



## 'Con-viviality' – living inside

Race relations and racism in prisons have come under close scrutiny in recent years but despite efforts at improving the situation there is still little understanding of how people of different ethnicities get along with each other in the pressured and claustrophobic environment of a prison.

A recent research project, conducted by Dr Coretta Phillips of the London School of Economics and Rod Earle of The Open University, has tried to fill that gap by researching ethnicity and prisoner's social relations in two men's prisons, HMYOI Rochester and HMP Maidstone.

The research reveals a complex and contradictory picture of social relations among prisoners. These social relations were characterised by what the researchers have called 'con-viviality', a sense of prisoners living with ethnic differences under difficult conditions.

Con-viviality seemed to involve slightly wary social relations in which racism was present but unstable, inconsistent and contradictory. Explicit racism persisted 'back-stage' because it would not be tolerated in open areas of the prison, partly because it was deemed fair game for violent reprisal by prisoners.

For some white prisoners the substantial and assertive minority ethnic presence generated some difficulty. They struggled to negotiate everyday ordinary contact and some withdrew taking refuge in varying degrees of passive resentment.

Some white prisoners expressed frustration at the impact of race equality policies which they felt unfairly offered some prisoners a form of leverage against the prison regime that they could not operate.

For some black and minority ethnic prisoners, as well as many

white prisoners, ethnicity was not seen as a divisive feature of prison life or of the kinds of groupings that characterised times of association and recreational activities. Many white and ethnic minority prisoners preferred to ignore differences and focus on a sense of 'common humanity', differences of skin colour and culture were dismissed as largely irrelevant.

It is possible that the acceptance of ethnic diversity found in the two prisons operates to produce a low key but necessary solidarity among the many different men who find themselves in prison. Con-viviality was a way of 'doing time' in relative harmony with other prisoners but one that could not completely escape the divisive legacies of racism .

*A longer article about the research can be found in The Prison Service Journal, No 179, September 2008*

## Offender Learning Group update

Representatives from nearly all of the OU Regions and Nations recently attended the first meeting of the Offender Learning Group (OLG) in Birmingham.

Many of the problems for OU students in prison were discussed, and some working groups were set up to help tackle the key issues.

Over the next few months OLG members will be working very hard to provide clearer guidance for everyone who supports our students in prison. We will have a regular slot in *Inside News*. A new internal website will be launched soon, and will be extended to an external site by Spring 2009.

We would like input from students and staff. If you have views about what our priorities should be, please write to the OLG via the editor or if you have email you can contact us directly at [OLG@open.ac.uk](mailto:OLG@open.ac.uk).

## A life changing experience

*Erwin James, now a well known writer and journalist, describes how The Open University helped to set him on his chosen career path during his time in prison. He was made an Honorary Master of the OU (MUniv) in June this year*

When I went to prison in 1984 I was an ill-educated individual with no apparent skills or abilities. When I left prison 20 years later I was an Open University graduate and had an established career as writer. It was a dramatic transformation of a life – and totally unanticipated. I was lucky that quite early on in my prison time I met a prison professional who persuaded me that I was still valuable. With this person's encouragement I embarked on an education programme, just evening classes, in English and Maths. After passing my GCE exams the deputy head of the education department in the prison I was in suggested I might like to try higher education. "We think you would make a good OU student," he said.

Before then I had only vaguely heard of The Open University and had never considered that I could ever be a student.

Again, after some further coaxing I submitted an application and was accepted on an Arts Foundation course: A102 graduating with a BA, majoring in history six years later.

Achieving my degree was life changing; it made me see my place in the world differently. Anyone who studies with the OU soon understands how demanding and rigorous the work is. To succeed takes great tenacity and determination – qualities I certainly never had before prison. Armed with my degree my earlier sense of being incapable and lacking in worth was extinguished. I was able to set my sights for the future high. So when the opportunity for me to write for the Guardian came I knew it wasn't going to be easy, but I knew I could do it. OU study taught me to discipline my thinking, to analyse information and to explain

ideas. It was the perfect training for a writer.

