Learning basic skills while serving time
– reading, writing and numeracy training
Learning basic skills while serving time
Eystein Raude
Kaja Winsnes
Preface

This report describes the experiences from a project implemented in Bastøy Prison in the spring of 2009. During several months a group of inmates was to receive training in reading, writing and numeracy. Making the most efficient use of the available time was essential, in the classroom as well as outside. The daily activities of the inmates would serve as the "curriculum" as well as a testing ground for the participants.

Teachers from Horten Upper Secondary School, officers from Bastøy Prison and advisors from Vox joined forces to develop a teaching model on the basis of the daily work of the participants. The report shows how basic skills training can be linked to problems encountered and texts used in daily situations, and it confirms the importance of facilitating close cooperation between the educational institution and the ones who are responsible for the practical operations.

The Vox project group consisted of Åge Hanssen (project director), Camilla Alfsen, Sissel Lyngvær Ramstad, Eystein Raude and Kaja Winsnes. Raude and Winsnes were responsible for monitoring the project and have also written the report.

Vox, April 2010

Contents

1. Background ......................................................................................................................................................... 2
2. Competence goals .................................................................................................................................................. 4
   Reading and writing .......................................................................................................................................... 4
   Numeracy .............................................................................................................................................................. 4
3. The reading and writing course ....................................................................................................................... 5
   Course content .................................................................................................................................................. 5
   Cooperation between the teacher and the officers ......................................................................................... 5
   Workplace-based assignments ......................................................................................................................... 6
   Use of computers .............................................................................................................................................. 7
   The importance of meeting perceived needs ................................................................................................. 7
   Results from the literacy course ..................................................................................................................... 8
4. The numeracy course .......................................................................................................................................... 9
   Course content .................................................................................................................................................. 9
   Use of computers .............................................................................................................................................. 9
   Assignments for work and leisure ................................................................................................................... 9
   Appraisal and assessment ............................................................................................................................... 11
   Final remarks .................................................................................................................................................... 11
5. Summary conclusion .......................................................................................................................................... 12
Background

The Bastøy island is located in the Oslo fjord and is part of Horten municipality. The entire island is under the administration of Bastøy Prison, even though the Nordbukta beach is classified as a public area and some other beaches are also open to visitors, with some restrictions. The prison is part of South Norway Correctional Services, and with a total of 115 places, it is the country’s largest open facility, where inmates serving long or medium-long sentences stay under a reasonable security regime.

Bastøy Prison aims to develop the individual inmate’s self-respect and an understanding of the value of a future as a law-abiding and socially integrated citizen. Therefore, the prison focuses on values and attitudes associated with ecology and humanism, through activities that are associated with responsibilities and the inmates’ values. Practical work activities are a key to these efforts. Through workplace learning, the inmates will be in a better position once they are released, and they will also be engaged in positive activities during their imprisonment.

Approximately one third of the inmates had paid employment at the time of their incarceration. A stronger association with the labour market, in addition to the skills that the inmates will need to find a job, is therefore essential in order to help them into a life without crime after their release.

In 2009, Bastøy Prison and Vox wished to test new methods for training adults in prisons. The inmates would be offered reading, writing and numeracy training, in courses designed by teachers, Vox and Bastøy Prison’s officers working in close cooperation. The courses would be based on knowledge about how the participants used writing and simple mathematics in their own everyday activities. In addition, the courses were intended to help establish opportunities and motivation for reading, writing and mathematics in daily prison life.

The training course was to be based on experience and skills that the participants would bring with them from their previous lives. A further key principle was that the content of the training should be perceived as directly relevant to daily activities. Finally, it was essential that the newly acquired skills could be used immediately.
The training programme lasted four months, and the participants were offered training in reading, writing and numeracy on separate days once weekly. The training sessions lasted from 9 AM until lunchtime, and the teacher stayed for about an extra hour to visit the participants’ workplaces and talk to the officers in charge. Participants were selected on the basis of appraisal mapping of a large number of the prison inmates. At the start of the programme, the reading and writing group had five participants with a Norwegian language background, one participant from Vietnam, one from Morocco and one from Kosovo. The numeracy group had five participants from the start.
2 Competence goals

Reading and writing

The course was based on Vox’s competence goals for reading and writing. The competence goals have been designed to adapt the teaching of reading and writing skills to adults in their everyday life. The goals outline development that spans three levels, of which the completion of level 3 is equal to a lower-secondary school certificate. Each level comprises skill targets in the fields of ‘Reading and understanding’, ‘Writing and communicating’ and ‘Developing basic reading and writing strategies’.

