationship inadequacies, low self esteem and hopelessness, it is important that students receive ongoing constructive criticism and complimentary adulation. Incorporating learning that will assist in student social development is not only a key focus but an absolute imperative in addressing their criminogenic needs and to reduce
recidivism. The aim of inciting behavioural change is achieved by applying a holistic approach to their learning via a range of reading, comprehension, kinaesthetic and public speaking assignments. The public debate is one such initiative that has gained due recognition for its ability to break down personal inhibitions and improve their team building skills. This of course, is convoyed with and a superfluity of complaints, whining, whinging, crying and absolute desperation from students who believe they could never present in public; yet from this state of anarchy comes the incredible jubilation and sense of self-pride for a wonderful achievement in overcoming a plethora of self deprecating beliefs and to follow the wisdom uttered by Gloria Steinem “The first problem for all of us, men and women, is not to learn, but to unlearn” (wisdomquotes.com, May08). Many of these students are beginning to ‘unlearn’ some of these incapacitating misconceptions of self doubt.

**STUDENT WORK EXPERIENCE IN CORRECTIVE SERVICES INDUSTRIES**

Correctional Industry Services (CSI) philosophy states, “The provision of work, and the engagement of individuals in training and work, is a cornerstone of a successful society. It also recognizes that empirical support exists; substantiating the link between offender employment deficits and recidivism…. Within this context, the development and implementation of an employability framework to support work programs, as part of inmate case-management, is intended to increase the likelihood of successful community reintegration of offenders” (Bearing Point, 2003). Developing prisoners’ employability requires training that will address not only the skills that are specific to a particular occupation or industry, but also generic skills such as: communication, problem solving, working in teams and using technology.

One of the objectives outlined in this CSI mission statement is "to provide selected inmates with the opportunity of engaging in work programs, which provide a continuity of productive activity and are complimentary to other program endeavours". It is with this philosophy in mind, that a work experience component was deemed essential from the programs original inception. Students are provided with an experience where skills and information learnt in the ILC can be put to practical use in the workplace and most importantly to develop an affirmative work ethic.

The industry work that is available to ILC students is in the following areas:

- Powder Coating
- Packing Shop
Although the industry work experience component is seen in principle as having great merit, it has been a contentious issue for students who do not fully appreciate the need for workplace learning integration but never-the-less they eventually come to terms with the fact that real life situations are often very different to those experienced in the classroom environment. Custodial staff also provide worthwhile feedback, which is beneficial in analysing their adaptability, modesty and self initiative, whilst performing in a workplace setting.

**THE GRADUATION CEREMONY**

"from crisis or danger, opportunity arises"

The Chinese symbol of change is aptly defined as it has a dual meaning of opportunity or crisis, depending on our perspective. This concept of change highlights a crucial aspect when implementing organisational initiatives; namely to promote the beneficial outcomes for all stakeholders. In simplistic terms; encourage those affected by change to embrace and exhibit a curious, inquisitive outlook to the opportunities that education can attain. At the risk of sounding idealistic, this state of mind is crucial for successful program implementation as human nature impels us to fall prey to the perils of monotony or in crude terms; a rut, sometimes referred to as an elongated grave without an epitaph. The adherence to mandatory work instructions is a necessary process but does not signify organisational initiative or creativity and therefore employees need to maintain a pragmatic yet optimistic mindset to allow innovative learning practice to be the catalyst for breaking the mould of mediocrity.

The ILC initiative aims to take heed of this wisdom albeit the implementation is often very distant to the rhetoric. As educationalist’s we deem it a privilege to be involved with this program, amid our own inhibitions and shortfalls; yet we are determined to take advantage of this small window of opportunity that has presented itself via the many inmate life stories, based on an upbringing of crisis.

To date we have had fourteen ILC graduation ceremonies. In a profession where behavioural milestones are a scarcity, this is truly a proud event where the graduating group is encouraged to invite family and friends to attend the Graduation Ceremony. Enjoying the motivational content presented by a variety of guest speakers and engaging in typical social interaction is a highlight for students. If deemed to be worthy candidates we
also present a Governor’s Award for Excellence and a Principal’s Award for Commitment to Learning. The Graduation event provides the intrinsic inspiration and incentive for students and teachers alike and we have enjoyed many poignant graduation moments.

It is interesting to note that at the graduation stage, many alumni express how they have developed a new perspective to their incarceration by viewing their prison life with a sense of ongoing opportunity rather than a sense of calamity.

**Recommendations**

Ongoing evaluation of the ILC and its longitudinal effects on further education, employment, attitude and behaviour, both during sentence and post release, is still being gathered by the department's Education Research Officer. We are very pleased to note that the ILC concept has spread its wings, with the recently opened Wellington Correctional centre adopting this learning structure. We trust that within the next two years a reasonable level of data from both centres will validate the positive anecdotal evidence we have attained and provide quantifiable statistics, which will assist in analysing the impact of recidivism of graduated students.

In recommendation for further improvements, worthwhile considerations would include:

- Further analysis of a student’s ability to respond appropriately to external provocations; to determine how they manage stress and the interpersonal conflicts that are associated with this territory. Psychology staff does of course, conduct various analytical assessments but this evidence could be formally presented to relevant education and custodial staff.

- In line with the above recommendation; Psychology staff at the John Morony complex have already expressed interest in this proposal. This process could be facilitated as a consultative monthly meeting with all relevant staff where a collective evaluation is conducted and formally reported, thus providing two way data that would be useful to all disciplines who are managing these inmates.

- The Community Restorative Centre (CRC) is responsible for a number of community projects, which assist inmates, ex-mates & family members of inmates, to gain information on various correctional centre, probation & parole and related matters. Radio programs are one form of communication medium used to transmit this information, which inmates have previously been involved with. Further utilisation of this community resource could be very effective within the literacy and communication curriculum.

- The option for Restorative Justice involvement is in theory available to a broad sector of inmate’s dependant upon the necessary criteria being fulfilled but perhaps we could have education staff skilled in assisting Restorative Justice professionals with this process, in whatever way they deemed beneficial. If appropriate, structured and relevant training was provided to education staff they could assist in the promotion of this conciliatory program.

- Continuation of regular debriefing sessions with all facilitators and invited guests, which should also include programs and custodial staff.

- Rotate facilitation staff, within each department to broaden the skill set of employees and to have effective substitutes on hand when required.

- Allocation of permanent Custodial staff with meaningful participation in the program objectives.

- To provide best practice self evaluation tools for students to self-appraise their behaviour, skills and personal paradigms and therefore
permit students to initiate, discover and value a sense of personal identity, something that this demographic often buries deep and vehemently avoids.

**CONCLUSION**

We trust the Intensive Learning Centre concept will continue to provide meaningful educational development in harmony with the grander focus of inmate rehabilitation and reduction of recidivism. It is imperative to address the attitudinal aspects of how we communicate and ultimately connect with students and to avoid a confrontational, aggressive style of inmate management; "The colossal misunderstanding of our time is the assumption that insight will work with people who are unmotivated to change. Communication does not depend on syntax, or eloquence, or rhetoric, or articulation but on the emotional context in which the message is being heard. People can only hear you when they are moving toward you, and they are not likely to hear you when your words are pursuing them. Even the choice of words loses their power, when they are used to overpower. Attitudes are the real figures of speech” (Friedman, E. 2007).

As teachers we aim to follow and convey this admonition and demonstrate the diligence needed for this progressive inmate development program.

**REFERENCES**


NSW Department of Corrective Services, Corporate research, evaluation and statistics, pg.1-7.

