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Debates in digital pedagogy within prisons

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Abstract

This paper provides a critical view of the digital education within the global prison estate, with a specific aim of examining the extent to which we can expect the prison system of England and Wales to embrace digital pedagogy. By presenting critical sociological theories around social hierarchies and the transitions between them that education can provide (Freire, 1972; Gramsci, 1994; Kant, 1992), the paper will be able to show how while there is a desire and appetite for increasing the digital education of those who are at the lower end of the social economic divide; without buy in from the cultural hegemonic state (Gramsci, 1994), then there is no desire to aid prisoners to be able to access the global digital community. While the paper will paint a bleak picture of the digital education of prisoners, it will provide a latitudinal overview of successful programmes that are being run within the global prison estate. This in turn will show that while there is hope for a digitally accessible prison in which to aid education, it will be done so through capitalistic ideals rather than pedagogical ones.

Keywords

Digital pedagogy, oppressed learners, prisons, one laptop per child, global inequalities

“We can’t go on with prisons in a pre-internet dark age: inefficient, wasteful and leaving prisoners woefully unprepared for the real world they will face on release. I have not met one prison professional who does not think drastic change is needed” (CSJ, 2021:6).

The former Chief Inspector of prisons for England and Wales, Professor Nick Hardwick.

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Introduction

This paper provides a critical view of the digital education within the global prison estate, with a specific aim of examining the extent to which we can expect the prison system of England and Wales to embrace digital pedagogy. We will begin with a brief exploration of the global digital divide as provided by the [United Nations \(2023\)](#), along with discussion relating to those that are excluded from the digital world ([Tsatsou, 2022](#)). By presenting critical sociological theories around social hierarchies and the transitions between them that education can provide ([Freire, 1971](#); [Gramsci, 1994](#); [Kant, 1992](#)), the paper will be able to show how while there is a desire and appetite for increasing the digital education of those who are at the lower end of the social economic divide; without buy in from the *cultural hegemonic* state ([Gramsci, 1994](#)), then there is no desire to aid prisoners to be able to access the global digital community. While the paper will paint a bleak picture of the digital education of prisoners, it will provide a latitudinal overview of successful programmes that are being run within the global prison estate. This in turn will show that while there is hope for a digitally accessible prison in which to aid education, it will be done so through capitalistic ideals rather than pedagogical ones.

Digital divide – global and national

Digital inclusion is shown to comprise of five key components; those being a device, a strong internet connection (minimum download speed of 10Mbit/s), skills and support, a safe online environment and sustainability of access ([Bowyer et al., 2021](#)). However, a general council meeting of the United Nations (UN) show us that 2.7 billion people are still unable to access the internet ([UN, 2023](#)). Access to networks such as 5G are largely present within advanced countries, with the average level of access being 66% of the population. While the less developed countries work on 2G and as little as 36% of the population of such countries can access that. In a separate report, the UN also warns that there is a need for the ‘improvement of digital literacy to prevent further class divisions of societies’ (2023a: 4).

Further than the obvious geographical and technological chasms in digital inclusion, [Tsatsou \(2022\)](#) identifies further divides within being excluded from the digital world; age, ethnicity and disabilities. In addition, Tsatsou argues that intersectionality and those disadvantaged by this can lead to social marginalisation. The worrying aspect of this, if we accept it, is that the demographics put forward by Tsatsou, are protected characteristics that should preclude someone from suffering any prejudice either in person, or because of omittance.

There is no escaping that there is a digital divide, both locally and nationally. What is not so sacrosanct though is that is simply what Tsatsou identifies as being the ‘information haves, and information have nots’ (2011: 318). Nor is it as simple as being those who can, and those who cannot use technology, such as the two groups identified by [Prensky \(2001\)](#): – the digital natives and the digital immigrants. There is another demographic that this essay puts forward as being excluded from the digital world, and that is those who are in prison. Indeed, the exclusion is not one of happenstance, rather it is one that is performed and perpetuated by what [Gramsci \(1994\)](#) defines as being *Cultural Hegemony*. In its most reductive form, [Gramsci’s \(1994\)](#) theory of cultural hegemony suggests that there are cultural institutions that are used as a means of maintaining power. These institutions are governed by those in power and shape how society act, one example of which could be a school, and as [Friere \(1971\)](#) suggests, is used a means of promoting certain actors within society, namely those who have money, power and or contacts. [Gramsci \(1994\)](#) uses his own experiences of education growing up in a poor family without social capital, stating that, ‘The

scholastic method of by which I was taught was very backward' (1994: 369). In his prison letters (1931–1937), Gramsci is often critical of the education of the poor and highlights the additional struggles that he had to gain an education of quality. Going further, it can be argued that, 'adult education can be seen as counterhegemonic' (Borg et al., 2002: 93). This would in turn threaten the cultural hegemony of the state.

