Educational, vocational and ‘thinking skills’ provision in HM Prisons:
Results from a national survey

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Results from a national survey

This chapter presents results from the first phase of a research study funded by the Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA), which explores the delivery of interventions which aim to improve the thinking, and communication skills, of prisoners. We surveyed all 139 penal institutions in England and Wales, as it was vital for the research team to be aware of exactly what is available to prisoners, in the form of training, education, rehabilitation and therapeutic opportunities. The survey also intended to explore how prison staff construe the idea of ‘thinking skills’. Questionnaire data is drawn on to explore the range and diversity of educational courses and provision for inmates in 83 institutions. Findings from the questionnaire survey are placed in the policy context of prisoners as learners and educational provision in England and Wales, with a particular reference to thinking skills. Most completed questionnaires were from Her Majesty’s Prisons (HMPs) which hold male inmates only. The survey asked respondents to list, and rate the emphasis on thinking skills of each course or activity offered in their institution. A huge range of provision is evident across the institutions, and a total of 511 courses/activities were identified by respondents. Almost one third of all courses mentioned are thought to have the development of thinking as the primary aim. Not surprisingly, Psychological courses are seen as being primarily about thinking, and vocational courses get much lower ratings.

Introduction

The survey is the first phase of a research project funded by the Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA) which is evaluating the impact of English Speaking Board (ESB) communication courses in prisons in England and Wales. The purpose of this study is ‘to build a picture of the delivery of interventions which seek to improve the thinking skills of prisoners’ and thereby to contextualise the ESB courses in oral communication. The present research team\(^1\) saw an opportunity to carry out an independent evaluation of the ESB approach, both retrospectively and prospectively. The prima facie evidence was that ESB oral communication courses are emotionally powerful for many and may well bring other benefits, even perhaps reducing recidivism by opening up alternative paths, including employment options. The opportunity to immediately transfer oral communication skills to other contexts (including other courses) within and outside prisons is always available to prisoners, whereas this applies much less with other kinds of course.

The research project was planned as follows:

(1) A postal survey carried out in prisons in England and Wales to ascertain which courses are believed by prison staff to help develop thinking skills;

\(^1\) The team includes David Moseley, Jill Clark, Elaine Hall, Jen Miller and Viv Baumfield from Centre for Learning and Teaching at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne and Maggie Gregson, Trish Spedding, and Graeme Blench from the University of Sunderland and Joe Elliot from the University of Durham.
(2) A retrospective study to evaluate the impact on recidivism of taking an ESB oral communication course during the period of the Lottery-funded project 1999-2002;
(3) A prospective experimental study was planned to test the hypothesis that, after successfully completing ESB courses, prisoners are able to communicate better with fellow inmates and prison staff; and
(4) Four case studies, using largely qualitative methods, to compare different approaches to the development of thinking skills.

It is the first phase of our research, the postal questionnaire survey, which is the focus of this article. Before exploring these findings it is important to set out the policy context within which this study is taking place.

The political climate

The modern prisons service as we know it today is based on two functions: incarceration and punishment of inmates (and therefore protection of the public) and the provision of activities to educate and rehabilitate, and therefore reduce re-offending. The rehabilitation of offenders has been the subject of several reports and policy changes during the last few years. For example, in 2001 a report on Resettlement by HM Inspectors of Prisons (2001) recommended improved joint working between prisons and probation, and concluded that although three-quarters of initial sentence plans contained targets to address offending behaviour, risk and other needs, the research showed that only about a third were judged to have done this ‘satisfactorily’, or ‘well’. On offender behaviour provision generally, the report found that: ‘although the provision of accredited and non-accredited programmes was widespread in prison, a strategic approach had not been developed, and too many offenders were leaving prison without their offending behaviour having been addressed’ (HMI Prisons 2001: 18).