The competence goals constitute a flexible tool, which should be adapted to various target groups and contexts, and to the individual needs of each participant. The teacher mainly worked on levels 1 and 2, and selected goals that suited the individual participants. In addition, the teacher used the competence goals to structure the teaching and to assess the participants’ learning needs and the degree of difficulty of the texts. The wide selection of texts that were made available to her at Bastoy, and all the texts that the participants wanted her to help them with, gave the teacher an excellent starting point for working with the various competence goals.

Numeracy

The course was based on Vox’s competence goals for numeracy. The competence goals are subdivided into three levels and deal with the skill types Numbers, Measurements and Statistics, which are common to all cultures. In addition, the competence goals include examples from the arenas Private life and social life and Labour, education and training. These examples proved very useful in the training situation and in the interplay between the school and the workshops.

1 You can read more about the competence goals and associated guidance under “basic skills” at www.vox.no/english

2 You can read more about the competence goals and associated guidance under “basic skills” at www.vox.no/english
3 The reading and writing course

Course content

The participants were encouraged to bring with them any material that they needed help with, even if it was of a private nature. The teacher made sure that sufficient time was devoted to this purpose so that the participants’ initiatives could be rewarded with some real help. Many participants turned to the teacher for help with the very practical challenge of writing formal letters and applications to the prison administration. While inside, the inmates often need to address the prison authorities in writing, and their need for help with this was made clear during the course. Inmates also often needed help to write private letters, and were given some assistance after having worked on a draft on a computer outside the classroom. This constituted a good writing exercise, as well as practical training in the use of MS-Word.

Some of the inmates had special responsibilities, including the role of caretaker. The caretakers would ask for help to formulate notes on matters ranging from garbage disposal to cleaning routines and purchases of coffee, and for making lists of the occupants of the different rooms. These were mostly written on a computer in their own free time, whereupon they were given assistance in formulating and printing the results during the course. The classroom was often buzzing with activity and discussions when the inmates sought to help each other across the table. Some participants became so motivated that they spent their leisure time completing the assignments.

Cooperation between the teacher and the officers

The teachers cooperated closely with the officers in charge of the cleaning department, the stables, the large cowshed and the kitchen. They would often meet after the course had ended for the day. These conversations and joint observations resulted in agreements on how the teachers and the officers should cooperate to enhance the participants’ learning opportunities, inside the classroom as well as outside. These learning opportunities were created by giving the participants assignments in the form of reading or writing workplace-related texts that were unfamiliar to them or texts that needed to be written or revised.
Workplace-based assignments

In some cases, participants had reading and writing work assigned to them by their workplace leaders. After initial guidance by the officers, they brought their texts to the course, where they were given assistance in completing them. This enabled the officers to offer their skills and familiarity with the daily routines, without having to undertake the literacy training activities directly. Once the participants had made a draft version with the aid of the officers, they brought the draft to the course where they were assisted in designing and printing a final version. In order to guide the participants successfully through this process of completion, it was essential that the teacher visited the workshops and observed the work there on a regular basis.

The participants’ opportunities to read and write during the working day were enhanced in various ways. Occasionally, changes were introduced to make this a regular part of the work, for example by giving the participants the assignment of writing out the invoice for the sale of eggs. On other occasions, the inmates were given or assumed responsibility for assignments that required them to take a break from the manual work and concentrate specifically on how to formulate a text. These texts could be manpower lists, fodder lists or cleaning instructions. The participants should perceive the text as useful to their work and feel that the animals, co-workers or managers gained something from it. Furthermore, it was essential that the texts were related to a field in which the participants had some competence or experience.