So I will be eternally grateful for what I gained from my involvement with the OU. Especially since when I look back on my prison time I am struck by how little of what I experienced generally was relevant to working towards living a decent, law-abiding life in a civilised society. Prison life is so hectic and psychologically exhausting. It can be brutal and bleak. Just surviving is the priority for the majority of prisoners. Landing life can be very primitive, the vagaries of the prison system obtuse. For me education was the last bastion of rehabilitation in prison. I believe that everyone who enters prison should be able to access whatever level of education they are capable of and be fully supported in their endeavours. I can say that now. Before my educational journey however, and before I had studied with the OU I would not have understood how important that was.

[www.erwinjames.co.uk](http://www.erwinjames.co.uk)

## Award-winning student chooses OU

*It is possible to study all the way up to OU Level 2 courses even if you start from scratch. Here's how one student achieved this.*

Damien has been a student at HMP The Mount for over two years. As he wanted to study at a higher level he initially enrolled on the Access to Higher Education course with a view to becoming an independent learner.

Although Damien was enthusiastic and motivated, his skills needed developing in terms of essay writing and structuring, note taking and summary writing skills. He was therefore advised to

study an Open University Openings course at an introductory level prior to applying for an OU Level 1 course.

With this in mind he enrolled on the Openings Course Y157, 'Understanding society' and followed this by the Level 1 course, DD100, 'An Introduction to the social sciences'. He achieved excellent marks and passed with an average mark of over 80%.

Damien developed a thirst for learning and began studying A Level Mathematics, a subject where he has a natural ability, and more recently, 'Discovering art'. He

also fitted a Firm Start business course and bookkeeping course into his busy schedule.

Damien is now studying an OU Level 2 course DSE212, 'Exploring psychology', which he is enjoying but finding challenging!

Damien's success in his studies gained him Learner of the Year Award for Offender Learning at Milton Keynes College.

Damien now has a clear path, which he wishes to follow - completing the OU degree of course, and finding employment using his maths skills and psychology knowledge.

## Support for prison students

The best way of describing what education can mean for people in prison is to hear from one of them. This is from Michael:

“Level 1 at university level is something I believed was well out of reach for me and was more for the brainboxes who already had a list of GCSE’s and A level qualifications under their belts.”

“Now more than ever I have confidence and success is far less daunting. My OU tutor has given me more confidence than I have ever known. I was a wreck inside myself each time I went to a tutorial. When I came out and walked back to the wing I was walking on air!”

Prison gives people time for thinking about their past and what the future might hold. Learning is one of the ways prisoners can give themselves more choices in life. Many prisoners have missed out on school, or have not fulfilled their potential, for all sorts of reasons. Distance learning is a way to study what you want, in your own time; it

is hard work, but it is something prisoners do for themselves, because they want to. This is why much of the feedback from prisoners received by the Prisoners Education Trust talks about how education has changed their lives.

The **Prisoners Education Trust** makes awards so that sentenced prisoners can gain skills and qualifications that enable them to lead a more positive life both in prison and after their release. The Trust pays for academic and vocational distance learning courses and materials. Offenders can study both academic and vocational subjects mainly through distance learning. Since it started work in 1990, the Trust has offered more than 15,000 men and women serving custodial sentences the opportunity to gain new skills and qualifications. Any sentenced prisoner who has a good chance of completing their chosen course before release and is resident in a prison or young offender institution may apply to the Trust for funding

through their Education Department.

*Offender Learning Matters* is a Prisoners Education Trust project. It aims to share the experiences of prisoners with the people who influence what happens in prison. So the Trust provides a platform for the exchange of information and thus encourages debate among all who are interested or involved. *Learning Matters* is the Trust’s monthly e-newsletter, highlighting news and events concerning offender education and bringing news from inside prisons. The Trust also responds to requests for information from policy makers, academics, media and anybody interested in increasing their knowledge of the issues.

The Trust recently produced a supplement, *Inside Education*, in partnership with *Inside Time*, the paper for prisoners and will be contributing to the paper on a monthly basis, responding to letters from prisoners and showcasing some of their talent.

[www.prisonerseducation.org.uk](http://www.prisonerseducation.org.uk)

## All the world’s a stage

This is a line from *As You Like It*, one of Shakespeare’s dramas studied by George at HMP Littlehey in the course of his arts and literature studies.

