

## Learning behind bars

“We have one very serious rule in here,” I am warned as I settle myself down. “We don’t talk about what people are in for. Whatever they’ve done...” What is it like trying to study in a jail cell? **Nicky Woolf** talks to people on both sides of the bars to uncover the gritty realities of learning in a prison classroom

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**What is it like trying to study in a jail cell? *Nicky Woolf* talks to people on both sides of the bars to uncover the gritty realities of learning in a prison classroom.**

“We have one very serious rule in here,” I am warned as I settle myself down. “We don’t talk about what people are in for. Whatever they’ve done...” She puts heavy emphasis on ‘whatever’, then pauses, to stress to me the importance of this point, “...whatever they’ve done is not relevant in this room.”

The room is pleasantly furnished, arranged in a rectangle and filled with the lightly-padded chairs and the generic rectangular tables you find in classrooms and seminar rooms everywhere. In fact, the only sign that this is not just any classroom anywhere is the big, ominous bars on the windows.

I thought I had come to HM Prison Hull to meet Fi, one of the tutors here, and to sit in on one of her humanities classes. It turns out that this is not to be entirely the case. “What’s your lesson plan then?” Fi asks me at the door with the faint suggestion of a grin, adding that I “shouldn’t be nervous.” Do I look nervous? “They want to know about you, too,” she tells me. “They’re curious.”

I am fairly apprehensive as the students file in, but they put me instantly at my ease. I introduce myself, and explain what I’m doing, and they are almost overwhelmingly eager to respond, to interact, to have their voices heard. Jim\*, an intelligent and energetic Londoner with dreadlocks, tells me that Hull Prison is one of the best places to be in offender learning. “You’re seeing the real cream of the crop”, another student cuts in, and there is a general murmur of agreement. I ask why.

Firstly, I am told, this class is what are called ‘VP’s’; ‘Vulnerable Prisoners’. This means that those I am sitting in the classroom with today are those who are separated from the “mains”, the mainstream prisoners, for various reasons. “They could be paedophiles or sex offenders, or high-profile grasses or informers”, Daniel Vulliamy, from Hull University’s Centre for Lifelong Learning, who helped set up the education system at the prison, told me. “Any people who need protecting”.

Marcus, a man in his early fifties sitting opposite me, leans forward on heavily tattooed arms. “VP’s tend to move around less than Mains, which allows us to concentrate much better on our studies,” he tells me.

“There’s no consistency between prisons,” agrees Bob, the skinny guy to my left. “There’s not even any consistency between wings, in some places.” Jim, the Londoner, started the seminar sitting apart from the class but, interested in the direction the conversation is taking, is now leaning against the window near where Fi is sitting.

“I used to be in Dartmoor,” he says “and it was a lot worse than here. I used to order books, right...” Here Marcus interrupts, waving at massive Sociology textbook. “See this book?” Jim shoots him an annoyed

glance, and Marcus backs down with exaggerated rolling of his eyes. There are grins all round the classroom. "Settle down," says Fi, almost fondly.

Jim continues his story. "I ordered the textbook. And it's expensive. When your week's wage is a tenner, you have to save up a long time. But they wouldn't give it to me. Claimed security reasons. That's what they can just do, any time. If they say 'security', there's nothing you can do."

"If there's a security alert," Fi adds, "then the whole teaching block gets shut down. Nothing happens for the rest of the day. Rest of the week sometimes, until they give the ok."

Hull's education system, I'm told, is unusually strong. Driven by a series of fairly progressive governors, as well as a partnership with Hull University, Hull Prison has been the recipient of several pilot schemes for offender learning. As well as allowing inmates to do Open University degrees, it also teaches the UFA, a modular foundation course that Hull University offers.

Most VP's are doing longer sentences, often for 'crimes of passion', or very serious, one-off offenses, are less likely to be 'career' criminals, and are more likely to have prior education. Due to their protected status, they tend to spend longer in one prison, as their isolation is expensive to maintain in transit. Mains prisoners are a very different story. Back in the class, I hear about students who find themselves with a one year sentence, or less, who spend less than a month in any one prison before they are moved on.

