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Svetlik, Paul D. *Writing for the workforce: teaching technical and professional communication skills to county jail inmates.*

Abstract

The United States incarcerates more people than any other nation. Of those individuals released from incarceration, more than 40% commit additional crimes and are placed back into a correctional facility within three years. Written literacy is a critical skill that inmates need to possess and utilize if they are to gain employment or continue their education upon their release and thus reduce recidivism. Through the analysis of 104 surveys, and an evaluation of 12 local county jail inmates' test scores and writing samples before and after participating in a writing class, this thesis aims to provide insight on the ability of inmates to learn and practice specific writing techniques. The inmate participants were both male and female, and were all incarcerated within the same local county jail. The findings may shed light on how correctional education programs can prepare inmates for a successful reentry to mainstream society through teaching specific skill sets.

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Chapter I: Introduction

While teaching in a small county jail in Wisconsin, I asked a new General Education Diploma (GED) student to prepare a brief writing sample regarding his goals. His response was a full page of legible, hand-written text regarding his need to finish his GED. As it was, he stated that he had successfully completed the math, social studies, science, and reading tests, needing only to complete the writing test to earn his diploma. His writing sample, however, did not include a single comma, period, or other punctuation mark. He wrote without pause, not realizing his incorrect use of Standard Edited American English was failing to meet the needs of his audience. Indeed, upon contacting the local testing center, it was confirmed that this student had failed to meet the expectations of the GED writing test evaluators during the previous year.

Punctuation was not the only issue limiting this student's ability to effectively transfer information through writing—that is, he did not consider, or perhaps did not understand, that the audience to whom he was writing did not expect a document filled with slang. Colloquialisms such as “gonna” and “wanna” and text message acronyms such as “U” rather than the written form “you” were abundant throughout the paper. Furthermore, the document included several words such as “shit”, “suck”, and “crap” not acceptable in academic or professional writing. Upon discussing the punctuation and word choice issues with this student, he indicated that the essays he prepared while testing for his GED were written in a similar manner. He noted that he did not know where the periods and commas were supposed to be placed, so he neglected to use them. He also stated that during the ten years of school he did complete, he did not learn much about conventional writing.

During the next class, I asked this student to complete a GED writing predictor¹, hoping that his essay would differ from his original writing sample. He stated that he would do fine on the multiple choice section, but that he could not write the essay— that he “hated” writing, and did not understand why it was necessary. He explained that he had passed all the other tests, but he would never pass writing. A review of his predictor test confirmed his hypothesis. The improper word choice and lack of punctuation remained in his writing, but he scored well on the multiple choice section. In essence, he could recognize the correct answers in multiple choice settings, but he was not able to apply this knowledge through his own writing, in part because he did not understand punctuation and grammar, and in part because he never linked the notion that different audiences demanded different expectations.

To improve this student’s writing, we worked together over an eight week period, meeting once or twice each week, depending on classroom availability for hour long sessions (along with a class of approximately seven other Adult Basic Education students working in subjects ranging from math to civics). During the first few sessions, we studied the elements of a complete sentence. That is, he learned that any sentence needs to include a subject, and a verb. He learned the role of a subject in a sentence, the role of a verb in a sentence, and their grammatical relationship. Once this concept was mastered, we discussed the fact that a subject and a verb alone do not constitute a complete sentence—that a complete sentence requires a complete thought and a period to end it. To reinforce this notion, he wrote sentences containing a subject, a verb, and a direct object (S-V-O pattern). It became clear to this student that he

¹ The GED predictor tests are half the length of the actual tests (half the number of questions and half the amount of time) and are prepared at the same level of difficulty as official GED tests.

typically spoke in complete sentences and that a pause in his speech generally indicated a period in writing. We then began to identify such sentences in the writing samples he had submitted, noting the S-V-O elements and then placing periods after each complete thought. This task ultimately remedied his problem with never ending sentences.

What followed was a brief overview of the basic rules of punctuation. We discussed when to use a comma and when to simply use a period followed by a capital letter. We worked to create paragraphs with short and long sentences. I frequently reminded this student of the S-V-O pattern, and introduced the idea of prepositional phrases at the beginnings of his sentences. His writing began to improve. However, he was still using a limited vocabulary relying heavily on colloquial slang as his vocabulary may not have been fully developed because of incarceration.

