

Educating the Protective Custody Inmate for Self-Directness: An Adult Learning Contract Approach

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Abstract

Correctional education is receiving increasing attention worldwide as a topic of concern to adult educators. The applications of adult learning principles to the education of adult inmates is a particular concern of the article, which reports on the design, development, implementation, and evaluation of an adult learning contract approach to educating the protective custody inmates at Walpole Correctional Institution in Massachusetts. An examination of PC and its growth in recent years, and the educational rights of PC inmates undergird the discussion. The approach, founded on and guided by sound adult learning principles, is equally applicable and relevant to the general inmate population. An appeal is issued to readers — both researchers and practitioner — for further dialogue and discussion with regard to educating the inmate as an adult learner.

Introduction

The education of prison inmates is increasingly becoming recognized worldwide as an important area of practice within the field of adult education. The International Education, for example, has recently proclaimed correctional education as a top priority area of interest (Hall, 1984). Also at the international level, the Open University in England hosted, from July 3-6, 1984, an international seminar of 30 experts in correctional education from around the world. Entitled "Strategies for Education Within Prison Regimes," the program (Normie et al., 1984) covered areas from organizing and managing correctional education to issues of policy, practice, methodology, and research. As noted by Duguid (1984), one theme, recurring particularly in informal discussions, focused on the importance of creating a learning environment such that an inmate could develop, grow, and learn to take increasing initiative and responsibility for one's own learning. In general, the author stressed the importance of "transforming [correctional]...institutions into centres for personal growth and transformation" (p. 71).

The theory and practice of adult education, and the accompanying principles of adult learning, stress the development of self-directness in the learner, including emphasis on one's taking increasing responsibility for designing and evaluating one's own learning and, in general, learning how to learn and not merely how to be taught. Unfortunately, little has been written on how one might effectively apply the principles of adult learning to a correctional setting. **Accordingly, the aim of this article is to discuss an illustrative example of how adult learning principles have been successfully applied to the education of protective custody inmates.** Although the process is relevant and has been applied by the authors to other custody classifications as well, the present discussion focuses exclusively on the results of a systematic effort with protective custody inmates in light of the previous neglect of this area coupled with its increasing growth.

Protective Custody (PC)

Protective custody is becoming an area of increasing concern to both correctional officials and personnel. Protective custody (PC) is a status accorded inmates who need to be separated from the general inmate population for protective reasons. Most of the time the lives of these inmates are threatened by someone and they can no longer survive in the prison population. They fear for their lives. Examples include: the "drug addicts" who can't "pay their bill" and will be harassed, killed, or both by the "dealer", informants who are considered "rats" by fellow inmates, and child molesters who are often looked upon with disdain, distrust, and sometimes malice by other inmates. Most inmates in the PC population have requested that status; a small number have been assigned there.

Although the status of PC is not new, the proliferation of inmates requesting and needing PC has increased. A recent study of Protective Custody, completed by the American Correctional Association (ACA, 1983), indicated that "most veteran administrators in the correctional field do not recall PC being much of an issue until the past few years" (p. 8).

The ACA study, in synthesizing views from several authors (Anderson, 1980; Vantour, 1979), noted factors in society-at-large as well as within the correctional institution contributing to what has been termed the "explosive growth" (Jacobs, 1982) of PC. Among the factors included are: (a) the practice of inmates being assigned PC status before arriving at the correctional institution (for example: drug culture informants, or offenders whose trials have attracted mass media publicity, to mention a few). Also, the court system has begun to grant protective custody status to those inmates who request it. (b) Climate within a correctional institution. Increased freedom of movement promotes greater accessibility of one inmate to another, and often contributes to the rising level of inmate to inmate violence. Such factors are creating an expansion of PC

effort on which the present discussion is based.

To maintain fairness, a parallel approach was also offered to inmates in the general population. In fact, elements of the approach had been ongoing for several years as introduced by the co-author. The PC population, however, represented a small, more controlled sample for systematic observation. Also it was felt that the self-contained nature of the group made it more amenable to this type of approach, while at the same time addressed some of the problems unique to PC status.¹

The Adult Learning Contract Approach

Foundations and Format

A Foundation: Sound Adult Learning Principles

Prior to discussing the mechanics of the approach, it seems critical to offer a brief discussion of the principles of adult learning on which it is based, particularly since a learning contract could conceivably be implemented in a mechanistic, prescriptive manner in which the adult inmate, treated as a dependent child, has no input regarding the design, development, or evaluation of the contract and which conceivably could be one-sided. This would indicate the inmate's "responsibility" only as dictated by another, but not the responsibility of the facilitator to the inmate.