Jim has a theory. "Each prison is run separately," he tells me. "There is no real unified system. There isn't even and similarities in security levels. This is a C-cat prison, but it's got higher security than some B-cat's I've been in, and even some A-cats. It's a fucking joke... In Dartmoor, they said I couldn't have a PS2, because they said I could connect it to wireless networks. I said, 'listen mate. I am a network systems engineer. I am telling you, a PS2 cannot connect to a wireless network even if there was one, which there wasn't. And in my last prison, it was allowed, so it's not like it's illegal.' It's a fucking joke."

Marcus leans forward again. "I've seen prison officers who can't even add up," he says, with an air of superiority. There is general assent at this. "And then we're here, doing degree-level stuff. I think they resent it. Not all of them, by any means, lots of them are very supportive; but certainly a few."

Later that week, I get a call from John Hirst, who taught himself law during his 25 years in prison, and has won several high-profile cases on prisoner rights, including winning the vote for inmates in the Grand Chamber of the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg in the case of *Hirst vs United Kingdom*, 2005.

Hirst, a grizzled 57-year-old with a mischievous grin, is a man who used his time in prison to take education by the scruff of the neck and then use his new-found knowledge to fight the system. When I arrive at his house in a grey suburb of Hull, I am first welcomed by the attention of his friendly but irrepressible Black Labrador, Rocky, with whom I am to share chocolate biscuits with. The ceremonial splitting of the biscuits complete, I ask Hirst for his story.

"I started a life sentence 1980 in Winchester, though I was convicted in Reading," he begins. "They asked me, 'which route do you want to take through your life sentence?' and I said 'education'. But they then denied me education for 10 years." On what grounds, I ask. Hirst laughs. "On security grounds. They said that they believed that I would use education for subversive purposes."

As it turned out, that is exactly what he used his education for. "You can't beat the prison system with violence, because they just use more force against you. I'd already had that experience; that had been my way. But if you can beat the prison system by using the law then obviously you know it's a powerful weapon... If they recognise that you've got intelligence then they actually fear you. It turned out that the prison system feared me more for my lawful pursuits than they ever did for my unlawful pursuits."

"Certainly the education, prison education helped me," he tells me, pausing to help me defend my second biscuit against Rocky's enthusiastic attentions. "Hull prison had an education-based special unit, which was ideal for me, 'cos I did want to do education. So I studied there. Ron Cooper, who was the education

officer, was good as gold. He's not your run of the mill prison education officer. Most of them just go through the motions, whereas Ron really believed in educating prisoners. So that's basically where I got my education... My whole period at Hull special unit was a turning point in my career."

That weekend, I met Graham. A mild man in his late thirties, Graham served nine and a half years for attempted murder and fraud, and during his sentence he took courses in Technology, Environmental Studies and Business Studies from the Open University. He then took a teacher-training course at his local college while living in an open, or Category D, prison, and now teaches Business Studies.

I ask him what it's like teaching after having learned in a prison environment. "At the early stage it was really nervewracking," he tells me. "Suddenly here am I, going back every night to a prison, and yet all day every day I was teaching these kids. It was really quite surreal. If they knew what it was all about..." He pauses. "You know. Obviously I wasn't teaching in a class on my own, I was a trainee teacher, but it was quite surreal, and very challenging as well... I love it now, I really do," he smiles. "It's better than a life of crime, that's for sure..."

Like Jim, Graham had also spent some time in Dartmoor, though he actually found the strictness of the regime helpful. "That was the best grades I ever achieved. Dartmoor has a very rigid routine, a very structured regime, and there's a lot of lock-up. Consequently, all you could do was study. Some days it was 23 hours a day. You're entitled to one hour of exercise a day, and that's it. And you think, 'I'd go stir-crazy if I didn't have my studies.'"

