

## The Education Centre, Fort Mitchel Prison, Spike Island

BY PAM LORENZ

### Abstract

This paper outlines the educational program of a young offenders' prison in Ireland. Education is central to the overall program of the prison and the aim is, as far as possible, to offer the same or similar educational opportunities as those offered in the community. We use the adult education model where education is voluntary, giving the student choices and responsibilities; the curriculum is student-centered and addresses the needs of the "whole person."

Fort Mitchel Prison is a young offenders' prison, situated on an island near to Cobh in County Cork, Ireland. Asked to outline the main education programs we undertake here in the education center of the prison, I thought a brief history lesson might add interest first!

Cobh is an old seaside town situated in Cork harbor, and was formally named Queenstown. Back in the 1900s the town became famous as the last port from which the Titanic ship sailed on 11 April 1912, as it made its way to America some ninety years ago. Many Irish emigrants embarked as third class passengers hoping to start a new life in the "New World," but on 14 April 1912 the ship collided with an iceberg and the rest is history, as they say.

Fort Mitchel Prison, situated on Spike Island just off Cobh, is also renowned as the place of detention where John Mitchel (1815 - 1875) was held before he was due to be deported to Van Diemen's Land (now Tasmania), hence the prison's name! Mitchel was born in County Derry, the son of a Unitarian minister and United Irishman, and was educated at Trinity College, Dublin, later becoming a solicitor. In 1845 Mitchel began writing for a newspaper, *The Nation*; but in 1848 he left there to write for another paper, *The United Irishman*. It openly preached sedition to "that numerous and respectable class of the community, the men of no property," and in May 1848 Mitchel was convicted of treason felony and sentenced to fourteen years transportation. In 1853, he escaped to America and there he published his famous "Jail Journal."

In more recent times Fort Mitchel was a former naval base, but opened as a civilian prison in 1985. Fort Mitchel Prison is a closed place of detention for male offenders aged 16 years and over, and all the staff are still required to go to work each day by boat. This is a 15-20 minute journey and not always in the calmest of seas! The education center was opened in 1986 with just three part-time teachers, with 55 student prisoners, and no experience of "prison teaching." The prison soon grew to a constant population of 102 prisoners (aged mainly 16-25 years) and today we have 17 teaching staff (nine permanent and eight part-time) providing a broadly based education program.

Prison education in Ireland consists of a partnership between the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform and a range of educational agencies from the community; notably the vocational education committees (VECs), or local education authority, who are

mainly responsible for second level education in schools and colleges, and adult education/evening classes in the community. Other bodies such as the Public Library Service, the Arts Council and the Open University also make a contribution, but the VECs are responsible for the day-to-day management and administration of classes in prisons. The concept of education held is a broad one and is founded in a number of principles that are reflected in the Council of Europe document, "Education in Prison."

Prison Education has grown greatly in recent decades, achieving a substantial presence in all prisons and engaging more than half of all prisoners voluntarily in classes. The aim of the programs is to help prisoners cope with their sentences and prepare them for release, and particularly to offer them the opportunity to discover and develop new potential within themselves. Such personal development has special urgency in a prison context since the majority of those in prison have had limited education opportunities in the past. The methods and approaches in use are drawn from adult and community education models: participation is voluntary. The program does not include vocational training, which is administered separately by the prison regime.

The students at the education center in Fort Mitchel Prison also attend education on a voluntary basis. This means that if the students enjoy the class and find it worthwhile and interesting they continue to come, if however, they do not, they can simply vote with their feet and leave the class! Fortunately this does not happen often, as there is a very strong interest in education and approximately 80% of the prison population are involved in classes at some level. We place particular emphasis on literacy, numeric and basic skills, and on personal development courses including drug and alcohol awareness programs and anger management. These personal development courses were started at least ten years ago, by staff with some training but little experience in a prison setting. Now these courses are in great demand by the students and are an integral part of our curriculum.

As one student put it:

The choice theory course was good. It was interesting. It was strange too because it shows you a different way of looking at things. It is good to look at things a different way. I got to see how I thought and changed the way I operate a bit. It

was basic but it had to be or otherwise it would be confusing, as you wouldn't be used to that kind of thing. I thought the sex education was good too. It tells you about pregnancy and stuff like that. It put me aware too of AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases. I never did addiction groups on the outside. It is good just to look at things that are going on for you. You get to look at them clear and think about it. It's just a basic thing, just a start.