Early in 2002, the National Audit Office (with the Prisons Service) concluded that the Service needed to make certain that all offenders who would benefit from attending programmes whilst in prison do so and that ‘many prisoners leave prison without having had the opportunity to address their offending behaviour’ (NAO 2002:1). Later in that same year, British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, admitted that although crime was down 21% since 1997, there was still a long way to go in relation to re-offending by ex-prisoners:

People who have been in prison account for one in five of all crimes. Nearly three in five prisoners are re-convicted within two years of leaving prison. Offending by ex-prisoners costs society at least £11 billion a year. This all tells us we are failing to capitalise on the opportunity prison provides to stop people offending for good (Blair, Foreword, Social Exclusion Unit (SEU) 2002:3).

Recommendations from the SEU report included the development of a National Rehabilitation Strategy. A further parallel report, Managing Offenders, Reducing Crime (Carter, 2003), was produced as a result of a correctional services review - which also suggested the need for a more ‘joined up’ approach to working - concluded that the system remains dominated by the need to
administer both the prison and probation service rather than focus on the offender and reducing re-offending. A solution to this, Carter proposed, was to develop the National Offender Management Service (NOMS), which should restructure the current activities of prison and probation to provide ‘end-to-end’ management of offenders who receive either a community or custodial sentence.

Alongside these reviews and suggestions for change, the Criminal Justice Act (2003), for the first time, laid down the purposes of sentencing for courts, which includes a reference to rehabilitation:

- The punishment of offenders
- The reduction of crime, including its reduction by deterrence
- The reform and rehabilitation of offenders
- The protection of the public, and
- The making of reparation by offenders to persons affected by their offences.

(taken from Home Office, 2004c).

Taking the work and recommendations of the Carter report further, Reducing Crime – Changing Lives (2004) documented the next strategy of the Government to improve the effectiveness of the criminal justice system, and more specifically, the correctional services. Increased emphasis is now on co-ordinated programmes of work, training and education for individual prisoners in order to make a significant difference to prisoner’s life chances and rates of re-offending and re-conviction.

The recent National Action Plan, Reducing Reoffending (Home Office 2004b; 2004c) is a result of all these preceding documents, and outlines the Government’s plans to reduce reoffending through strategic direction and joined-up working. At the centre of the plan, NOMS aims to bring together prisons and probation and help to develop an effective case management approach. The document also takes forward two important Government manifesto commitments:

- to ensure that punishment and rehabilitation are both designed to minimise re-offending;
- and to improve the education of those offenders in custody (Home Office 2004b).

Given that the prison population currently stands at an all time high of 75,203 (as at 03/12/04) and is continuing to rise (the total population at the time of our questionnaire survey - 15/04/02 - was 73,012), such political interest and strategic changes are clearly timely. Despite this increased population, it is clear that progress towards targets is good, with the provision of basic skills training a priority. In 2002-3, in basic skills qualifications, there were 9,179 at entry level compared to a target of 6,000. There were 16,989 qualifications at Level 1 compared to a target of 12,000 and there were 15,145 qualifications at Level 2 compared to a target of 10,800. This gives a total outturn of 41,313 Basic Skills awards compared to an overall target of 28,800. The national target for Key Work Skills was exceeded by an even more substantial margin. There were 89,201 qualifications delivered against a national target of 45,000, which is almost double (HM Prisons Service 2003). The report concludes that it is important that prisons continue to:

... deliver against these targets, both as a contribution to improving the basic skills of adults in the population, and as a means of reducing the likelihood of individuals re-
offending. But it is equally important that prisons deliver education and training of a high quality which is relevant to the needs of individuals, and which will equip them with skills they need to lead useful lives when they return to the community (HM Prisons Service 2003:33).

In addition to the policy changes and implementation plans, there have been changes in relation to the funding of education and training of offenders. Following the 2002 Spending Review settlement, the funding for education and training of prisoners increased to £97 million in 2003-2004, £122 million in 2004-2005 and £137 million in 2005-2006. This will bring about substantial increases in the volume of education and training in prisons and will also provide resources for further innovation and quality improvement. Part of the funding has been used to appoint Heads of Learning and Skills across the prisons estate, who will oversee the development of education and training in all parts of their respective establishments.