We can link this notion of inequality in the education of different social classes by examining the work of Friere (1971) in more detail. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, it is argued (from a Marxist and Gramscian viewpoint), that how we share knowledge mirrors how society works; a top-down approach. It is suggested by Freire (1971) that there are two avenues to education, a banking concept and problem posing concept. The banking concept of education happens when the teacher chooses the knowledge to give to the student and deposits it to them. It is about the depositing of knowledge by those at the top to those at the bottom. It is a linear process. The teacher cannot learn from the student, and the student cannot create knowledge. This is a gift those who have the knowledge to only those that they see fit to receive. The student accepts this information and remembers it, and more importantly for those in power, accepts it as fact. This mirrors oppressive society. In problem posing education, the problem is presented to the student, who along with the teacher finds the answer. The teacher and student roles are interchangeable. If we are to take Kant's notion of education being based in Enlightenment, and that 'man can only become a man, through education' (1992: 699), we can begin to see how cultural hegemony becomes present. By 'man' Kant is speaking about an individual that becomes a sentient being that can think for themselves. Therefore, if we take a prison as a cultural institution where education of becoming a good citizen is provided, we can argue that when educating prisoners, the state will only want to deposit knowledge through a bank of approved content, rather than making prisoners sentient beings.

By only allowing prisoners to gain knowledge that the state allows them, those in government can maintain hegemonic power over them. This is important for the state as it helps maintain the distinction between manual and intellectual labour (Simon, 1991), and not allow for there to be a pathway by which society can challenge hegemonic power that Gramsci (1994) argues is possible through education and allow individuals to, 'elaborate their own conception of the world life' (Borg et al., 2002: 5).

The self-perception of oneself is important to one's ontological security (Giddens, 1991) and how they interact with others. Individuals as a whole need impartial education to be able to locate themselves in the world and, 'The form of action that men adopt is to a large extent a function of how they perceive themselves in the world' (Freire, 1971: 56). This is especially important when the individual inhabits a cultural institution that bestows an identity upon them. In the case of prisons, this would be a stigma attached to them as a blemish of character (Goffman, 1990). This in turn leads to being labelled as being an outsider, and as such searching for comfort within a group of similarly labelled people (Becker, 1963). While this unwritten manifesto of keeping those at the bottom of society under the hegemonic control of those in power is successful, it also keeps those within the criminal justice system, within that system, with little hope of progressing through it into the next level of acceptable society. If anything, we are actively keeping a marginalised section of society subjugated as, 'There is no intelligence where there is aggregation, the *binding* of one mind to another' (Ranciere, 1991: 32) which in this instance would be that the mind of the prisoner is bound to the mind of the oppressor, and thus their identity within society becomes an identity that is given to them, rather than achieved through education. Aligning with Gramsci's thoughts, Biesta (2006) discusses how there is also a drive for character education and citizenship education that can be used to counteract social disintegration.

It was said by Entwistle, who identified schools as being middle class institutions, that, ‘As hegemonic, schools function to service the exploitative imperatives of the capitalist consumer society’ (Entwistle, 1978: 42). Within this we can look at schools as being conduits of education, in this case, the digital education of prisoners, and capitalist consumer society as being what Bottoms (1995) would identify as the popular punitiveness ideals. The notion of popular punitiveness ideals in this instance would be how popular opinion within society would be that prisoners should be punished in prison and not rewarded with access to computers. Therefore, the political power of the time would be reluctant to provide such education, for fear of losing the popular vote. In turn this means, ‘The oppressors do not favour promoting the community as a whole, but rather selected leaders’ (Freire, 1971: 112).

So, if the hegemonic society is using the prison as a cultural institution with which to educate using Freire’s (1971) banking concept, how can prisoners, or anyone at the lower echelons of society gain the personal insight and self-awareness needed to be able to function as fully accepted members of society; especially when that society is becoming increasingly more digitized (UN, 2023). For this to happen, we need to look to the private sector, rather than the government to provide innovation.

One such innovation is that of the One Laptop Per Child (OLPC) which sought to decrease the ever-growing digital divide in education with impoverished and underprivileged children across the globe. To do so, it ambitiously sought to provide a low-cost educational device to each child that needed one. Though in reality it could be argued that they were only provided laptops to children who needed them, and whose government could afford to buy them one. It could be argued using Anderson’s discussion of how European literacy levels increased through the print revolution after Enlightenment, which allowed for the ‘inducting of lower classes into political life’ (Anderson, 1983: 70), that this is a classic example of altruism. Although he states that this could be a form of capitalism’s relentless search for markets. It was simply framed as a national consciousness that brings everyone to the same level, but this could mean that the desire of the computer companies to give a laptop to each child was simply to gain more customers in the future. In other words, their actions were driven by egoism and virtue signalling, helping others as a mere means to their own good.

