Peer Support for Learning: Adding Value

Summary

This briefing outlines the range of peer support roles that prisoners can and do take on to support other prisoners in learning. Learning Matters believes that peer roles play an invaluable part in encouraging prisoners to start, persevere with and succeed in education and learning. Such roles are also valuable for the prisoners who take them on, whether with a prison wage or as a volunteer.

Training for peer roles is available in some but not all prisons, provided both through Offender Learning & Skills Service (OLASS) provision and by charities and voluntary projects. This briefing makes the case for ensuring that peer support for learning through formal roles, with accredited training, is available in all prisons. OLASS providers can and should include peer mentoring for learners as a significant element of prison education and skills.

Why are peer roles needed?

Learning matters hugely for many prisoners. Many have a very poor educational background and a very negative experience of education. Government policy recognises the correlation between offending and low achievement, truancy and exclusion from school, and therefore gives priority to equipping prisoners with basic qualifications and skills to increase their chances of employment after release. Prisoners themselves agree; they know that their chances of turning their lives around are improved by better education and skills.

Learning inside prison is demanding. Prisoner learners have varied needs and face many challenges, often both from their own history and from the prison regimes. And although the resources available for statutory prison education through OLASS have increased in recent years, prison education staff and prison instructors are still hard-pressed, and provision is limited by the resources available. Whilst there are many dedicated staff working with prisoner learners, they cannot provide all the support that prisoners need. However, a significant number of prisoners have the skills and motivation to help their peers.

There are also groups of prisoner learners, such as distance learners, prisoners with learning difficulties or prisoners who are struggling with basic literacy, for whom peer support plays a particularly important role. Distance learners are often working at higher levels, including Open University study, and easily become isolated. The encouragement given by formal peer support can be important and can increase their confidence and motivation. Prisoners struggling to learn to read often benefit most from one to one support and assistance, and peer roles are the most practical way to meet their needs, as the Shannon Trusts’ Toe by Toe programme has demonstrated.
Peer support works in three ways:

- It extends the support available for individual learners, filling in gaps that prison staff cannot cover. It provides role models for new learners and increases the chances that their experience of education will be positive. It provides prisoner learners with a safe person with whom they can share anxieties and questions. Peer support increases learners’ confidence and widens participation in education.

- It offers a dimension that prison staff cannot give – encouragement from a peer who has made a similar journey and faced the same challenges. It enables prison education staff and prison instructors to delegate tasks and to build different relationships with successful and well motivated learners who are willing to contribute to others’ learning. Prison staff and mentors work together to build a ‘learning community’.

- It enables prisoners who take on peer roles to learn new skills, acquire accredited training, and experience the positive aspects of volunteering and/or of helping others. It also enables successful learners to make use of their experience to help others, and so contributes to a culture of positive attitudes towards learning. In some mentoring roles, prisoners learn professional behaviour and structure. The skills that mentors learn and use are mostly generic and can transfer to a range of volunteering opportunities and employment possibilities, both inside and outside prison.

Right now, I can think of over a dozen people I have assisted to a greater or lesser degree by teaching them to read via the very valuable Toe-by-Toe method. It’s all about providing the right environment and increasing the ‘wanting to learn’.

Peter. Toe by Toe mentor.

From the moment of my arrival there was a genuine atmosphere of concern for each other. I found this environment a complete surprise to what I thought prison was going to be like. Enthused with this positive ethos, I decided that if there were any skills I had that would be of benefit to others, then I would like to offer them. In time, I was asked if I would like to become the Education Representative for the wing.

Dave. Education mentor & Sex Offender Treatment Programme (SOTP) mentor.

I mentor prisoners in a classroom with seven other lads in the class and their needs are all different, but a lot of prisoners either can’t read or write. When I go back to my cell I reflect on my day’s work as a learning mentor and I feel really happy within myself because I know other prisoners are back in their cells and nine out of ten are happy with their day’s work.

I hope to help males and females who can’t read or write when I get released, as I really enjoy the work and want to carry on.

Robert. Listener, Toe by Toe mentor and Learning mentor.
What are peer learning support roles?