George started his studies with A103, ‘Introduction to humanities’ back in 2006 and since then has worked steadily towards a BA/Bsc Open degree by completing Level 2 course A210, ‘Approaching literature’ in 2008. He now intends to follow this up by Level 3 A300, ‘Twentieth century literature: texts and debates’.

George has found the study of authors, poets and playwrights

stimulating and confidence building.

“The texts you study are a rich source of literary knowledge that gives you not only the confidence to expand your thinking skills to a higher level but also the ability to have a go at constructive criticism.”

George summarises his experiences thus: “I thoroughly enjoyed this course and the challenges it presented; the skills and knowledge I have now will hold me in good stead for my next course, ‘Twentieth century literature: texts and debates’. That’s the confidence I have in

myself - being capable of attempting a course which, until I had completed ‘Approaching literature’, I would never have dared tackle.”

“I work full time as a gym orderly and spend no time in the education department. So another skill I have honed is the ability to create a study plan that allows me to use the time I spend in my cell wisely. This also gives me the chance to immerse myself into the worlds created, real or imagined by the authors, poets and playwrights whom I study. Which, in turn takes my mind away from prison life.”

# Openings are the ideal starting point

*Andy from HMP Littlehey explains why he found the OU Openings course to be an ideal introduction to study.*

“My first course with The Open University was the Openings course Y161, ‘Introducing environment’. I chose this course because I have always had an interest in the natural world and wanted to learn more, both to understand better all the news stories about the effects we’re having on the planet and to enable me to find employment in the conservation sector. I found this course really informative; it gave me a taste for the subject and was a great springboard to further study. The course did exactly what

it’s designed to do: built up my knowledge of the subject, increased my confidence and helped me develop my learning skills. I have now completed my second course, T172, ‘Working with our environment, technology for a sustainable future’, and I’m currently deciding which course to do next.”

“Studying at a level for university was something I’d never previously thought of doing, let alone considered I was capable of achieving. I would now recommend distance learning with The Open University to anybody. The OU offers so much; the study helps to keep your mind active and the courses offer flexibility with

study times. The OU allows you to develop your learning skills and confidence, has excellent tutor support and feedback, and provides the chance to study for a new career.”

“Openings courses are an ideal, gentle introduction to study if you’ve not studied for many years, like me! You don’t even have to follow a set path (although you can if you so choose) as the OU enables you to study anything from a single course, study for a certificate or diploma, or mix and match courses to gain an open degree, tailor-made to the student. My only regret is that I didn’t start studying with the OU years ago.”

# Growing through study

*Martin is in his third year of study with the OU and his fourth inside. He takes a keen interest in offender learning, having helped to produce ‘The Insider Guide to Distance Learning’, a copy of which is sent to every prisoner student. He has studied the French language and English grammar and is currently studying U211, ‘Exploring the English language’.*

“In terms of preparing me for a future outside of prison, it is the consistent treatment of me as an individual, and dare I say it, as a human being, by the OU that has had the most positive impact on me. The courses I’ve studied over the last few years have been the single most positive aspect of my sentence.”

“During my sentence I have been visited by several tutors. In my experience these one-to-one tutorials are as satisfying as visits from friends and family. To spend up to two hours discussing a subject I love or practising a second language, is such a break from the monotony of prison life.”

“There is never any discussion between the tutor and myself regarding why I am locked up and it is difficult to detect any emotions these generous people have towards me, beyond their professional opinion of me as a student. I always try to go out of

my way to make the tutors comfortable but the security, security, security atmosphere may raise tension rather than relieve it.”

“It would be fantastic if these distractions were not a reality. The silver lining is that The Open University and its tutors, time and time again, see past the circumstances that would otherwise make tutorials impossible.”

“The ‘what works’ culture of offender behaviour courses, basic and cognitive skills and meaningless activities is alien in comparison to what I have gained from studying with the OU. My successes and genuine prospects have come because I have been given the opportunity to step outside the key performance indicators.”

“My opinion remains that what prisoners need is the space to grow through their studies and not the restrictions of box ticking exercises.”

## Inside News

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