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Using PE effectively to improve prisoners' literacy skills: HMP Bure

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Brief description

This example shows how improving reading skills in the prison gym is successfully providing a relaxed, non-traditional educational environment for men who have avoided learning to read for too many years.

Overview – the provider's message

'PE is a popular area visited by a wide range of prisoners, including those who are not keen to attend education classes. It offers the opportunity for them to stop for short periods of mentored reading, often during a PE session. The "Toe by Toe" scheme uses trained peer mentors and encourages non-readers or those with poor reading abilities to improve their skills, without attending traditional classroom-based sessions. For prisoners, learning to read provides access to education, training and employment opportunities that would previously have been unavailable to them; and this in turn supports the national drive to reduce re-offending by offering better resettlement opportunities.'

Sam Critchley, PE Officer

The good practice in detail

HMP Bure successfully encourages non-readers or those with poor reading abilities to improve their skills, without expecting attendance at traditional classroom-based sessions. It has found that the best environment is one that is popular and frequently used by prospective learners and therefore readily accessible and non-threatening, while offering the opportunity for withdrawal to a quiet area for short periods of mentored reading support.

'Toe by Toe'

"...the single best thing introduced into prisons in the last ten years"

Stephen Shaw

Prisons and Probation Service Ombudsman (2007)

'Toe by Toe' is a structured reading scheme used internationally, including in some schools. The scheme takes small steps towards reading goals and allows the learners to work in a structured way at their own pace. It is based on a 'buddying' or mentoring system, where fluent readers support those learning to read. Mentors should be appropriate to the target group, and offer a relaxed, approachable and supportive non-traditional learning environment. The 'Toe by Toe' reading scheme is popular in prisons because it uses trained mentors who are not trained literacy teachers.



The Shannon Trust

Materials are provided by the [Shannon Trust](#). Copies of 'Toe by Toe' books are provided to prisons free of charge once the scheme is up and running. The administration at the prison is done by the prisoners and monitored by prison officers. In 2007, the Trust provided resources to teach more than 5,000 new learners in prison.

Ex-offenders are three times more likely to re-offend when unemployed but if you want to work you must be able to read...

Over 90% of all employment in the UK requires employees to be able to read - half of all offenders leaving prison are unable to do this.

Using these materials

The way in which learning to read is promoted to non-readers in prison could be used effectively in other adult education and training settings. Being able to read empowers people by increasing their self-esteem, providing independent living skills and improved employment opportunities. The concept of peer mentoring can also be transferred to other skills and to the workplace.

The key elements are:

- choose peers as mentors, who have good literacy abilities (at least Level 2), are approachable and have patience and credibility with their peers
- promote reading using non-traditional subjects and work areas
- ensure that the mentors are clearly identifiable, using, for example, colourful T-shirts
- provide training and on-going support for the mentors and the coordinators
- communicate well across the organisation to staff and learners
- offer easily accessible short learning sessions of between 10 and 20 minutes

- provide incentives to become involved.

How the scheme works at HMP Bure



Two PE officers (PEOs), Paul Harris and Sam Critchley, grasped the opportunity to use the popular prison gym environment to encourage prisoners to read. They used their previous experience of the reading scheme to encourage as many prisoners as possible to join the scheme. They were supported by the senior PE officer, Paul Cosham, the former Governor, Paul Cawkwell and the Head of Learning and Skills, John Perkins.

Too often, prisoners with no or low reading abilities can manage to avoid improving their skills despite literacy being offered in all prison education departments.

Poor school experiences, missing critical learning years or constant moving around have resulted in them being unable to read.

This results in them relying on others to read their letters from family, friends and solicitors, which often contain personal and confidential information.

Currently 25% of the prisoners in HMP Bure have literacy abilities at Entry level and below.

Sam Critchley says, 'It is the enthusiasm of the prisoners to volunteer as 'Toe by Toe' mentors that has made the scheme such a success'.



Jason has been a mentor since HMP Bure opened and also works as a gym orderly. Owen is one of the prisoner coordinators for 'Toe by Toe' and is based in the library, which has strong links with the PE and education departments.