I am getting the impression that education in prison might be more than just some way to pass the time. Is there something addictive about it? Graham believes there is. "You send off a tutor-marked assignment and it comes back and you've got a good mark and you can't wait to send the next one off... You look forward to it coming back, you want to know how you've done. And off you go and you do the next one. It's that continual ongoing addiction. You do become addicted to study, I think."

John Hirst, and Graham, have found their niche since leaving prison. Unfortunately, a lot of people don't. "There's an awful lot of guys and women who do very well in education but they can't get a job on release," Graham, who is an active supporter of the Prisoners' Education Trust, which helps prisoners fund higher education, tells me. "A lot of it is to do with the introduction of the disclosure act, meaning that you have to declare that you've been in prison. There's an awful lot who drift into casual labour, rather than do anything more education-based."

One of these is George. An amiable 39-year-old with a thick Hull accent, he served two and a half years of a five year sentence for the possession and supply of ecstasy, speed and cannabis, and the possession of cocaine. While in Hull prison, he began a Sociology course, and subsequently was accepted to Hull University to finish his course when he was released.

"I never really had any self-belief at school'n'that," he tells me over coffee. "The lecturer that was there, Ron Cooper, and another guy called Bill gave me the belief, and a lot of the other lads as well, that we could study at this level and achieve at this level... Obviously, when I got out, I'd changed, which I put down to the education. It changed my outlook on life."

Daniel Vulliamy helped George to find his place at Hull University. When I meet Daniel in his office in the Centre for Lifelong Learning, he tells me about George's experience. "The nice thing was the feedback from the other students. They said that as an ex-con, he had a range of experiences which might have seemed quite limited to him, because he was stuck inside these walls all the time, but to them, to the students, it was outside their world. It gave him some perspectives and angles that he was able to share with them in class that they found useful, and appreciated." He pauses. "And he was a supplier, and an addict, and he's neither now. But he can't get a proper job either."

George is certain that he is being discriminated against. "I had tried for two or three jobs and been knocked back, and so I saw a job going in a local call centre and I went for it... I was hoping, you know, that I wouldn't be there for very long, neither. I just looked at it as a bit of a stopgap, really. And yeah, I

got the job. Three years on, I'm still there. And it isn't for the want of trying for other jobs... They just come out with one excuse after another."

He has no shortage of evidence. "I've had other people denying that they've actually spoke to me before. I've been told 'just give it another year, you know, another year you've been out of prison, and then apply again,' and I've rung back and talked to the same person a year later and he denied having any conversation with me. I had someone say to me that a lot of their clients have or have had substance abuse problems, and I'd have a ready-made clientele if I wanted to start dealing again. Which is just absolutely mad," he splutters, obviously outraged, "because to put myself through all that and this that and the other, and... y'know..." He spreads his arms desperately; "if I was going to start dealing again I'd... I'd have done it by now; I wouldn't have done it through like looking for a job, know what I mean. It's just absolute madness. You get all these places saying 'we're equal opportunity employers', but when it comes down to that, they're not. They're clearly not."

At several points during our meeting, George is almost overwhelmed by emotion. "I've been out of jail five years now, and I thought somebody might have given me a chance by now, but they haven't. I just don't want it to have been all for nothing, because I feel like I've got so much to offer, you know?"

"There's others at the call centre that are at university, or just using it as a stopgap, and they get their degree and within a few weeks they've gone off to a better job. I get continually questioned, 'why are you here', 'why are you still here', and I have to make excuses up. I feel that I shouldn't have to, but at work nobody knows my past, apart from a couple of people that I've come to know really well. I don't like lying to people, I don't like hiding things from people, but there's a lot of people at work who just wouldn't understand. 'Once a prisoner, once a con, always a con,' that sort of thing... I just feel gutted. Really gutted that I've got so much to offer and nobody'll give me the chance to offer it. And if nobody gives me that chance, it'll have all been for nothing."