Trying to deal with addiction/alcohol problems and the damaging response of anger/violence have often been issues in the student's past, and frequently have a direct link to the present crimes of the prisoner. These words are from Jimmy:

I'm in school today and I'm starting a ten week course in anger management. There are eight in the group and they have all been interviewed. For some of these prisoners, being released would be like lambs to the slaughter. It would have a great effect on them. Most of them come from broken homes or a history of alcohol or drug abuse. They also had a problem with their anger growing up through the years faced with all that life had to throw. The effects now play a great part in their everyday life, it is Anger! One by one, slowly but surely, the room filled with some familiar faces. Starting off we got a cup of coffee and gathered round in a circle. The facilitators start the group off and we discuss what the ground rules will be; we need this to make the group work. We all sign the group rules as a gesture of confidence and understanding within the group. During week four we are looking at anger as a destructive force and the consequences of what we do. This, I could see, brought some guilt feelings into the group and made a lot of us stop and think. There were some good discussions and we got good feedback from the group. During week seven we look at unresolved issues. These unresolved issues may well be important to you and you may think action is the only way out. But you have a choice and this choice may be the difference between you being a free man or a caged one.

Most of our prisoners would have left school between 9 and 14 years and their attendance and attitudes towards school would have been poor. Juvenile offenders aged 17-20 years are the largest group in our prisons. These students often have short concentration spans, a history of substance abuse, serious literacy problems, poor communication skills, and since they have large gaps in their education they often lack confidence.

Central to our education program is mutual respect between the student and the teacher, and awareness that successful learning takes place best where the student is most motivated. Our classes are small, never more than ten and mostly around six to a group, and are student centered. Hence we aim to be as inclusive as possible, and to offer courses where the student can have an input into the curriculum and the events in the education center. We also have a small "student council" comprised of four student representatives and three teachers which informs the

activities in the education center, provided they are constructive and for the general good. This was found to help build up the student's trust, confidence and self esteem, and offer them a "voice" in an otherwise mainly controlling system where the prisoner is expected to conform and where creativity is not encouraged.

This student-centered approach means that when the prisoners are first brought to the education center they are interviewed individually and a program is devised for each applicant with their active cooperation, based on their length of sentence, literacy level, subject preferences and personal goals. Initially students are encouraged to work on areas that directly interest them, but given time they often take part in subject areas they have not tried before (especially personal development and life skills courses), and find new skills and hidden talents, as well as different ways of thinking about problems. By engaging with the prisoners in this way we hope to best address their personal and educational needs and build on their successes and self worth.

The curriculum contains the following range of subjects: Literacy, English at various levels, general maths, basic history and geography, home economics (cookery, budgeting and sewing skills), art and crafts, ceramics, computer and IT skills, music and the teaching of keyboards and guitar, woodwork, creative writing, drama, health education, addiction and drug awareness, AIDS information, peer education, anger management and pre-release courses. The most popular classes are the "practical subjects" where a student can physically see what he has accomplished and often will "give it out" as a gift to his family. Woodwork is a particularly practical subject and the student can show his skills by making anything from a jewelry box for his girlfriend to a cot for his baby. In home economics the student not only learns how to cook, about healthy eating and life skills, and how to work as a team member, but also gets to eat the food he has cooked and in pleasant surroundings too! Likewise art provides many opportunities for the student to make valued items like paintings, batiks or pieces of pottery, and to increase the value of self.

Literacy tuition is a priority subject. Those identified with serious problems might begin with one-to-one tuition and then gradually be integrated into a group (of three to six) appropriate to their needs. Classes can take the form of simple functional skills like form filling, letter writing, and reading everyday signs, to writing about family and life experiences while developing skills such as grammar, spelling and comprehension. Materials and literacy games are always adult-based with appropriate adult themes and topics and computers are often used to enhance learning. While we endeavour to work with all who have reading and writing problems, some prisoners, sadly still fall through the net. As Seamus explains, reading and writing are particularly valuable skills in prison:

At half past seven it is fall-in and I go to the top of my landing, and back to my cell till morning. So now I am left with four hours to do something till lights out. I start a letter to my girlfriend which I finish at nine. Then I read today's paper or listen to the radio. After my letter I would have a

chocolate bar and a bag of crisps before I start my craft work with matches. I like to make ships. Crafts would usually carry me through till half past eleven. Then it's time to tidy up and have a wash and brush my teeth before I go to bed. I might not sleep till one or two sometimes because I would have a chat with one of the lads in the cell and then dose off. I love reading and writing poems. I can count myself lucky that I can read and write because there is a lot of lads who can't, and I feel sorry for them, and you can guess how boring half seven to twelve can be for them.