Even if we are to accept that there are no capitalist ideologies underpinning the OLPC programme, it is still very much a utopian project that Ames (2019) would align with the social imaginary. Ames discusses how the technology could be seen as *charismatic* (2019: 18), and that charisma would drive users to submerge themselves in their use in a means of obtaining the social imaginary, whereby they might be able to socially transition from the lower classes and into mainstream society; this can be seen to link with Merton’s (1968) ideas about social transitions, and that simply having tools with which to ease access to higher social strands, there needs to be knowledge on how to properly use the tools (in this case, the laptops). However, as Ames (2019) found out, simply providing laptops was not correlated to an increase in their use, and that the ‘laptops were not used for the sort of activities that technologists would generally identify as sophisticated’ (2019: 141). This could be argued to be because there was little support for how to use the laptops, and that children could not be expected to teach themselves. However, there is evidence to show that children can indeed teach themselves (Mittra and Rana, 2001). In a slum in India, Mittra and Rana put a computer in a wall that could be accessed and used by anyone that wanted to use it. Even with no instructions, within 3 months they reported that children from the slums were able to surf the internet, download games, create documents, teach each other, and a significant number of other tasks. The question that needs to be asked then, is whether introducing digital access within the

prison estate would lead to a ‘social imaginary’ future of computer literate ex-prisoners seamlessly integrating with, and giving back to, society.

During the COVID-19 lockdown, prisoners within the HMPPS estate were kept in their cells for 23.5 h a day with no access to external contact, such as speaking with family. We know from the work on the sociology of imprisonment (Crewe, 2011; Crewe et al., 2017; Sykes, 1958) that family contact is important in supporting positive mental health. The prison service of Scotland, however, introduced a scheme, to the cost of over £3m, whereby each prisoner was given a mobile phone during the pandemic with which to maintain family contact. This led to populist punitive feelings being whipped up by the political right and the media, with one outlet running a public opinion poll that showed 80% of their readers were against this policy and should not even have access to landlines (Newspaper). It would be difficult to see how public opinion would react to an OLPC initiative to give each prisoner an in-cell digital device, even though Sir Martin Nary (former director general of the prison service) calls for their use, ‘New tech always freaks people out. But giving prisoners iPads would allow them to keep in touch with family members and spend time in their cells more constructively’ (Inside Time, 2016: 5). This puts additional pressure on HMPPS though as there becomes a, ‘persistence of technological expectations about education’ (Biesta, 2006: 73).

Prison digital and global best practice

So, how do we digitally educate a marginalised group that a) is not a priority to the state who fear it may lead to a reversal of the cultural hegemony of contemporary society, and b) is a sensitive issue to popular punitivism ideologies. The answer is already in action. A recent document from HMPPS (2021) has identified five strategic objectives for digital inclusion within the prison estate. These are defined as; providing staff with up-to-date IT equipment and applications, to replace legacy systems with simpler clearer faster digital services, to give people in their care the digital tools and technology to support their rehabilitation, to make video conferencing accessible to everyone, and to capture, store and share high quality data across the services. Indeed, there are already several instances of best practices throughout global imprisonment that transcends political ideologies or Left or Right. Below are a few examples of such work from USA (imprisonment rates of 629 people per 100,000 population, England and Wales (131 per 100,000), Australia (167 per 100,000) and Belgium (93 per 100,000) (prison population figures taken from Fair and Walmsley, (2021). In addition, we also look below at the percentage of each population that has access to the internet (Statista, 2023); though it should be noted that while a country might provide the infrastructure for 93% of the population to gain access to the internet, it does not mean that 93% of the population can afford the devices needed, or the cost of continued data access (UN, 2023a; Tsatsou, 2022).

The prison systems within the USA (federal and state) are separate entities that align with the most punitive of ideologies. In all, the nation has the highest incarceration rate of any country (Fair and Walmsley, 2021) but with an excellent digital framework it has an internet connectivity rate of 93% (Statista, 2023). There are a small number of education programmes such as Inside Out which teaches prisoners in person, but also an increasing number of digital programmes are emerging. Two examples identified by the PLA (2020) are RACHEL (remote area community hotspot for education and learning), and The Last Mile (TLM). RACHEL is a repository of education content that can be accessed within a prison without the need for internet connection. Access can be obtained by learners using desktop computers, laptops or tablets. This can be linked to specific content from local education providers. The second digital programme, TLM, is a not-for-profit company that provides coding programmes to be delivered offline. The destination for students would be

employment within the digital industry. So, even though it is illegal to access the internet in US prisons, there are still avenues to digital education.