Other key development are the expansion of the Offenders’ Learning and Skills Unit’s (OLSU) remit from 2004-2005 to cover education and training for offenders who are serving sentences in the community, and (in conjunction with the Learning and Skills Council) the development and regional testing of elements of the Offenders Learning and Skills Project. These developments will bring new opportunities for aligning the provision that is offered to offenders on probation with that available in prisons, and for improving continuity of learning opportunities. While focus has been on basic skills and vocational qualifications, the Prison Service has continued to deliver offending behaviour courses, albeit in smaller numbers.

**Prisoners and learning**

There is a view that prison experience is in itself a damaging experience – both practically and emotionally (see for example, Worrall, 2004). On a practical level, prisoners are likely to suffer from a loss of housing, employment and family contact. Emotionally, institutionalisation can lead to few opportunities to make decisions or take responsibility for their own actions. Education in prison, therefore, is regarded as a tool for mitigating such damage, and for over a hundred years prison systems on both sides of the Atlantic have been developing prisoner programmes that aim to rehabilitate prisoners into society. The learning processes involved have been seen as valuable both for the individuals concerned and for society as a whole. Yet research and policy has concentrated on attempts to change individuals rather than on attempts to deal with the strongly linked societal factors of crime and unemployment simultaneously.

Different prison education programmes have different purposes and draw upon different branches of applied psychology and pedagogical approaches in different ways and to differing degrees. There are, for example:

- vocational programmes which aim to improve prisoners’ employment prospects;
- ICT programmes which aim to develop awareness and use of new technology;
- basic skills programmes;
- literacy for lifelong learning;
personal development programmes which aim to modify/develop prisoners’ thinking/behaviour (sometimes referred to as general offending behaviour programmes and cognitive skills programmes);
programmes based around the humanities which aim to cultivate individual critical and creative abilities through a broad liberal curriculum; and
faith-based programmes which aim to promote a set of religious values and beliefs and associated behaviours.

These involve different approaches to teaching and learning and different ideas about how knowledge and identity are constructed. They may emphasise:

- individual/isolated learning;
- teacher-led or ‘direct’ instruction;
- mastery learning of skills built up from their components;
- knowledge acquisition based on reading/writing/oracy/multimedia;
- the development of practical skills through modelling and guided practice;
- student-centred learning with the teacher as a facilitator of meaning-making;
- problem solving drawing on personal experience and meeting real-life needs;
- language and discourse development through dialogue in groups;
- the examination of ideas, beliefs and values through Socratic questioning; and
- critical thinking, reflection and transformative learning.

The article by Wilson et al (2000) provides an excellent discussion of a meta-analysis of American correction-based education, vocation, and work programs for adult offenders. The article is based on research which compared 33 independent experimental evaluations of education, vocation and work programs and found that program participants recidivate at a lower rate than non-participants. The study itself recommends that future evaluative research could be strengthened through the incorporation of theoretical links between program activities and future criminal involvement and through designs that control for self-selection bias beyond basic demographic differences.

However, it is not just psychological personal development programmes that are thought to reduce recidivism: vocational and educational programmes can be equally if not more effective. Pawson (2000) suggested that the rehabilitative outcome of prisoner education stems from improved competence (including social skills and reflection). Educational experiences can help build character and raise self-confidence and aspirations. Pawson summarised the benefits of the Simon Fraser Prison Education Programme in Canada where 654 participants had a recidivism rate of 25% instead of a predicted 42% (a massive 40% improvement). He also addressed the important issues of why the programme was effective, for whom, in what circumstances and in what respects.

Prison as a learning environment is a unique location to say the least. The students can have a variety of abilities and prior experience, attendance is not always voluntary, and motivations for attending may be extrinsic rather than intrinsic. It should be noted that earlier in their lives many prisoners may have been excluded from school for this kind of behaviour. In the UK it is
reported that prisoners are over twenty times more likely than the general population to have been excluded from school and ten times as likely to have truanted regularly (SEU 2002). Others have simply dropped out and have been drawn into crime through the influence of gangs and drug dealers (Ibid.).