Unfortunately, most theories of learning are founded on research conducted with either animals or children (Knowles, 1984). Over the past few decades, however, results of both research and practice with adults have generated a number of principles to guide one's efforts in working with adult learners.

Perhaps the most popularized works are those of Malcolm Knowles² and his emerging theory of ANDRAGOGY (based on the Greek word for adult) – the art and science of facilitating the learning of adults. Critical to understand, is the premise that the andragogical approach is not restricted to dealing only with **mature** human beings or adults, but is a process which in itself contributes to maturation. For this reason, its application to a correctional setting may have important implications for encouraging an inmate to take more responsibility for his/her own learning and provide a potential key to self-management in an otherwise "other-controlled" environment. Four central elements, which have emerged from research and practice (see footnote 2), form the foundational principles of andragogical theory. They deal with an adult's (a) self-concept, (b) life experiences, (c) readiness to learn, and (d) orientation to learning.

1. Self-Concept

Adults generally perceive themselves as independent beings, capable and desirous of self-direction even (and often especially) when in a controlled environment. Obviously, security and control are critically important to the sound functioning of a correctional institution. Consequently, the degree to which an education program can include the

inmate in the planning and evaluation of learning activities while at the same time encourage individual responsibility for one's own learning will respect this "tug" toward a need for recognition as an independent, self-directing creature. This need is found in all maturing human beings, however frustrated they are in feeling a lack of control or a dependency on others.

2. Experience

Recognition and respect for a huge reservoir of **Life Experience** has proven critical in working with adults as learners. Drawing-out, and "getting-to-know" an individual's past experiences (in whatever form) is essential. Since adults often define themselves largely in terms of their experiences, ignoring these experiences is tantamount to rejecting a large part of the individual's identity. Knowing what life experiences and resources are part of each inmate helps the facilitator better work with the individual in relating new learning to old connections. Moreover, when working in a learning group inmates can often be rich learning resources for each other.

In another vein, past experiences with learning and teachers can act as deterrents to learning. Moreover, one's own self-concept as a learner can have a profound effect on one's attitude as well as on success with learning situations.

3. Readiness to Learn

The "**readiness to learn**" and "**teachable moments**" of adults tend to be related to the developmental task at hand — in other words, the tasks that one must master in order to perform current roles. For an inmate that role may be one of "What do I do now that I'm out of work and society?" This "new role" can potentially serve as a creative catalyst to unleashing energies previously bound to tasks in society-at-large. The educational program can serve as an important link in that process, particularly if educators and inmates alike understand and apply the principles of adult learning.

4. Orientation to Learning

The adult's **orientation to learning** is generally one of immediacy of application. Determining from the learners themselves, then, what they perceive to be "problem areas" in need of improvement becomes a more meaningful catalyst than predetermining subject and curriculum for them. Adults tend to more wholeheartedly engage in learning in response to internal pressures felt from their current situation. Consequently, an inmate who previously had not been motivated to read may be stimulated by a desire to "visit the law library" or by a need to write letters. Building upon this need in addressing the development of a learning program tends to produce a more meaningful and lasting learning experience.

Consequently, adults learn best when their adulthood is respected and grow not only in learning content, but also in the maturation process when education is planned and designed with them rather than for them. Learning is an

internal process, unique to each individual. Adults work and grow most fully at their own pace and by their own choice in their own time. As a result, adult educators in all contexts are increasingly turning toward the use of learning contracts. Although the content to be learned may be similar among inmates, a contract allows the pacing and approach to be individualized. Going beyond the "individualized instruction" approach which has permeated correctional education for about fifty years now (McCormick, 1931), the use of contracts is not totally prescriptive in nature. It involves the mutual input of both learner and "guide" in designing, implementing, and evaluating a learning program. Moreover, responsibility for completing the learning activities rests on the learner.