In some of the prison’s workplaces, it was initially difficult to find texts that were suitable for use as assignments. With a view to security and quality, many of the texts had to be written by the officers themselves. Some texts that are usually found in enterprises, such as quality control forms and self-reporting forms, the management had chosen not to use out of concern for the inmates’ skills. Following some reflection on this matter by the teacher and the officers, some new ideas emerged. The participants were given some assignments that had previously been the responsibility of the officers, but still could be undertaken by the participants with some assistance. In consultation with the teacher, the officers introduced several new routines, such as writing minutes from the morning meeting. Certain procedures, instructions and reports that had not previously been formulated in writing, but for which there was a real need in the workplace, were identified. In cases where the function of the text was not evident to the participants, the officers would devote some time to discussing this with them before they would begin the assignment.

Assignments included the establishment of weekly plans for the work teams, revision and formulation of work instructions and the logging of shifts. Some participants also started to write minutes from meetings. Leaders reported that they saw this as an opportunity to engage those who were ready for some more challenging tasks, and that the participants might gradually assume responsibility for various activities that had previously been performed by the leaders.

Some writing assignments in the workplaces did not require much reading or writing, but rather quite a lot of preparation. In order to establish a manpower list for the stables, somebody first had to find out who had taken the unpopular duties lately, who was eligible for leave and whether anybody would be absent for training or other activities during the period in question. Then solutions that would satisfy as many as possible had to be found. By learning how to set up a manpower list, the participants freed the officers from a lot of work, and seeing their text being widely used gave the participants increased self-confidence. A further result was that the participants gained a better overview of what their co-workers in the stables were doing at any given time, which resulted in better solutions for the operation of the shifts.
also grateful for the opportunity to learn how to type on a computer, because they realized how important this would be for their return to working life.

The importance of meeting perceived needs

One key purpose of the course was to investigate how the inmates make use of texts, and what could motivate them to continue improving their reading and writing skills. The participants’ sources of motivation varied greatly. Some of them were quite happy with their workplace or their roles as caretakers, among other things. For them, working with texts that were relevant to their work was the main motivation, and some would continue until late in the evening in order to finish the texts. Other participants, on the other hand, were engaged in jobs with which they perceived no personal attachment and which were quite remote from the things they had done before or planned to do after their release. These participants could work on workplace-related texts such as exercises, but felt real motivation only when they could practise writing a CV, reading a book or writing private letters on the computer.

When working with authentic texts in a prison, there is the challenge that the workplace often will not be perceived as “real”, and therefore will not automatically provide a deeper motivation to improve one’s skills. This motivation is dependent on whether, for example, farm animals or co-workers will suffer if the participant fails to perform his job adequately.

Some reading and writing assignments were nevertheless obviously perceived as real challenges in everyday life, irrespective of the motivation the inmates felt for their work. This could be observed with regard to writing internal and external applications, private letters and CVs. Other things that would motivate the participants, irrespective of their personality and job situation, included creative work with texts and layout. The participants enjoyed working with the word processor to enter images and adding colours, and to print out and pin their text to the wall or send it off to someone. They were also motivated by saving the texts they had written in separate folders on the computer and then retrieving and continue working on them later.

The teacher used this work on the practical assignments as a basis for discussions on how to read and write various types of texts, and on how to relate to different recipients. Textual assignments from the workplace could also be used for practising various reading and writing strategies, learning how to learn and enhancing awareness of the use of different texts and genres. On the basis of the workplace-related texts, the participants could discuss topics such as sentence construction and concepts, orthography, keywords and techniques for taking notes.

The use of computers

The participants made extensive use of the computers placed outside the classroom. They were used for a number of purposes, including writing private letters and applications, using educational software for spelling training, entering music files and images and watching DVD movies. In this manner, the computers established an opportunity for the participants to practise and maintain their skills after having returned to their barracks in the evening. Seeing the benefits from learning how to use the computer was also a source of self-confidence and further motivation. The teacher supported these efforts by letting the participants practise how to use MS-Word, how to type on the keyboard and how to use memory sticks and similar devices during the course. The teacher and the participants agreed that having access to a computer was decisive for obtaining maximum benefit from the course. The participants were
Other assignments that provided motivation for many participants included writing CVs and job applications. This was a very popular activity, and the participants worked hard to make their CVs as correct as possible and give them an attractive layout on the computer. It was obvious that applying for work was perceived as an immediate need, and this provided the motivation for many of the participants.