Prisoners are rarely equipped with the skills which are valued by employers, and prominent amongst these are oral communication and interpersonal skills (Hall et al., 1999). The National Employers Skills Survey carried out in 2003 again yielded the same findings, drawing attention to a lack of motivation on the part of employees as the second most common reason for skill deficits (Hogarth et al., 2004).

Very little is known about the communicative competence of inmates on entry to prison and we know of no research on the issue. Ethnic minority groups make up 18% of the male and 25% of the female prison population and 8% of the prison population are foreign nationals. It is not unusual for prison inspection reports to draw attention to the need to provide more support for inmates who do not understand English. However, there is reason to believe that verbal communication skills are a common area of weakness irrespective of language background.

**Thinking skills interventions in prisons**

Thinking skills interventions in schools, colleges and universities are typically designed to improve educational outcomes, especially through developing critical and creative thinking and enabling learners to regulate their thinking and learning more effectively. Moseley and colleagues (2004: 8) define thinking skills approaches as ‘courses or organised activities which identify for learners translatable mental processes and/or which require learners to plan, describe and evaluate their thinking and learning’. The long-term aim of such courses is to improve strategic thinking, self-awareness and reflection together with a positive set of values, beliefs and personal qualities.

The thinking skills (or cognitive skills) interventions developed specifically for use in prisons have been strongly influenced by developments in clinical psychology, especially the development and use of cognitive behaviour therapies. Unlike thinking skills interventions with an educational focus, they are primarily directed at changing patterns of behaviour. Nonetheless, the generic characterisation of thinking skills approaches used by Moseley and colleagues in their report to the LSDA (2004) also applies to these programmes. In the UK, thinking skills interventions in prisons (usually known as Offending Behaviour Programmes, or OBPs) are generally organised and delivered through prison psychology departments and do not fall under the remit of either Education Managers or Heads of Learning and Skills. The staff involved are mainly psychologists and prison or probation officers, but may include people with educational training and experience who have trained as tutors.

First introduced into the UK Prison Service in 1992, the principal aim of the Offending Behaviour Programmes is to reduce the likelihood of re-offending. Secondary aims are to improve behaviour, problem solving skills and attitudes. The most well-developed and popular
of these is the Reasoning and Rehabilitation (R&R) programme (also known as Cognitive Skills) which was first used by the Canadian Correctional System but has since been used more widely in a number of countries including the USA. Also increasingly popular in the UK is the use of Enhanced Thinking Skills (ETS) programmes. Courses involve teaching participants how to think more positively, to empathise with others, and to avoid situations and patterns of thinking and behaviour that have previously led to crime in the individual’s past in order to avoid returning to crime. The use of such Offending Behaviour Programmes in the UK is on the increase, and around 6,000 prisoners completed an accredited offending behaviour programme in 2000/01 (SEU, 2002). By 2003/04 the Prison Service has a target of delivering 8,900 offending behaviour courses in prison and the Probation Service has a target of delivering 30,000 in the community. Described as ‘one of the key building blocks in the programme of interventions to reduce reoffending’ (Home Office, 2004b) prisoners in 108 establishments completed over 7,300 accredited programmes in 2002-03 and over 8,900 in 2003-04. In 2002-03, over 7,700 Probation Service accredited programmes were completed, and this was almost doubled to over 13,100 in 2003-04 (Ibid.).