Use of the Learning Contract: A Rationale

As the word implies, a contract is a binding agreement between two (or more) people. Written terms usually delineate the specifications and conditions of the contract. Accordingly, a learning contract is an agreement, mutually drawn between a learning facilitator and learner, which describes the learning project and lists objectives, learning resources (material and human), and proposed evidence to be submitted for accomplishment of objectives. An adult learning contract approach differs from the Independent Education Plan (IEP) sometimes used in special education programs. IEP contracts are written by a committee of educators (who must have the approval from parents of the child). Quarterly evaluations are conducted by the educator to determine the progress of the learner. An adult learning contract is a mutual agreement between the learner and facilitator, where the time frame, goals, and objectives are identified by the learner. Evaluation, considered rediagnosis of needs, is a mutual process.

An example of a hypothetical adult learning contract is provided in Figure 1.

Contracts are updated, revised, evaluated, and new ones written on a periodic basis. As is evident, a delineation of objectives as competencies to be mastered often affords a method of gathering evidence for evaluative purposes.

The use of a learning contract approach with PC inmates may be employed by the correctional educator in ABE/GED, Vocational/Technical Education, Community College and University courses within the institution, or other learning projects in which the inmates may wish to become involved. Moreover, it may be used in conjunction with helping a PC inmate better structure, organize, and "attack" a correspondence course.

Use of this approach can be of great benefit to administration and security. Not only does it provide a permanent, frequently updated, and recent record for both learning facilitator and learner, but it also provides a step-by-step record of accomplishments for administrative use.

Correctional administrators often agonize over poor documentation and inaccurate information concerning the accomplishments of PC inmates. In addition to providing a record of accomplishments, the learning contract approach would also serve as an administrative tool by providing precise entrance and exit points of each inmate, a bonus for tracking a sometimes transient population of PC inmates. Moreover, this information is vitally important for those PC inmates who might apply for Good Time Credit.

With regard to security matters, the use of a learning contract approach eliminates the need to move large numbers of PC inmates into a classroom situation, which potentially is an enormous security risk. The need for daily classroom space for PC inmates is reduced, if not eliminated, since the contract can specify not only what is to be learned, but where. Such built-in flexibility also permits recognition of individual preferences with regard to learning environment and context.

Rather than meeting classroom style, on a daily basis for three hours, hourly consultations between learning facilitator and learner – either individually or in small groups – can double the use of consultation time. In fact, meetings may be held in cell blocks, in areas designated for a library mobile (which visits PC visiting area), all of which already employ the use of security personnel, thus decreasing the need for additional security. Contract evaluation time can be done on a biweekly or monthly basis as initiated and requested by the inmate when he/she feels ready to progress. One can probably see how such a learning contract approach can also be used to augment and support those inmates taking correspondence courses.

Use of a learning contract approach does not negate the use of group learning activities, but merely provides more flexibility to the monocular approach of classroom learning often practiced with the general population. The facilitator may indeed wish to have group meetings with inmates if possible, but the contract learner will still be responsible for what he/she has or has not learned. Large group instruction, particularly in which inmates have not been involved or given any responsibility in the planning process, often breeds a lack of individual "ownership" of the learning. In fact, an atmosphere devoid of the learner's acceptance of involvement with the learning objectives and lacking in individual responsibility for the learning itself tends to encourage "gamesmanship" – especially among inmates. A situation with "passive" recipients also encourages passive-resistance as well as passive aggressiveness. Attitudes and behaviors such as "Make me do it, Teach" may manifest. Person-to-person conversations about anything but "learning" as well as idling away time may also be present. Some inmates may "get lost" in the wilderness of the more aggressive ones who may try to control the instructor, other inmates, or both. The "show-offs" and "manipulators" often surface causing many

Figure 1

Hypothetical Learning Contract

(This contract is only a **sample** framework. An actual contract would be much more detailed and specific)

INMATE NO. _____

NAME: _____ M.C.I. WALPOLE

Learning Project: Develop selected test-taking skills Time Period (Today's date to date of completion)

Entry Point: Validated skills in: Content – Reading, Science, Literature; skill in dealing with multiple choice items on GED preparation tests (See inmate file and previous learning contract).