Two participants in particular were highly motivated to prepare for working life off the island. One of them had served a larger proportion of his sentence than the other, and worked particularly hard on the job application genre. He had a varied professional background, and at the end of the course he could write well-formulated job applications and CVs. He also became skilled in reading job advertisements, so that he would understand what the employer wanted and how he should respond.

Results from the literacy course

The literacy course provided strong motivation for further learning. All participants made considerable progress, with an average of 25% improvement from the initial to the final appraisal. The participants emphasized the benefit they had gained from working in a small group with close follow-up from the teacher. They also found it to be motivating that the training situation bore little resemblance to what they remembered from school, and that they were allowed to bring in problems and texts with which they felt they needed some help. It was also essential that the classes included helping them with the layout and printing of their work.

The course had a low dropout rate, and the participants claimed that they were motivated by the close follow-up and by being able to monitor their own progress. At the end of the course, all participants were motivated to continue learning. One reason was found in the positive test results, and the experience of being able to read and write better, as well as perceiving the opportunities that these abilities would provide them with, which also provided further motivation. Participants who had a long period of their sentences left to serve wished to undergo further training while in prison and wished to retain their borrowed computers for a longer period. Those who were released during the training period all agreed that they would like to continue the learning process on the outside.

One of the participants wanted to continue his literacy training after leaving Bastøy Prison. He would go back to a 60% job as a car painter with his former employer, but would contact the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration to find out whether any suitable courses are available through the adult education organization in his home municipality.

The participants clearly expressed the view that having the support of prison officers and staff had been important for them during their training. They told stories of officers who encouraged them to go to the training course and asked them how their training went, provided access to the printer when the course premises had been locked and helped them with the written assignments. Some officers also saw to it that the participants continued visiting the course even in periods when their motivation was sagging. On one occasion, a works manager took the initiative to bring a new student into the training programme. The participants greatly appreciated all these efforts.

The objective of the course, to work with the participants’ specific needs for reading and writing skills, showed positive results. It was also important that the teacher and the officers remained in regular contact, and that the teacher was familiar with the jobs of the individual participants and their roles in the prison system. A key insight, however, was that familiarity with the everyday situation of the participants in itself provided insufficient indications of what the inmates themselves would regard as relevant learning. In addition, it was important to understand what the participants wanted to do with their lives, the things that were important to them on a day-to-day basis, their previous association with the labour market and their attitude to their work in the prison and the relationship to their prison officers.
4 The numeracy course

Course content

The purpose of the numeracy course was to develop the participants’ functional skills and an understanding of the mathematical calculations that all adults in general need to undertake. In our complex society these skills are essential for every individual, not only as an active member of society, as a parent and as an employee, but also in terms of democratic participation. The objective of the course was to focus on the mathematical operations that were part of the participants’ lives, but often remained invisible and embedded in daily activities, routines and computer software.

The use of computers

In addition to the competence goals, the teacher used the book Migramatte (‘Migramaths’, new name: Hverdagsmatte – ‘Everyday maths’), containing examples of the use of the competence goals. The participants also had access to the computer game The Quest for Ada, which they could use in their leisure time. Using this game they could practise reading, writing, calculation and digital skills.

The participants had one laptop computer each for use in the training course and during their leisure time. The teachers confirmed that the use of the laptops acted as a stimulant to learning, with regard to literacy as well as numeracy. Computers play an important part in our lives, and a computer is a natural companion in numeracy training.

Spreadsheet (Excel) is a powerful and user-friendly mathematical tool, and the participants were given an introduction to the most basic features of this type of software. In addition to the spreadsheet, the participants would use a calculator. The use of spreadsheet had a very positive effect on the participants’ learning efforts. The results of any entries are immediately visible, as are the effects of any changes made to the numbers. A calculator is also a practical aid to any work with numbers and it was frequently used during the training sessions.
Assignments for work and leisure

The teacher addressed the basic mathematical concepts associated with the competence goals in the fields of ‘Numbers’ and ‘Measurements’, such as the positional system for positive integers and the four main forms of calculation. He emphasized the training in mental calculation, which is an important numerical skill and often used for making rough estimates. Calculation of percentages was addressed in the context of commerce and calculating VAT. The participants were given an introductory course in the use of Excel, and its application was linked to the participants’ work in the production of eggs on the Bastøy island, to invoices that should have VAT added to them, to feeding animals and other production.