His eyes brim with something approaching tears. "I did me time. I've obviously worked hard to reform meself and to come out to be a valuable member of society and to put something back rather than just taking all the time. But I've been out five years and I feel like I'm still being persecuted in society for a mistake I made all them years ago. That's all people want to look at, 'oh you did something wrong'. They don't want to see 'oh wait a minute, he's done something to try and put it right'. So yeah, I don't know where I go from here now. I really don't. I try so hard."

The media image of the convict has changed fairly little in the last few decades. They still seem to be pariahs, even after they have served their sentence. A quick trawl of recent tabloid headlines confirms this. On the introduction of a 2007 prison scheme to allow prisoners to lock their own cells – not from the prison officers, but from each other – the Daily Mail hysterically commented: "Thousands of prisoners are being given keys to their cells in the latest farce to hit the criminal justice system." With an unpleasant sneer in its tone, it continued: "They can roam in and out virtually at will under a scheme designed to give them more 'respect and decency'."

Despite this, the class when I see them are all confident that their education will still not only give them a better chance at a new start when they get out, but make their time inside bearable as well. I ask them how the system could be better, and have to scribble to keep up with the response. A national curriculum for prisons is generally accepted to be the most important thing; almost all of them have had their education inconvenienced or interrupted in some way by being moved about from prison to prison with vastly differing regimes.

Then they begin to talk about the lengths of people's sentences. All of them are in for a fairly long time, but they have all seen the negative effects that a shorter sentence can have. They are convinced that short custodial sentences, two years or less, are damaging.

Graham sums up the problem. "Somebody who's been sentenced for two years for example, he will serve a year, so if he spent a little bit of time on remand, he arrives in prison, he's assessed, and they say 'we'll put him on a basic skills course'. So then there's a waiting list of maybe three or four months... by the

time he does anything at all he's a good halfway, three quarters of the way through his sentence. The course might be 6 months long, and he can't fit that in. The guy's doing a year in prison, and yet he cannot get on the ladder to do any form of education... You get people saying 'he should be locked up, he shouldn't be studying, how come youngsters outside can't get college places and yet these guys who've done these horrendous crimes are getting the best of education?' But nine times out of ten, the guys who keep on coming back to prison all their life are the guys who can't read or write."

The class have another theory. "They've got to tick their boxes, yeah?" says Mike, a tall, thin man with jet-black hair in a bowl cut, in a slow, considered voice. "So when you go to a new prison, which is pretty often in some cases, it might not matter where you'd reached in your course before, they'll make you do the basics again. So you've ticked the boxes, yeah?" Marcus cuts in. "There's no continuity. None of the prison departments talk to each other."

Hirst is much more candid. "It is a business. Prisoners come in, and it's like a revolving door, they're coming back out. Prison officers living off prisoners, you get psychologists, doctors, people like that living off them. The builders that build the jails, shops that surround the jails. The whole thing is actually a business, and it has to keep going on. Justice doesn't come into it, and trying to reform people doesn't come into it. There's too many people living off the system."

I ask him for an example. "Some places, when you come out, they give you two weeks money when they know you're not getting any dole for three weeks," he tells me. "So what are you going to do for that last week? Most fall down, go out screwing again, say 'well, I can't afford to do anything else', so they fall back into that trap... It's easier to end up back inside than stay out."

The class tell me that there are places where the guards have bad attitudes when it comes to education. "They want to see us banging out number-plates. They think education is a privilege," says `Mike.

I ask them if there is a self-esteem issue at the root of why education is so important for them, and there is overwhelming agreement. "When I come here, I don't feel like a prisoner," sums up a quiet, fairly young student with short blonde hair, who hasn't spoken much so far. Everyone nods.