Friendship et al. (2003a) illustrate how the body of research initiated by Gendreau and Ross (1983) known as ‘what works’ research has led to the development of a ‘strong treatment ethic’ within the criminal justice system in the UK. This growing body of literature suggests that specific multi-modal cognitive-behavioural programmes are effective. Robinson and Porporino (2001) summarised many of the relevant ‘what works’ studies of offenders who completed the R&R programme between 1989 and 1994. They describe how one thinking skills intervention involving a sample of over 4,000 Canadian offenders resulted in a reduction in reconviction rates of 5 percentage points or 20.5%. According to Friendship et al., an evaluation in a British setting of a version of an R&R programme known as Straight Thinking on Probation (STOP) showed a seven percentage point or 35% reduction in reconviction, although this was not sustained in two and five year follow-up studies. The authors go on to describe how HM Prison Service in England and Wales started to run cognitive skills programmes in ten prison establishments in 1992, using an in-house version of R&R initially under the banner of Thinking Skills and latterly in 1993 as Enhanced Thinking Skills (ETS). They point out that, while the Prison Service was aware of the ‘what works’ principles and had applied some of these into its programmes, this was done in a somewhat piecemeal way which was not always underpinned by a theoretical framework or empirical research supported by best practice. They acknowledge, however, that the accreditation system introduced in 1996 is beginning to address some of these issues.

A recent study reported that around 70 per cent of prisons run accredited offending behaviour programmes and that the number of prisoners completing programmes has grown significantly (National Audit Office, 2002). However, the same study reported that there were significant regional differences in access to programmes, with numbers waiting to begin a particular course ranging from none in one prison to 450 in another. Waiting lists mean that prisoners who would have met the criteria are often released before they have had a chance to benefit from the programme. Despite their proven success (Falshaw et al., 2003; Cann et al., 2003), there is currently no reliable measure of the overall number of prisoners who would benefit from such Offending Behaviour Programmes. OBPs also vary in their intensity and cost, from £2,000 per
prisoner for the Enhanced Thinking Skills course (around 40 hours) to around £7,000 per prisoner for programmes aimed at high security risk, violent prisoners (SEU 2002).

Most existing programmes are aimed at male adult prisoners serving sentences of over 12 months. Those serving short sentences are not usually in prison for long enough for the identification and assessment procedure to be completed, and often offenders are not in the same place long enough to obtain useful interventions (Carter 2003). Selection for accredited courses is rigorous to ensure maximum success rates, but this can result in many of those with mental health problems or poor basic skills being unable to access accredited offending behaviour programmes, as it is felt that they will not be able to cope with the demands placed on them.

Movement of inmates around the prison system can also be problematic. The Prison Service has made significant efforts to ensure that those involved in accredited programmes are not subject to moves around the system, disrupting their attendance. However, there is no data on the numbers who are moved and recent work by the National Audit Office (2002) has found that only 34 per cent of prisons believed that those moved to their establishment would be able to continue with an offending behaviour programme. Additionally, specific groups may not fare as well: there are currently no accredited offending behaviour programmes designed specifically for women, young adult prisoners, or remand prisoners. One in two remand prisoners go on to receive a custodial sentence, and four out of five are found guilty (SEU 2002). Yet they are unable to begin programmes designed to improve areas such as thinking skills during the remand period. The quality of interventions also varies greatly, and is dependent on the area in which the offender receives them (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2002/3) and the National Audit Office concluded that: ‘a prisoner’s access to programmes still owes much to where they are sent’ (NAO, 2002:3).

### Education and training provision in prisons in England and Wales: our survey

So what is being offered in prisons today? A survey by the LSDA (Vorhaus, 2003) based on questionnaire returns from 91 prisons and Young Offender Institutions (YOIs) found that there was a considerable amount of ‘spare capacity’ in prison education and training provision, with only 5% of prisons and less than 1% of YOIs and Her Majesty’s Prisons (HMP/YOIs) operating at, or near, full capacity. Overall, 38% of the prison population were engaged in full or part time education or training, the majority of these in part time education (21% of the total prison population). Young offenders institutions were the most successful in terms of providing full and part time training places (12% and 10% of inmates in YOIs) and full time education places (22% of inmates in YOIs).