Previously the inmates had been paid on a daily basis, but this routine was changed to monthly payments. Many struggled to keep their personal finances in order, and the participants found that the spreadsheet was a suitable tool in this context.

To find items associated with the life of the participants and ideas for his maths classes, the teacher established contact with the employees of the prison wards. The teacher also primarily used a dialogue form during classes, and used the blackboard to communicate and visualize. Giving the participants a feeling of being able to cope with the assignments was an import goal of the training.

Some of the inmates worked with the production of eggs, and their duties included keeping track of the production and the feeding of the hens. Using Excel, it was easy to gain an overview and to make calculations. The participants clearly voiced their positive experience of working with Excel in the context of their everyday calculation needs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Antall høner</th>
<th>Egg pr. høne</th>
<th>Pr. høne/dag</th>
<th>Pr. dag</th>
<th>Pr. dag</th>
<th>Pr. dag</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>196</td>
<td>0.918367347</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>19.6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Produksjon av egg pr. uke | 1295 |
| Knekte egg pr. uke | 56   |
| Kg. | 1239 |

| Kraftfor til foring pr. uke i kg. | 137.2 |
| Kraftfor til foring pr. mnd. i kg. | 588  |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mandag</th>
<th>Tirsdag</th>
<th>Onsdag</th>
<th>Torsdag</th>
<th>Fredag</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Salg til private</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eget kjøkken</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Butikk</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>60</td>
<td></td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forbruk pr. dag</td>
<td>260</td>
<td>220</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>410</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forbruk pr. uke</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A better overview of the production can be obtained by using Excel to make a graph, as shown in the next figure.

---

**Egg production**
Mapping and assessment

A key approach was to base the course on the participants’ prior knowledge. Vox’s mapping tools for numeracy were therefore used to give the participants and the teacher adequate information about the situation.

In addition to the initial mapping, evaluations were undertaken at regular intervals by letting the participants respond to three simple questions after each training session:

1) What did you learn today?
2) Were you “struck” by anything in particular?
3) Was there anything that you failed to understand?

The participants responded eagerly to these questions, for example answering that “I need to learn this in order to help my children when I return home”, “the teacher presented the whole material at a suitable tempo”, “today I understood everything that was said”, “it struck me that I need to practise these things constantly”, and “I have learned to do division, I didn’t know that before”. By responding to these questions the participants became more aware of their own learning, and the teacher could adapt the training and guidance to the needs of the individual participants.

Final remarks

Mathematics is a basic skill required for most activities in modern society. Mathematics comprises several disciplines, but is based on the numbers that are all around us every day. Knowing how to use these numbers is the essence of numeracy. Mathematics has previously been used as a tool for measuring general academic aptitude, and intellectual abilities have mainly been associated with skills in standard mathematics. This has given rise to, and continues to give rise to, a lot of frustration and resentment for this subject among many students. Knowing that mathematics is a natural human activity, it is even more important to rebuild the self-confidence of many adults in this field. This is where numeracy training faces its major mission: to give adults the feeling that they are able to do maths after all.

The prison inmates will return to society, and they will then draw an invaluable benefit from their numerical skills – at home, at work and in a possible future course of study. A key area is personal finances, and our project has demonstrated that this field should have a self-evident and prominent position in the numeracy training in prisons.
5 Summary

The training courses at Bastøy Prison set important processes in motion, among staff and inmates alike. With the aid of the courses, the participants were able to develop their skills and undertake more activities at work and in their leisure time, and they became more confident in doing so. The participants developed better learning strategies, enhanced their self-esteem with regard to their own learning, and ended up with better conceptions of what they wanted to do after their release. Not least, they became more aware of what they needed to continue focusing on in order to reach their goals. At the end of the course, the officers, the participants and the teachers showed great pride and joy in the results that had been produced by their joint efforts. The project’s objective of basing the training on everyday needs and the close cooperative relationships between all parties involved appear to have contributed to the excellent results. The flexibility and attentiveness of the teachers in their encounter with the inmates also had a decisive effect.