There are a range of peer learning roles currently operating in prisons across England and Wales. The most common are:

- **Classroom assistants**: Help in particular classes such as IT, working with tutors and learners.

- **Learning mentors**: Trained to work one-to-one with other learners, either in classrooms or workshops or on the wings with distance learners, or in specific programmes such as Toe by Toe mentors, who work one-to-one to help prisoners learn basic literacy, using a daily programme provided by the Shannon Trust.

- **Orderlies**: Usually work in a specific setting, such as the gym or a workshop; may also include education orderlies who help with administration.

- **Reading champions**: Encourage prisoners to read, working with the Literacy Trust.

- **Wing learning and skills representative**: Promote learning opportunities on the wing and act as liaison with education staff.

- **Presenters/tutors**: Prisoners who take part in specific processes such as induction or drugs courses, such as RAPt or who are approved by the prison to teach groups of prisoners.

There are other peer roles operating in prison: listeners are trained by the Samaritans and provide a listening ear to prisoners who need someone to talk to; peer advisers work in specific services such as housing advice, often trained through the St Giles Trust, which provides an NVQ Level 3 qualification in advice and guidance on education, training and employment; and insiders, who provide advice and assistance to new prisoners.

Many of the prisoners who take on one of the roles described above often get involved in additional roles. They find helping roles to be worthwhile and are often motivated to increase their skills, qualification and experience in this area.
What training is available?

There are a range of courses offering structured training leading to accredited qualifications, as well as some valuable unaccredited courses. The following courses are already being delivered in prisons:

- **Toe by Toe mentor training session**: The Shannon Trust has developed a training module for prisoners who take on the Toe by Toe role. Toe by Toe mentors also often complete the peer learning mentor course offered by the Prisoners Education Trust if this is available.

- **Rehabilitation for Addicted Prisoners Trust (RAPt)**: RAPt runs intensive drug rehabilitation courses in ten prisons. Some of those who have taken the course become mentors for others new to the programme. They advise and listen, and assist with written work. RAPt provides a day of training for their mentors, and gives them a certificate, but the course is not externally accredited. RAPt mentors learn about issues such as confidentiality, self-care, boundaries, and communicating effectively with prison staff, as well as transferable skills such as negotiation.

- **Peer mentoring Open College Network (OCN) accredited Level 2 course**: this course was developed by the Prisoners Education Trust and has been delivered so far in around 15 adult establishments and 7 young offender institutions. The course can be done as part of the Qualifications for Progression framework.

- **Certificate in Peer Support & Mentoring. Level 1. NCFE accredited**: This is a basic qualification designed to develop the skills and knowledge required to mentor a peer in education or training. It is aimed at learners who are mentoring peers by working alongside them throughout the course. This course is provided in HMP Low Newton.

- **Certificate in Adult Learning Support. Level 2. City & Guilds accredited (Course no 9297)**: This is a Skills for Life qualification suitable for those intending to provide classroom assistance to adult learners with literacy, numeracy and/or ESOL needs. The course includes literacy, language, numeracy and ICT needs for work, education and life as well as the skills necessary to support learners. This has been offered in HMP Wayland and HMP Haverigg.

- **Peer Mentoring. Level 2. National Open College Network (NOCN) accredited**: This is a new course, open to prisoners who have completed the AA’s 12 step programme and wish to mentor others undertaking drug and alcohol programmes. Offered at HMP Thorn Cross, HMP Preston, HMP Lancaster Castle and HMP Lancaster Farms.

- **Award in Coaching Skills. Level 3. NOCN NW accredited**: This qualification is tailored to enable prisoners to develop their potential as skills coaches. Offered in HMP Haverigg.

- **PTLLS: Preparing to Teach in the Lifelong Learning Sector. Level 3**. This is the initial qualification required to teach in adult and further education. Students are taught how to identify learners’ needs, plan and deliver lessons, and how to assess learners’ progress. Practical teaching sessions are incorporated into the course. It is a Level 3 course accredited by City and Guilds (Ref 7303) and available from various providers. A distance learning version is offered by the National Extension College (NEC) although prisons must still find a way of ensuring that learners can undertake a ‘microteaching’ session. It has been successfully delivered in HMP Foston Hall, HMP Wellingborough, HMP Wandsworth and other prisons. St Giles Trust offered an external PTLLS course for prisoners eligible for release on temporary licence (ROTL) from prisons in and close to London.