Daniel Vulliamy has more. "I can think of a student who gave a particularly fine account. He was a Barnardos boy, an orphan. He was in trouble and in an approved school, and a borstal, and in the borstal he worked with animals, found he had a real knack with working with them, and he liked it a lot. So then in prison some ill-humoured placement officer said, 'we've found the ideal job for you. You're good with animals, Johnson, we're putting you in the abbatoirs.'" He laughs bitterly. "So his job was to kill the animals. And he spent probably the next 25 years of his life as a criminal, mostly dealing in drugs, and more than half of that time in being prison for it."

He continues: "He's now up to his fifth or sixth year of a part time degree in Social and Behavioural Studies, having started inside Hull prison. Education has completely changed his life. He's involved in various projects to help ex-offenders when they come out and try to make sure they don't reoffend, just by giving them support... I think he's a magnificent tribute to the power of learning to change people's lives."

I called Ann Creighton, Director of the Prisoners' Education Trust, whose remit is to promote offender learning throughout the criminal justice system, to ask her how the system works. "For education above A-levels, since the Learning and Skills Councils took over operational responsibility in 2005 there has still been no decision as to where higher education sits. At the moment those operational and policy matters lie with the Learning and Skills Unit. My trust holds a contract with them to provide 800 open learning courses, OU courses, in prisons in England and Wales... Everything else that is provided in prisons has to be provided either through the vagaries of charitable funding or prisoners have to pay for it themselves."

Creighton is infectiously passionate about education. "Our prisons are full of people with loads of potential. People come into prisons thinking they're stupid, thinking they lack self-confidence, and something clicks sometimes and they begin to grow, and they begin to find all sorts of interesting things

to do..."

"There is evidence that the higher the level of education people get, the less likely they are to reoffend," she continues. "A piece of non-scientific research we did showed a very interesting result. We took 437 people that we had funded to do a course, and who had completed it, and we asked the Home Office to keep their names. That was about December 2003. Early in 2006 they looked to see how many people had reoffended. They only found 377, but of those people only 25% had been reconvicted compared with the current level of about 57%. That is a huge indication of what education can do. Of course people who do distance-learning are self-selecting, they are often people doing longer sentences, and are less likely to offend again. All I can say is that this is a very clear and powerful indication, and there should be more research done."

It's clear that offender education is important, but it seems there is a problem with the national mindset when it comes to convicts, both institutionally and generally. Hirst is certain that this is the case. "They just turn round and say, 'our children can't get this kind of free education, so why should prisoners get it?' It's a very outdated attitude, and a very wrong one. The thing with education: If you sunk more into it, you'd get a lot less reoffending."

I ask Creighton what improvements she'd make to the prison system. "I would like to see a period of stability... I reckon I could run this entire trust on what's been spent on changing the headed notepaper in the last ten years, the number of changes there've been... I'd like to see government policy based on proper, long term research. I'd like to see fewer people sent to prison, and much less of the revolving door process, and I would like to see that prisoners, like in all societies everywhere, are treated as whole people, and not each bit."

She pauses, then chuckles. "If that doesn't sound too horrendously idealistic. And, I think it's a complete waste of time sending anybody to prison for less than 2 years."

One thing is certain: A lot more attention needs to be given, and a lot more money spent, before the system works. Before that can happen, there needs to be a sea-change in the attitudes people have towards prisoners.



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## 4 comments

James

15 May '08 at 3:56 pm

Were they many York students in this prison then?

[Report](#)

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Chet

22 May '08 at 5:18 pm

Nice article mate, would have found it interesting to be there in your shoes myself.

[Report](#)

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Nigel Gibson

23 Jun '08 at 9:41 pm

Great article - I work for the Open University and I'm involved in offender learning. I plan to make mention of this piece to show a great perspective on learning in prison.

[Report](#)

janet jones

31 Jul '09 at 4:37 pm

Found your article absolutely great- I have literally just finished a tutorial with my supervisor and decided the title for my Doctorate Studies which is Learning behind bars. Can you give me any guidance as to other research you have done in this area- useful contact names perhaps ? Janet

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