#### Table 1 Prison education and training provision

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Full time education</th>
<th>Part time education</th>
<th>Full time training</th>
<th>Part time training</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HMP</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>&lt;1%</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YOI</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
At the beginning of the present research, the team realised that there was no simple answer as to what was currently being offered in prisons and YOIs across England and Wales. There were many variables which shaped the provision of both education and training. For example, the different categories and types of prisons, whether they were private or state funded and if an institutions had a particular ‘specialist’ target population, all led to a huge variance in provision. It was working from this assumption that we felt we had a unique opportunity to gain an overall picture of education and training provision. More specifically, the team aimed to answer one particular research question:

*How far do thinking skills approaches feature in the courses and training provided in HM prisons?*

Although we wanted to explore the provision of thinking skills activities generally, we were also interested in what courses or activities prison staff actually perceived, and understood, to be either developing and/or extending prisoners’ thinking skills. These could be educational courses, offender behaviour courses and vocational and non-vocational courses.

**Responses**

One-hundred and thirty-nine questionnaires were sent out to all the institutions in England and Wales, and 83 were returned. This gives an overall response rate of 60%. The team were aware that job titles and roles varied considerably across the prisons, and so questionnaires were sent directly to the governor (or director) of each institution, with a request that the survey was passed on to the most relevant person to complete.

Most completed questionnaires (56) from our sample were received from HMP institutions, although this is not surprising given that HMPs make up 72% (100) of all the institutions in England and Wales we surveyed. The response rate of 56% therefore was slightly lower than we anticipated. The response rate of HMP/YOI institutions was proportionately higher - 16 of a possible 24 - therefore representing a questionnaire response rate of 67%. Almost all YOI institutions responded (69%), and there was a 100% response rate from both Immigration Removal Centres (IRCs). However, it is worth noting here that both Immigration Removal Centres did not fully complete the questionnaire, as they reported that their work was not relevant to this survey.

**Table 2 Type of institution**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Institution</th>
<th>Questionnaire Count</th>
<th>% of questionnaire</th>
<th>Institution Count</th>
<th>% of all institutions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HMP/YOI</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from Vorhaus, 2003: NB there may be an element of double-counting, with inmates accessing both part and full time education and training.
The questionnaire return rate was initially very disappointing, and it often took several weeks for the questionnaire to arrive on the desk of the person most relevant to complete it. Usually this was the Education Manager, or Head of Learning and Skills.

The majority of questionnaires received (88%) were from institutions which detain male inmates only. The response rate from institutions used to detain women inmates only was a little disappointing, with only 7 of the 17 (at the time of the survey) responding, which translates into an overall response rate of 41%.

Table 3 Inmate gender by institution

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Inmate gender</th>
<th>Questionnaire Count (institutions)</th>
<th>Percentage of questionnaire sample</th>
<th>Institution Count</th>
<th>% of all institutions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All Male</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Female</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NS*</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>139</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NS = Not specified by respondent.

The research also intended to explore how prison staff construe the idea of ‘thinking skills’ and therefore the questionnaire asked:

Please identify up to eight courses offered in your institution, which in your opinion contain elements which help to develop or extend prisoners’ thinking skills. These may be educational courses, offending behaviour courses, vocational or non-vocational courses.

Respondents were then asked:
What is the emphasis on thinking skills in this course? (A), (B) or (C)?
(A) Its primary aim is to develop thinking;
(B) The course aims to develop transferable skills; and
(C) Thinking skills are required to deal with the course subject or activities.

Completed questionnaires were coded and data was entered and analysed using SPSS\(^2\), and selected details of the results of the survey are presented here.

Table 4 Types of course identified

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course category</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Percentage of sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Educational</td>
<td>238</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological</td>
<td>202</td>
<td>39.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocational</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Not categorised</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>**None</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>&gt;0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>511</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Six courses were rated as A, B or C by respondents but could not be categorised as educational, vocational or psychological due to a lack of course information.

**One institution did not provide any course information. Another provided course information, but did not provide course ratings.