Literacy is also incorporated into the context of the broader curriculum wherever possible, and the literacy teachers often work with other subject teachers (e.g. home economics, woodwork) to integrate students into classes appropriately and to the optimum level. Our sports and physical education teacher runs the physical education program with prison officer support. Throughout the year we would also invite in coaches with various skills (football, badminton, basketball etc.), which stimulates further learning and interest. Over the last three years we have linked in with a popular local road race, "The Ballycotton Ten," where participants run ten kilometers. The organizers of the race come in to the prison to hold the exact same race within the prison walls and are professional in the way they conduct the event. Generally about 15-20 prisoners train and complete the race, again with officer support, and it is a great day of celebration. Each year the prisoners run, they seek sponsorship for "The Chernobyl Children's Project," and usually raise a substantial sum for the fund. In the summer a small group of around ten children from the project visit the education center where we run games and party activities "hosted" by the young men who ran the race. This event is always the highlight of the year, and a memorable experience for all as we also learn of the difficulties experienced in Belarus.

The horticulture teacher provides a course, also with prison officer support, teaching the growing of plants, flowers, fruit and vegetables. This course takes place in "polyethylene tunnels" and the extensive prison grounds. Occasionally students are taken outside the gates to see parts of nature around the island, where relevant to the course. During the year 2000, the students built a "millennium pond" and equipped it with plant and fish life, and a seating area which is a welcome addition to the prison grounds. A recent addition to that subject area has been the acquisition of three colorful chickens and some goats. The students enjoy working and caring for the animals, watching and learning about their growth, feeding patterns, life cycle and development. Here are Timmy's ideas about one of the projects.

It all started in the garden shed when Donal, our teacher, told us about some Patridge Coachin chickens that he had at home. Mr. Murphy laughingly said to bring them in and Donal said, "There's an idea!" Soon it all started to turn into a reality - chickens on Spike Island! It's only then the work started. Where would we put them? How would we keep them? Picking the place to

put them was the hardest. We decided that by the pond would be perfect as everyone going to visits had to pass there and they would be able to see the hens. Everyone coming in the gate, going to school or the office would see them, too. Now building the hen house was the next task and we had to get all the materials we needed. We decided an old African hut style would look good and Ross, Matt and Francis got to work with mixing cement and building a steel frame... Now the hens have arrived and with the hen house in place we have erected a temporary fence. The final fence is going to be a picket fence, so that's our next project over the coming weeks.

Certification of subject courses plays an important role among students in the prison setting and there are a variety of reasons for this interest. For some students, they want a certificate to show the courts and the authorities that they have been using their time constructively while in prison, for others it is a way of focusing on a topic and developing a skill or interest during a long sentence, and some may see it as a way of giving something back to their families by way of their achievement and success in education. Whatever their reasons, and I am sure there are many, the take up in certification is constantly growing and this is surprising in a "client base" that generally failed or was often excluded from mainstream school. Fundamental to the content and methodology of prison education is the idea that it uses an adult and community education model, where the student will have already accumulated a bank of experiences and learning, that can be drawn on both by the student and the prison educator. Ideally the student is directly involved in his learning program where the curricula is student centered and not subject centered. An informal, friendly classroom climate with small numbers where each learner's problems can be addressed helps the student to feel valued and included. This approach goes a long way in encouraging students to come back into the classroom and "catch up" on the education they may have missed out on in the past.

Stephen Brookfield (1986) in his book *Understanding and Facilitating Adult Learning* maintains:

...adults learn best when they feel the need to learn and when they have a sense of responsibility for what, why, and how they learn. Adults use experience as a resource in learning so the learning content and process must bear a perceived and meaningful relationship to past experience. What is to be learned should be related to the individual's developmental changes and life tasks. The learning method used will foster, to differing degrees, the adult's exercise of autonomy. Adults will, however, generally learn best in an atmosphere that is nonthreatening and supportive of experimentation and in which differing learning styles are recognized.