Learning Objectives ^a	Resources & Strategies ^b		Evidence submitted & Criteria for Evaluation ^c
	Material	Human	
To develop competency in: 1. Time Management 2. Concentration	Books, articles, practice exercises, GED practice test, and General Performance Index Material available from library mobile or learning facilitator – as indicated on attached bibliography Above, plus computer instructional/skill-building materials (listed on bibliography)	Learning facilitator bi-weekly meetings & on-call Librarian Inmates: Smith & Doe (have specification on their contract) Counselor Bee (to conduct small group on how to focus) Correctional officers in cell block	Maintenance of a log by learner denoting frustrations, blocks, as well as progress (shared with learning facilitator and others chosen by learner) Although a continuous progress, improvement of skills determined by actual performance on practice tests and constant comparison with performance on previous attempts

^aNot an exhaustive list – merely illustrative for this learner. Entry point information above indicates validation of other skills.

^bMay differ among individuals with same or similar objectives.

^cDetermined in part during development of contract, modified and expanded during implementation. Evaluation considered rediagnosis of needs.

Exit Point: Date of Completion and Validation of Competencies.

(Signature of the Participant)

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inmates to withdraw – becoming nonparticipants and sometimes even dropping out. Use of a contract approach has been observed to decrease the drop out rate among PC inmates as well as “gamesmanship” often encountered. However, this observation should merely serve as a potential hypothesis for testing by the more research-oriented reader.

Implementing the Contract Approach

Although most adult learners are capable of achieving some degree of self-directedness during the period of incarceration, it would seem wise to start gradually by building success into one's efforts. First, one must identify those PC inmates who can function as adult learners with a minimum amount of supervision and who are voluntarily interested in engaging in a contractual approach to learning. Based on the Walpole experience, a time focus of about 5-8 weeks maximum for the first learning project seems reasonable. This period is long enough to expect some degree of accomplishment or attainment of objectives while short enough to provide psychological benefit and motivation accruing from short-term accomplishment and consequent motivation to move on to the next learning unit or project. Based on the Walpole experience, the shorter the initial time frame, the more commitment received from the inmate. The adult learners who committed themselves to a five week learning program evidenced a much lower dropout rate than those in an eight week program.

In order to determine who to initially include in such a program, two procedures as implemented at Walpole are suggested:

1. Administration of the **SDLRS-Self-Directed Learning Readiness Scale** (Guglielmino, 1977, 1981) to determine **with** the inmate his/her readiness for engaging in such an approach.
2. An individual interview with the inmate which includes questions such as those depicted in Table 1. Such questions are designed to help determine the degree to which the inmate is able to function as a self-directed learner.

Recognizing these characteristics is important to the success of efforts.

Table 1

Sample Interview Questions for the Protective Custody Inmates:

1. Do you enjoy reading on your own? Would you like the opportunity to do this more?
2. How much time do you spend reading books, magazines, or newspapers each day?

3. What is the maximum amount of time you can spend learning – or processing information at one time before becoming bored or frustrated? If it varies, what is the range?
4. Have you completed any kind of learning contract in the past six months?
5. Have you completed any correspondence instruction in the past six months?
6. Whom would you use as resource person if you needed assistance for a correspondence course?
7. Have you worked with an Avocational Learning Project recently?
8. What has been your most effective style or method of learning? (Give a list from which to select – see footnote 5.)
9. How and where do you learn most effectively?

Once the pilot population is selected, some additional guidelines may be helpful. Again, based on the Walpole experience a number of conditions seem to be necessary for a successful learning contract. While most of the pointers listed below are based on sound adult learning principles, the more research-oriented reader is again encouraged to adopt these tenets as hypotheses to be tested.

1. Deal with objective of immediate concern to the inmate and focus attention on **specific problem areas**, rather than on subjects.
2. Actively involve the inmate in the design of the Learning Contract. It has been observed that such inmates become more actively involved in the learning process too. (Contracts should not only be mutually written but mutually agreed upon also.)
3. Give constant attention to helping inmates learn the skills of learning – how to learn³ on one's own in addition to learning the content.
4. Help the inmate better understand and become comfortable with his/her learning style⁴ (including how they process information, as well as how and where they learn best).
5. The inmate **must** be ready to accept responsibility for the completion of the learning contract – with assurance that the learning facilitator is available for consultation when needed.

6. It appears that the approach tends to work best when the inmate has a functional competency level of 8.5 (grade equivalent) as measured by the Tests for Adult Basic Education (T.A.B.E.) Level D in Reading and Math.