Two institutions responded by saying that all courses promote thinking skills, but most nominated between one and ten courses (the median being six courses). Overall, 52% of the courses nominated were psychological in orientation, while 33% were educational and 15% vocational. For the ‘A’ rated courses alone (those where the primary aim is to develop thinking) the proportions were even more strongly weighted towards courses with a psychological orientation (77%), with 19% being educational courses and only 3% vocational.

It is clear that both educational and psychological courses are seen as aiming to develop effective thinking or as having a thinking skills emphasis. Vocational courses were mentioned less frequently, but this should not be taken to imply that thinking is less important in such courses. In fact, the ratio of vocational courses to educational courses mentioned (1: 3.8) is very similar to the ratio of inmates attending such courses nationally (1: 3.6) (Vorhaus, 2003).

Table 5 A, B and C-rated courses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course category</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Percentage of sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A - where the primary aim is to develop thinking</td>
<td>161</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B - which aim to develop transferable skills</td>
<td>247</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C - where thinking skills are required</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*None</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>511</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*One institution did not provide any course information. Another provided course information but did not provide course ratings.

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\(^2\) The Statistical Package for Social Sciences
The main finding of interest here is that about a third (31.5%) of all courses mentioned are thought to have the development of thinking as its primary aim. A further 48.3% of the courses are believed to develop transferable skills. If we assume that the thinking skills in the first group are thought of as transferable, this makes a total 80% of the courses mentioned which are thought to equip prisoners with transferable skills.

A summary below (Table 6) illustrates how different types of nominated course were rated (excluding courses which were mentioned only once). It can be seen that the psychological ‘What Works’ courses are seen as being primarily about thinking (as their titles suggest). Educational courses in literacy, numeracy and Key Skills Communication (discussion, reading and writing) are sometimes also seen in these terms, but more often as aiming to develop transferable skills. Vocational courses tend to get lower ratings.

### Table 6 Types of course ranked by perceived emphasis on thinking skills

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name or type of course</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Enhanced Thinking Skills</td>
<td>17</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reasoning and Rehabilitation</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivating Offenders to Rethink Everything</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social and life skills</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>16 were ‘A’ rated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drugs and/or alcohol abuse courses</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>9 were ‘A’ rated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key Skills Problem Solving</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anger management</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3 were ‘A’ rated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy/numeracy</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>8 ‘A’ ratings 12 ‘B’ ratings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key skills communications</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3 ‘A’ ratings 5 ‘B’ ratings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Art</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brickwork</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IT/computing</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>10 ‘B’ ratings 4 ‘C’ ratings</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What stands out most from this analysis is that respondents (who were generally education personnel) clearly saw the family of cognitive skill programmes (often known as thinking skills programmes) as having the primary aim of developing thinking. ETS and R&R featured very strongly here. However, it is also worth noting that courses dealing with drugs and alcohol abuse were also predominantly A-rated, as were a variety of psychology-based courses such as Anger Management.

Of the education courses mentioned there were five types which received the same number or more A-ratings in comparison with B or C ratings:
- General education courses;
- Citizenship;
- Personal development;
- Key Skills, problem-solving; and
- Health-related courses.
Other types of course where a significant minority gave A-ratings were: Literacy and Numeracy and Key Skills Communication.

The vast majority of education courses, including Key Skills (such as Information Technology, team-working and communication skills), literacy and numeracy, business studies, sports-related, food-related and arts-related courses were seen as primarily seeking to develop transferable skills rather than to develop thinking as such. This was also true of courses dealing with group work and resettlement. Of the twenty courses dealing with Social and Life Skills, 5 were A-rated, with 10 receiving B ratings and 10 being C-rated. The only type of course where the highest number of C ratings were given was Basic Skills. These last two findings may give cause for concern, as it suggests that the terminology itself may affect perceptions – or else that basic skills and social skills are seen as a low-level set of subskills (e.g. phonic skills, multiplication skills or greeting skills). No work-related courses were given A-ratings, but there were 34 B-ratings and 12 C-ratings. This brings out the perceived importance of transferable skills in such courses.