With regard to the successful take up of accredited certification, we are able to offer the Junior certificate in English and maths which is the state examination, of five subjects or more, most young people take at fifteen years,

The disadvantage to these examinations is that they can only be sat on one specific day in the year to link in with the examination process in the community. If students are transferred from prison or released back into the community it can sometimes be difficult to track or find alternative centers for the students to take these exams. Much more popular, both with teachers and students, are the National Certificate in Vocational Awards courses at foundation, Levels I and II, awarded by FETAC (the national further education body).

These certified courses allow the student to work at their own pace on a continual assessment basis and are examined by an external assessor twice a year in April and November. We are able to offer a large number of subjects in areas relevant to the student's interests and learning, and which may help towards him fulfilling his personal and social roles, as well as enhancing his employment opportunities. Subjects in which we are presently able to offer certification include: communications (basic English), mathematics, computers, languages, personal effectiveness, interpersonal skills, child care, art, pottery, food and cookery, craft/textiles, woodwork, music, horticulture, health and fitness, and preparation for work. Students can also receive certification in computer skills (the European Computer Driving Licence) a course with seven learning modules that can also be accessed in the community. We also offer certification in peer education through the College of Northern Ireland.

Last year we entered 16 students for Junior certificate in English and maths; and 40 took NCVAs in a variety of subjects. Two students achieved distinctions at level two in health and fitness and have gone on to further education and training. Two other students achieved merits at level two in woodwork. About three students also received certification in the ECDL computer modules and eight in peer education. Another important element of prison education, which strives to educate "the whole person," is inclusion of creating opportunities to bring the outside world into the prison. It is important that visiting speakers are brought in to the prison not only to give prisoners interesting events to take part in, but to stimulate debate and give access to community involvement, to bring some normality to the mundane prison existence. We regularly have visitors to speak about issues such as the environment and wild life animals, and Irish culture and history, as well as yoga teachers, theater productions and visiting artists and musicians who perform. Among the more popular and successful activities have been four separate Irish set dancing workshops (where musicians and a group of dancers came in to teach the students). For Mark it was always a very special event:

The dancing started. We grabbed our partner. I was on my way for a fun day. I first had a dance with Bernie. She's our English teacher. As I think of it now, I didn't see her the next day. Probably she was suffering severe bruising of the toes, as I must have stepped on her feet to every beat of the music. But it didn't stop me! As I looked around the room it was filled with laughter and joy. Everyone was having fun. Derek L. was dancing

with the oldest woman there, about 50 would be my guess. Junior, being from Dublin, was showing her some of the Boyzone moves and she seemed to be copying some of the trickier ones. By now the room was on fire, feet and hands everywhere, music playing. I was feeling the strain of it all, and I was tired. The M. brothers were in full swing, changing partners quicker than their dance routine. It was a class act. . . . But the fun had to stop. As we looked at the clock we knew we had to go back to the cells. Exhausted and happy we said our good-byes to the ones we wouldn't see again and thanked them for taking the time to come and show us the time of our lives. It was a day that didn't turn out like any other. It was our day and our time, even if it was just for a short while.

We have also had a series of song writing workshops over nine days one summer given by the singer/songwriter John Spillane where students composed and recorded their own work on CD, and more recently we had two artists in residence for ten days each (sponsored partly by the arts council/artist in prison scheme) working firstly with a large group of prisoners on self portraits and then on ceramics. The work from this last venture we hope will go towards a three-day sale of goods made in the prison (and in our post release project) which will be displayed and sold at a regional garden and arts festival in the summer. The proceeds of which will go towards supporting the work of our post release project. Just as it is important to bring outside people into the prison, so it is equally important to take the prison education activities out into the community. In this respect we have had a number of art exhibitions in the local community, we distribute a twice yearly magazine written by the prisons to their families, and this year the post release project helped to make an aeroplane for a float in the local Patrick's day parade.

### Pre and Post Release Program

Since 1996 we have been offering pre and post release support. Each year we offer three 10 week pre-release programs to assist inmates with their preparation for leaving prison. Approximately 30 students a year would have taken part in these courses comprising three two-hour sessions a week which focus on job seeking skills, further educational/training opportunities, linking in with community and welfare agencies, personal action plans and responsible choices, breaking old patterns of behavior and relapse management.

We have worked with the probation service on part of this course at times. This has become a very popular and valuable part of the curriculum. All the students on the course attend the school so we have a good working relationship with them, and this relationship is particularly important and valued when we need to address difficult topics such as family work or offending behavior.

