Should We Judge Education by Recidivism Rates?

By Kevin Warner

At the Region VI fall conference in Vancouver, a panel discussion addressed the question formed by the chairperson, Dr. Stephen Duguid: Is recidivism far too complex a phenomenon to be useful in assessing the success or failure of specific education programs? The following is an edited version of the contribution of Kevin Warner, International Representative on the CEA Executive Board and Coordinator of Prison Education in Ireland.

First of all, I want to say where I'm coming from. This quotation reflects my outlook:

"Education of prisoners is fundamentally a problem of adult education, taking the term in its European sense... We need to stress the normality rather than the abnormality of our prisoner-students, to apply standard educational practice to the problem rather than to try to develop a special educational technique designed for the criminal."

These are not the words of some European liberal, but of Austin MacCormick, an assistant director of the US federal correctional system, and a founder of the CEA. He had more to say:

"Education for adult prisoners has an aim and a philosophy. Its philosophy is to consider the prisoner as primarily an adult in need of education and only secondarily as a criminal in need of reform. Its aim is to extend to prisoners as individuals every type of educational opportunity that experience or sound reasoning shows may be of benefit or of interest to them."

My answer to Steve Duguid's question is, "Broadly, yes." But I want to elaborate by saying two things which relate to the second MacCormick quotation:

1) Since I believe, with MacCormick, that our role is primarily to facilitate an adult in need of education, evaluation of educational programs should be mainly related to this role, rather than to recidivism rates.
2) While I believe education can, and does, help in relation to MacCormick's secondary goal, the reform of the criminal, I think we need to recognize the complexities of the rehabilitation issue and especially the very negative reality of prisons.

I would like to introduce a third quotation (and here we do turn to the European liberals), from the Council of Europe report of 1990:

"Professional integrity requires teachers and other educators working in prisons, like those in other professions, to take their primary aims, the underlying orientation, from within their own professional field."

My underlying orientation is from my professional field of adult education. I do not have time here to tease out in any detail what being an adult educator means, other than to say that an adult education approach, as generally understood, leads to a great widening of the educational activity offered. This may be evident in MacCormick's second quotation.

Just as importantly, though, adult education classically is a deeper activity also than, say, much schooling for children, or vocational education, or, for that matter, criminogenic-focused approaches: it tends to engage people more fully, to be about personal growth or development. One of the texts I have read on adult education recently, by Jack Mezirow and associates, is sub-titled, *a guide to transformative and emancipatory learning*. Surely, the authors' goal is seeking to facilitate deep change, indeed, in people.

One aside I would make here is to express my continuing puzzlement at why, if so much of the great work and writing in English on adult education comes (like the book by Mezirow to which I referred) from North America, does there appear to be so little connection between correctional education and this vibrant field? And, perhaps, this is one of the ways in which the CEA has lost the plot?

Evaluation, then, should be related to the larger goals of adult education, not mainly to recidivism rates. But that role for education can, among its other purposes, support rehabilitation – and here I am turning to my second point. But we really must recognize the reality and the complexity of what education is often asked to do.

There is often an expectation (though sometimes I suspect it is a pretense) that education or other programs should actually improve people while they are incarcerated. But what is greatly ignored or underestimated is the negative impact of prison itself. Education (or other programs) are only small parts of prison regimes, of the totality of impact of prisons on people. While programs may be beneficial, what else may be going on that works in the opposite direction?

- Abuse by other prisoners?
- Humiliation or degradation by staff?
- Inhumane conditions?
- Further alienation from society?
- Barriers to work, housing and other forms of integration, upon release?

These may be some of the reasons why the larger prison world, and the wider society, may be working against reforms.

In these circumstances, then, education may be doing very well in many cases simply keeping things from getting worse, or even just helping to reduce the detrimental effects of imprisonment, to use a phrase from the European Prison Rules. Prison is not neutral; recognizing its inherent detrimental effects is important. One role education can have is helping prisoners cope with their sentences (which incidentally, is officially the first objective of government policy on prison education in Ireland). Prisoners speak of keeping their heads together; this may be no small feat, and many forms of education can help different prisoners do this in different ways.

See Judge Education page 9

Judge Education *cont. from pg 8*

I made a visit to the Los Angeles County Jail for Women four years ago which left me both appalled and greatly impressed. It held 2,200 women – more than the entire population of male and female prisoners in all of Ireland at that time. Women slept in tightly-packed double bunks, 90 to a room. In this jail teachers ran what seemed excellent addiction and parenting courses. Education in general was inspiring, conducted by obviously deeply committed people. But the prison conditions (which were clearly no fault of the staff there) surely qualified as a breach of human rights under the heading of cruel and unusual punishment. It would be outrageous to measure the work of those teachers by recidivism rates. They would do well just to keep many of the women afloat, to keep them from deteriorating too much physically, mentally or in terms of personality – although I had a sense that they did achieve positive progress, against all odds, with many of the women.

So my point is that if we are going to have debates about recidivism, we need to get real abut prisons also. Frankly, prisons are bad news, are in themselves major contributors to recidivism. A Rand Corporation study in California for the U.S. Department of Justice, showed prison as less effective than probation in a study of matched offenders. Because of its detrimental effect, we need to inject into the recidivism debate the argument that prison should be a last resort. Like surgery, prison is a radical intervention into somebody's life: it is necessary at times, but its serious negative side effects should be recognized.

By all means, let us evaluate correctional education, but relate this evaluation to the larger goals of education, especially adult education. Let us also try to relate the recidivism debate to what prisons are actually doing, and set this in a human rights context. In the U.S. in particular, but also elsewhere, I believe human rights is the real issue in relation to prison.