The recruitment campaign has extended to find mentors for all the residential wings, with the aim of having five mentors on each wing. The library supports the recruitment of mentors by displaying posters in places that are visited by 'readers'. The poster emphasises the need for applicants to have level 2 literacy skills and that 'Toe by Toe' mentor training will be provided.

PE staff and prisoners that are part of the scheme agree that the support and encouragement from the Governor have been critical in being able to implement the scheme so easily and quickly. They also speak positively about the help from the A4e and Tribal staff who meet prisoners at induction and encourage them to get involved, if their literacy initial assessment results are at Entry level or below. This encouragement is reinforced in PE inductions to recruit both mentees and mentors. Prisoners who have been involved in the scheme at other prisons are generally keen to continue.

The main aim is to encourage non-readers to participate, particularly many long-serving prisoners who have avoided attending literacy education classes at previous prisons. This helps prisoners in their custodial lives by increasing self-confidence through learning vital life

skills that most of us take for granted; as well as aiding resettlement and integration into 'outside' life and possibly progressing to further learning.

The Governor, Sue Doolan praises the initiative: 'It's unusual for "Toe by Toe" to be coordinated by a prison PE department; it provides a new learning environment, especially for those who have not necessarily excelled in the classroom.' She considers that the success also relates to clear 'ownership' of the scheme by specific staff in a PE environment where there is a focus on a prisoner's whole life well-being of physical activity, healthy lifestyle and preparing for the future – 'not just pumping iron'.

It is usually the prison library which operates 'Toe by Toe' schemes, but they may not be visited frequently by non-readers, certainly not as often as the prison gym. Librarian Kim is very supportive and works closely with the PE staff and peer mentors. The library holds an increasing stock of 'easy readers', welcoming 'Toe by Toe' mentors who bring their mentees to visit and choose books; often a new experience. The library also displays the 'readon' posters which use celebrity sports people to promote learning.



John Perkins, the prison's Head of Learning and Skills says, 'The gym taking the lead on the scheme was innovative and their approach of including both staff and prisoners together in the training has enabled it, in a relatively short space of time, to be successful both in the PE area and in extending it to peer mentors on the residential wings.' He emphasises that to have the Governor's strategic support in setting up the scheme was critically important. It enables staff and prisoners to attend training together and to promote the scheme across the prison, including with officers on residential wings.

'Toe by Toe' books are clearly labelled and integrated with main stream stock on main library shelves. Two 'Toe by Toe' orderlies, Owen and Neville, are coordinators and are responsible for the well-managed scheme, including the Shannon Trust data returns. The coordinators report to the PE staff each morning and work from the library where they can use the computers for their administration duties and to support their peers in choosing books. The 'Toe by Toe' book stock is adjacent to the coordinators' area, but is also integrated into the main book shelves.

The scheme brings benefits for both the mentors and the mentees. The mentors say, 'The scheme is valuable to do, really worthwhile...it improves my self-esteem...challenging and different...it gives an insight into other people's lives.' The mentees say, 'Reading in the PE department is better than classroom; it's more relaxed...peer support is easier...learning to read has "opened doors"...now I can write private letters.'

Learning to read has other far-reaching impacts on prisoners such as improved self-esteem and confidence which has been proven to lead to: prisoners entering education and skills training for the first time; improvements in attitude and behaviour; improvements in family relationships; and a realisation that life can be better and they have the power to make it so.

Provider background

HMP Bure is a new prison located seven miles north of Norwich. It opened in two phases, and accepted the first prisoners in November 2009, more in April 2010 and was full by June 2010. It is a category C closed prison for adult male prisoners and has an operational capacity of 523.

The PE department is operated by prison officers who are specialists. The PE facilities are available for prisoners to use seven days a week, including four weekday evenings. Prisoners are appointed as gym orderlies to support PE staff.

The library provision is contracted to Norfolk County Council and is based in the education building. The offender learning and skills service (OLASS) contracts the education and vocational training provision to A4e and the careers information and advice service (CIAS) to Tribal. The prison manages the offender management unit.

Are you thinking of putting these ideas into practice; or already doing something similar that could help other providers; or just interested? We'd welcome your views and ideas. Get in touch [here](#).

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