The H.O.P.E. Voluntary Project is our post release project. It offers ex-offenders in the Cork area support by assisting them to find work and training programs, educational support, and help with housing advice and drug and alcohol issues. We offer a stepping stone for our

students when they leave prison in a setting that is welcoming and accepting and also part of the local community. Central to our post release work is our pre-employment course where participants receive a training allowance for attendance; the allowance offers them slightly more money than they would receive from the unemployment office but they forfeit money if they fail to attend without good reason.

The course consists of the following two main elements. They are a woodwork skills course and a health and fitness element, where participants take part in gym activities, swimming and outdoor pursuits. The course caters for a maximum of seven students at any one time and is run by two teachers, with experience of prison teaching, in a local community training and employment center. In this way the students have the opportunity of mixing with the wider population in the community without being ostracized as "ex-offenders."

The students could remain on the course for two years but they are encouraged to actively look for more permanent work as time goes on. It is vital that the participants see the center as a bridge for returning back into the community and not as the final long term goal. We also have a counselor who is trained in addiction education and who attends one afternoon a week to link in with participants who may be looking for support with personal problems.

The second arm to our post release work is "The Club," a parent and family support group which meets on Monday evenings. The group meets to talk about their own everyday issues and problems, but also invites speakers to run short courses on topics such as drug education, stress management and relaxation techniques, assertiveness training, arts and crafts activities. On occasion they "network" with other parent support groups in Ireland or just do fun things together such as swimming trips, days out in the country, or tenpin bowling! The group has become very well established in recent times with 8-10 members at any one time, and the members are a tremendous source of encouragement and support to each other. Education in our prison is broad based but inclusive. It has to be, to cater for all the diverse interests and needs of its students. It can offer an opportunity to catch up on missed experiences in the past and a chance to engage in something purposeful and interesting for the future, to forge links with family again and to meet a friendly face willing to respect you, treat you with dignity and take an interest in your person. I will leave the final words with the people who say it best, some of our students:

It's my first time inside. I have no choice but to do it. I am doing twelve months. Every day is the same. I work in the kitchen, it's all right and passes the day. I come to school a few times a week and I am learning to read and write. I was thrown out of school before my confirmation and I was always in trouble.

Then:

I suppose prison is the best place to learn and there is a school for that. I think prison is the best place to do exams if you were a wild child; because you have the time and the mind is free of drugs. Then

again you do it out of boredom. I never did much education till I came in here and now I'm doing all the NVCAs I can. It keeps me going with a bit of homework back in my room at night.

And lastly:

Why do I like school? It gives me a sense of achievement and I like to tell my family what I am doing and they feel pleased and are proud of me. It gives you a place to think. Sometimes it's quite challenging, but it's done in a respectful way so that's okay. We have to think out our problems, because I don't intend coming back here again!

### References

Brookfield, S. (1986). *Understanding and facilitating adult learning*. Open University Press, 30

### Biographical Sketch

Pam Lorenz began teaching in prison in 1986. She is currently the head teacher of an education center for juvenile offenders in Ireland. Previously she taught both in primary and secondary schools, and also taught children and youth with autism and special needs. She later went on to work in adult education, specializing in adult literacy work. She has a particular interest in counseling and group work.

## Historical Vignette

### Juvenile Facility Established by Charles Dickens

In 1846 Charles Dickens ran into penal colony superintendent Alexander Maconochie at a Ragged School conference in England — a meeting of juvenile correctional educators. A week later the famous author invited Maconochie to dinner. "Dickens had always been interested in penal issues, ever since the time of his father's stay in Marshalsea debtors' prison. In 1842 he had visited the Eastern Penitentiary at Philadelphia..." Dickens eventually "incorporated Maconochie's mark [reformatory] system into the running of Urania Cottage, the 'Home for Homeless Women' he set up with Angela Burdett-Coutts in Lime Grove, Shepherd's Bush [England]. It was named after Aphrodite Urania, the pure goddess of love. Its method of operation was based on Maconochie, as Dickens explained: 'I do not know of any plan, so well conceived, or so firmly grounded in a knowledge of human nature...as what is called Captain Maconochie's...' The girls were to be 'tempted to virtue,' not 'dragged, driven, or frightened'... Every girl was required to keep a duplicate copy of her daily mark-paper [itemized behavioral record]. This had a dual function. 'Besides the probability of its producing some moral effect upon her, it would be a lesson in arithmetic in which she could not fail to have a personal interest.'" (Clay, J. *Maconochie's Experiment*. London: John Murray, 2001, pp. 256-259).