In the questionnaire respondents were asked to list vocational and non-vocational courses offered in their institutions, apart from any nominated courses. They were also asked to specify the size of groups for all nominated and non-nominated courses, to see if courses rated high for ‘thinking skills’ tended to have smaller groups. We found that this was not the case, as all types of course had an average of 9 or 10 participants. Whether this figure represents those enrolled rather than those actually present in a typical session is not known. Nor is it known how this figure has come to be the norm in prison education and training. However, with groups of nine or ten it is certainly possible for dialogue and discussion to take place as well as for individuals and subgroups to work at tasks and then have time to present, or report back.

Conclusions

Overall it was interesting that significant numbers of staff in prisons are aware of the importance of thinking skills in the education and training provided in prisons. The notion of transferable skills is also salient for many. What is less clear is whether courses are delivered in such a way that course participants are able to make connections between them, thereby increasing the possibility that they will be able to generalise their knowledge and skills both within and outside the prison setting. Certainly within prisons there have been arguments that education generally should be more closely integrated with programmes on social skills, substance abuse, anger management and family violence (Townsend, 1991). Newman et al. wrote about the ‘right kind’ of education in US correctional facilities, and took it to include:

- moral education
- democratic self-rule in the ‘just community’
- instruction in the humanities, with a strong appeal to the cognitive
- training in a variety of skills to enable the inmate to cope with the personal, sexual, familial, chemical, economic, vocational, and social problems of life, thereby to gain a realistic sense of one’s individual worth as a human being (Newman et al., 1993: 7).
Learning and generalisation is difficult in stressful environments. Prisons are arguably prime examples of such environments, and some research has documented that prisoners see their environment as a place of danger which generates and shapes conflict (Edgar and Martin, 2002). Such stressful environments will then, inevitably, impact on learning, and particularly on transfer and generalisation. So if we are going to try and teach generalisation and transferability, what would be the most profitable area to choose? Oral communication could be regarded as being the most profitable as skills learnt could be used by prisoners for the remainder of their lives, both inside and outside of prison.

Friendship et al. (2003b), while accepting that reconviction rates are a fundamental measure of treatment success, claim that they cannot be considered in isolation from other empirically related treatment and resettlement factors. They offer an integrated model for the evaluation of accredited cognitive behaviour interventions which includes pre and post treatment psychometric tests, participants’ own feedback on the benefit of treatment, treatment summary documents and daily assessments from prison staff such as wing logs and adjudication records, together with the assessments made by group facilitators. They say that changes in intermediary treatment targets, for instance socialisation and impulsivity, are best monitored on a day-to-day basis when the skills acquired during therapy are put to the test. The same authors believe that the following factors are key to the effectiveness of any cognitive intervention and should therefore be part of the criteria for evaluation studies:

- group climate, characterised by high cohesion, good organisation and being well led by facilitators
- encouragement of the open expression of feelings
- a sense of group responsibility
- a sense of hope among group members, coupled with an institutional climate where prison staff are involved in treatment and model appropriate attitudes and behaviour.

Thinking skills in schools are presented as embedded in curriculum or separately delivered. There is some evidence to suggest that these generic, cognitive thinking skills are more easily assimilated by students when part of mathematics, science and literacy lessons (Higgins et al. 2004), and that there is more evidence that these skills are transferable (e.g. Adey and Shayer, 1990). Even if, as the survey suggests, there are elements of thinking skills in a good deal of current provision, there has been, and continues to be, an increased use in the UK for stand-alone thinking skills programmes like ETS and R&R. Home Office projections and current forecasts estimate that by 2009 there will be 93,000 offenders in custody and 300,000 under supervision (Carter 2003). It seems that Offending Behaviour Programmes such as ETS and R&R will continue to play a major role in the rehabilitation and education of offenders both within prison and in the community.
References