Focusing on PC inmates who are ready to assume responsibility for their own learning, know **how** (or are interested in learning **how**) to learn, and who have mastered some basic reading and writing skills ensures greater initial success and credibility for the effort. One may then have the support and energy to venture on to include inmates needing more direction, guidance, and assistance. Even introducing this approach in pilot form should serve to eliminate the need for classroom space as the **principal** means of providing meaningful adult learning programs, particularly for PC inmates – but for the general populations as well.

It seems of utmost importance to emphasize the **voluntary** nature of the program. Customs such as those sometimes practiced in correctional education programs of either: (a) making attendance mandatory or (b) paying an inmate to attend an educational program should be caveats to avoid.

Conclusions

Use of a learning contract approach to educate the protective custody inmate has promise for meeting court requirements, alleviating some security concerns posed by PC inmates, and addressing a number of administrative concerns. The program introduced at Walpole Correctional Institution continues to evidence positive “spin-off” effects. For example, it has:

- a. identified inmates who are interested in learning.
- b. tended to eliminate, or at least reduce, game playing of “Make me do it, Teach”.
- c. increased confidence, motivation, and progress of inmates (as well as participation).
- d. provided interested administrators (and potentially those in counselor/social work roles) with a tool to better understand the impact of the educational program.

It is hoped that this discussion will stimulate dialogue on this and perhaps other approaches to educating the inmate in protective custody. As indicated at the outset, the authors welcome dialogue and discussion from other correctional educators on how we might further implement and improve upon this approach or others. Perhaps the research-oriented reader may benefit from the discussion and may be challenged to design investigations and studies to improve the practice of educating the inmate in protective custody – a population which is predicted to become one of the most critical issue areas for correctional administrators in the future. In conclusion, the reader is reminded that the adult learning contract approach is one

that is equally applicable to non PC classifications as well.

Endnotes

1. Although outside the scope of the present discussion, a different type of individualized approach was also attempted by an instructor at Norfolk Correctional Institute. The interested reader may want to communicate with: Larry Pollard, Massachusetts Correctional Institution, Norfolk, Box 43, Norfolk, MA 02056.
2. For a comprehensive list of research studies executed around the emerging theory of Andragogy, the reader is referred to Appendix E in Knowles, M.S. (1980). *The modern practice of adult education*. (2nd. edition). Chicago: Follet, Other pertinent works listed in the references include Knowles (1975, 1984).
3. Helping the inmate learn how to learn is built into all learning endeavors. Excellent source books are cited in the list of references as Smith (1982, 1983).
4. The reader is encouraged to see Appendix A of Smith (1982) for information on and access to learning style inventories. Appendix B provides an Active Reading exercise, Appendix D an exercise on Thinking About Learning, and Appendix E Learning from Resource Person exercise.

Biographical Sketches

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Phillip Pearse has been a correctional educator for 15 years at Walpole Correctional Institution, a maximum security facility of the Massachusetts Department of Corrections (P.O. Box 100, S. Walpole, MA 02071). With a master's degree in adult education, he has been infusing adult learning principles into correctional education efforts at Walpole for a number of years. Also, he served for several years as Chair of the Corrections Unit for the now – American Association for Adult and Continuing Education.

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1986 CEA and ACA Regional Meeting and Conference Schedule

- CEA NATIONAL CONFERENCE**, Cincinnati, Ohio
July 6-9, 1986
- Region I Annual Conference**, Sturbridge, Massachusetts
May 28-30, 1986
- Region II Annual Conference**, Charlottesville, Virginia
April 17-18, 1986
- Region III Annual Conference**, No Conference in 1986
- Region IV Annual Conference**, Minneapolis, Minnesota
April 2-4, 1986
- Region V Annual Conference**, Huntsville, Texas
September 24-26, 1986
- Region VI Annual Conference**, Tacoma, Washington
November 6-9, 1986
- Region VII Annual Conference**, San Francisco, California
February 7-9, 1986
- Region VIII Annual Conference**, Time to be determined
- ACA MID-WINTER CONFERENCE**, San Diego, California
January 13-16, 1986
- ACA CONGRESS**, Las Vegas, Nevada
August 10-14, 1986