In addition, some prisoners have chosen to pursue mentoring training through distance learning. Some of the courses available and currently being studied in prison include:

- **Coaching & Mentoring Diploma. (Course no 1400). Level 2. Institute of Counselling**: Cost: £459. 1 year course, with tutor support delivered by post and telephone.

- **Certificate in Mentoring in the Workplace. (Course no 3340). Levels 3 or 4. Oxford Cambridge & RSA Examinations (OCR)**: Cost: £54.90 registration, then £12.70 per unit. Each level consists of 4 units, with tutor support delivered by telephone.

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Case studies

- **HMP Swinfen Hall** has run a peer mentoring scheme for some time and recently has collaborated with the Prisoners Education Trust to provide accredited training for peer mentors. The Trusts’ OCN accredited course leads to six credits at level 2. There are two modules: “The Role of the Mentor” and “Mentoring Skills”. The course is split into 4 sessions and topics include: values and self esteem, appropriate boundaries, communication skills, good practice in the mentoring relationship and support strategies. Sessions are interactive and cover theory and practical elements.

Learners also need to complete in-cell work in order to achieve the qualifications. The course is assessed by handing in a portfolio of work at the end of the course and through participation in class. Feedback from the pilot scheme has been extremely positive and all the mentors have been placed in classes or workshops and are using the new skills acquired.

- A PTTLS course is offered at **HMP Foston Hall**. This course has been delivered three times so far, with a mixed group of prisoners and staff participating. The course lasts 15 weeks, with the prison funding the staff participants, and the education provider funding the prisoners. Prisoner learners benefit from taking the course alongside staff, as it helps them see staff differently and gives them more respect for teachers. Currently staff take the course at level 4, and prisoners at level 3, as they do not have internet access which is needed for some elements of the advanced level.

The course includes a micro-teaching session, in which each student has to plan, prepare and deliver a teaching session to colleagues. Although this is daunting for some, it can also help embed the learning.

Women who have done PTTLS gain considerably both in terms of a highly marketable qualification and in their own personal skills and self-confidence. They are articulate and reflective about their experience as learners and the value of learning whilst inside prison. Other prisoners who listened to them in a focus group discussion about learning immediately wanted to sign up to the course themselves.

- **HMP Low Newton**, eight learning mentors assist across a range of areas. One prisoner mentor delivers a presentation in the induction programme, explaining her learning journey and the support she has received. Another specialises in supporting foreign national prisoners with ESOL. There are mentors working in IT and also cookery classes, providing one to one support to new arrivals and learners with poor literacy skills. The beauty class learning mentor supports learners with research techniques and provides practical demonstrations to new students. Mentors are invaluable to teaching staff, particularly in areas which provide independent learning opportunities such as IT, where all learners work at their own pace and commence the course with different levels of competence.

All learning mentors attend one session of education and are working towards NCFE Peer Mentoring Qualification at level 1. The course is offered as roll-on-roll off and takes approximately 20 weeks to complete. There are practical activities to identify how learners with hearing and visual impairments experience education as well as the theory around learning styles, assessing learning needs etc. Learning mentors are encouraged to produce their own objectives for each session they support, which develops their planning skills. Learning mentors are trusted roles, providing good evidence of individual commitment and accountability, which is useful to the mentor at Risk Management Meetings or Sentence Planning Reviews. They are paid the same wage as women engaging in education and are often awarded bonuses of £2.50 for outstanding mentorship.
Prisoners' experience of peer roles

Many prisoners are interested in taking on peer roles and seize any opportunities available. In the Prisoners Education Trust’s survey of prisoners about education, 40% of respondents (190 out of a total of 468 responses) had been involved in a volunteer role or a paid role related to prisoner education and learning. The role most often waged was classroom assistant (25%; 48 responses) and the two unwaged roles that were most common among respondents were peer mentor (28%; 54 responses) and Toe by Toe mentor (27%; 51 responses). More were involved in unpaid roles than in paid roles, and in addition to the roles listed above, they mentioned working as a translator and assisting other prisoners with writing.