Within the prison system of England and Wales (HMPPS), as with the US system, there is no internet access for prisoners, and the majority of teaching is delivered via traditional classroom (banking, Freire, 1971) techniques. There is a suite of computers within most education departments of prisons, but these are not of a quality you might find in society. Another punitive political sphere of responses to crime, and with 131 people per 100,000 in prison (Fair and Walmsley, 2021), and 93% of the nation having internet access (Statista, 2023), you would not expect there to be much drive for digital education within prisons. While there is digital education in prisons it is not driven by the government or ideals regarding the rehabilitation and reintegration of offenders and is instead the capitalist approach of a private company. The company, Coracle Inside, provides Chromebooks to prisons that are on secure networks that can be pre-loaded with educational (and other digital content). At present, Coracle state that their devices are in half of prisons within England and Wales, but it does not state how many individual devices that equates to. While this is a huge step in the right direction, this initiative has its drawbacks; the devices are not free and individual prisons need to provide the funds for each device (approximately £600 each), and it relies on individual learners being able to use computers. So, even if the prison can provide them, it is not guaranteed that they can be used to anywhere near their full potential.

Another country that favours the conservative nature of overusing prison is Australia, who imprison 167 people per 100,000 (Fair and Walmsley, 2021), but the country's internet connection only reaches 75% of the population (Statista, 2023). That has not stopped the University of Southern Queensland (USQ) from providing prisons with access to a remote learning system that allows prisoners to study for degree level qualifications (PLA, 2020). This is a system that can be seen to have been replicated by Coracle, and as with England and Wales is driven by external influences to those of the governing bodies.

It is not until we examine the prison systems of more liberal countries, such as Belgium that only imprison 93 of 100,000 people (Fair and Walmsley, 2021) and have internet access for 94.44% of the country (Statista, 2023). The Belgium prison system has implemented a 'prison cloud' to one of its prisons (Robberechts and Beyens, 2020). The prison cloud allows each prisoner to have their own computer, keyboard, headphones and USB stick in their own cell. There is access to certain parts of the internet through the cloud, and users are allowed to manage certain parts of their life, such as food, medical appointments, family contact, without the need for oversight from the institute. Having access to such resources has been shown by research to aid with the rehabilitation, resettlement and reintegration of prisoners (SEU, 2002).

In addition to the case studies identified above, examples of best practice relating to computer access in prisons can be found in Sweden, New Zealand, Germany, Finland, Denmark and Catalonia (PLA, 2020). While there can be no doubt that there is excellent work being done towards the advancement of digital access and pedagogy with the global prison estate, all of these are driven not by government policy aimed at improving the lived experiences of prisoners, and their potential post release, but are largely driven capitalism from private companies, or educational establishments who are both looking for future consumers.

Conclusion

There are numerous ways in which the digital divide can be evidenced worldwide, whether that be due to the digital exclusion of children (Bowyer et al., 2021), the digital exclusion of nations through lack of infrastructure (United Nations, 2023), the digital exclusion of individuals due to their

personal characteristics (Tastsou, 2022), or the exclusion through socio-economic channels in any society (United Nations, 2023a). The one thing that all of these groups have in common is that they can be seen to be excluded through no fault of their own. Whereas governments (Gramsci, 1994) and the voting public (Bottoms, 1995) would argue that prisoners have taken themselves out of society through their actions, and as such have no right to be digitally included. Ranciere states that all people are equally intelligent and ‘intellectual emancipation occurs when hierarchies of intelligence are overturned’ (1991: 70). However, as we have seen in this essay, it is not always in the best interests the ruling society to intellectually emancipate those who they imprison.

While there can be no doubt that within the global prison estate there is a significant traction for the improvement of digital access to prisoners. We have seen that education at degree level is now accessible in several countries, crossing political boundaries. We as a civilised society should no longer be able to state that we are unable to digitally educate our prisoners due to security reasons, as it has been shown in Belgium that prisoners can access the internet from their cells, and this has not led to increased criminality. The Social Exclusion Unit (2002) has shown that of the pathways into re-offending, education is one of the main seven issues that prisoners face when released; whether that be lack of formal education to enable to gain employment, or lack of education in the way in which the world is now digital. In an age where the digital landscape changes quickly, people at the bottom of the socio-economic divide, and those that are even lower (prisoners) will always be at the bottom. They will never be able to intellectually emancipate themselves (Ranciere, 1991), nor will they ever be able to transcend upwards through society to able to challenge or shape cultural hegemonic ideologies (Gramsci, 1994).

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