Even more significantly, 341 respondents answered a question about support roles they felt they could suitably do or would like to do, indicating a significant pool of people willing to undertake both paid and unpaid roles:

Clearly prisoners would prefer to take on these roles as waged prison jobs, but the survey results also indicate that significant numbers of prisoners are interested in volunteer learning roles.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Paid</th>
<th>Unpaid</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Toe by Toe mentor</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Other</td>
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<td>245</td>
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What prisoners say about mentoring.

“…”For those who can’t yet read, the learning process, without patient one-to-one mentoring, can quickly become an embarrassing, patronising and generally off-putting experience. In some prisons being a mentor is a full-time job; in others it is voluntary and desperately unsupported by staff. When there is a community of mentors who share their ideas and frustrations with each other and an Education Department or Induction Programme that identifies those in need, Toe by Toe can thrive.

Jay: Toe by Toe mentor.

“I got involved with the learning mentor scheme to help other prisoners because when a teacher tries to help them the prisoners throw it back in their faces. I feel that when I mentor a prisoner, they are always respectful towards me because I know where they are coming from and know how to get the work across to them.

Robert: Listener, Learning mentor, and Toe by Toe mentor.”
Peer support roles and current offender learning policy

Current offender learning policy supports the use of peer roles. Education providers agree the particular curriculum available in each prison with that prison, taking account of local needs and broader constraints. Peer mentoring for learning support will spread across prisons if prison heads of learning and skills and/or education managers argue the case for providing the training within their prison programmes, and can assign staff capacity to oversee the peer mentoring activity. The accredited training programmes available fit within OLASS priorities, and can help education providers reach their targets.

I wanted to be a mentor as I read a story from a lad who could not read or write when he came into prison and now he is helping other people to read and write, and I just thought his transformation was incredible. Once I read that article I just wanted to help people, because I could understand how certain people feel not being able to read and write. When I became a learning mentor, I had to complete a three week course in practical strategies for supporting basic skills learning. That course was at level two, and the course is part of a teaching assistant’s training. I get so much satisfaction from helping another prisoner, because I know the things I help them with they could use later on life and maybe use it towards further education or even their dream job.

Alexander: Learning mentor, Toe-by-Toe mentor, resettlement mentor and Listener.

Offenders Learning Journey. 2008 (Adults) (P13.5)

My role as education rep. is to signpost and assist inmates to the relevant departments and courses, and to remain up to date with opportunities available. Most inmates want to improve their education whilst in prison, but are not always sure how or where to go to achieve this. The boost to an inmate’s confidence and self-esteem upon successfully completing a course or receiving a certificate is what makes it all worth while for me. To feel that I have helped my fellow inmates, and this may increase their chances of finding employment and help them to not re-offend, is a very positive driving force for me to continue.

Dave: Education representative.
Conclusion

Whether one or more of the peer mentoring training courses can be offered in particular prisons is likely to depend on priorities and resources. In recent years, some external organisations have accessed European funding which has enabled them to deliver peer mentoring courses in several prisons. Some charities also provide courses and training for prison staff to deliver further courses. In some prisons, education providers have included peer mentor training in the curriculum available.

It is clear that more prisons would like to make use of peer mentor roles for learning support, if resources were available to do so.

Links

Gity & Guilds.  
www.cityandguilds.com/uk

Institute of Counselling.  
www.collegeofcounselling.com

NCFE.  
www.ncfe.org.uk

National Extension College (NEC).  
www.collegeofcounselling.com

National Open College Network (NOCN).  
www.nocn.org.uk

Open University (OU) For Prisoners Prospectus.  
www.open.ac.uk

Offender Learning & Skills Service (OLASS).  
http://olass.lsc.gov.uk

Oxford Cambridge & RSA Examinations (OCR).  
www.ocr.org.uk

Rehabilitation for Addicted Prisoners Trust (RAPt).  
www.rapt.org.uk

St Giles Trust.  
www.stgilestrust.org.uk

Shannon Trust.  
www.shannontrust.org.uk

Stonebridge Associated Colleges.  
www.stonebridge.uk.com