To transform how this student used language based on a given situation, we began thinking of our audience critically. I asked this student to think about how he communicated with his peers in jail compared to how people acted in professional settings. He came to the conclusion that I was “probably right” that groups of people outside of correctional facilities may utilize a vernacular language different from the one he was accustomed to inside of a jail. The problem was rooted in the fact that this student had no other persona, no other script to follow, other than the one he learned from prison. He needed to spend more time surrounded by other terminology—an option non-existent for many offenders while serving a sentence. During the time that I spent with this student, I maintained the expectation of no vulgar language in class and demanded the use of proper English while speaking. These expectations were never fully met. However, this student did learn that “gonna” is actually short for “going to,” one of the many facts that he truly did not know.

The result of our time together proved meaningful. He did pass his GED writing test, albeit with a minimum score, and he did receive his diploma. Perhaps equally important, he learned that he was capable of developing new skills in his most feared and hated subject—academic composition. While he still had a lot of work to do before being ready for college level writing, he was truly grateful that someone was willing to take the time to help him learn.

As a former GED/HSED and Career Skills instructor at two county jails, I witnessed first-hand inmates who feared, or even hated the idea of academic or other formal writing tasks. Indeed, professor of special education and literacy James Vacca (2004) stated, “Many prisoners are likely to have poor self-confidence and negative attitudes about education because they viewed their early experiences as being negative,” (p. 301). I also witnessed the positive difference that an education made on inmates’ self-image and their ability to find employment. While many inmates compose poetry, maintain personal diaries, and write letters to loved ones, they often lack a basic education, have never had to write formally, and therefore may lack confidence in their ability to learn and practice formal writing techniques needed to compose a resume or cover letter.

However, if inmates are given the opportunity to develop their literacy skills and a positive conception of education through quality correctional education programs, they may realize that they are capable of learning and improving their self-worth. Consequently, these same inmates may decide to write a cover letter and gain employment, or fill out a college application and earn a degree, rather than commit another crime and return to prison. In a study examining the impact of correctional education programs on post-release recidivism within the Indiana Department of Corrections (IDOC), Nally, Lockwood, Knutson, and Taiping (2012) found:

All else being equal. . .an offender who has not attended correctional education programs during incarceration is approximately 3.7 times more likely to become a recidivist offender after release from IDOC custody, while compared with an offender who has participated in correctional education programs during incarceration (p.79).

If we can find a way to help individual inmates learn practical skills, we may find a way to lower levels of recidivism, and thus levels of incarceration in America.

Statement of the Problem

One key element that needs to be addressed in the effort to reduce the number of prisoners is recidivism, or released inmates who re-offend and return to incarceration. Indeed, the majority of inmates currently serving time will, at some point, be released back into society. This is perhaps more true of local jails that typically house inmates for less than one year sentences. A report released by the Pew Center on the States (2011) noted, “Although preventing offenders from committing more crimes once released is only one goal of the overall correctional system, it is a crucial one, both in terms of preventing future victimization and ensuring that taxpayer dollars are spent effectively,” (p.1). Nationally, over 40% of inmates who were released returned to prison within three years, and in Wisconsin (where this study took place) 46% of inmates released from prison in 2004 returned to incarceration by 2007 (Pew Center on the States).

By providing inmates with essential skills, such as communication skills, that are needed to live a productive life, we will help an at-risk population develop their academic knowledge to a level suitable to find work or further their education upon their release. In his article examining effective correctional education characteristics, Vacca (2004) stated:

Since 1990, literature examining the return rates of prisoners, or recidivism, has shown that educated prisoners are less likely to find themselves back in prison a second time if

they complete an educational program and are taught skills to successfully read and write (p. 298).

Of the nation's prison population, 41% do not have a high school diploma or its equivalent (Bureau of Justice Statistics [BJS], 2003). This is a disproportionately high percent when compared with the 12.9% of the general population who do not have a high school diploma or its equivalent (U.S. Census, 2010). These same inmates, upon their release, are typically faced with three options: 1) find employment, 2) further their education, or 3) break the law and return to jail or prison. More than 4 of every 10 released inmates, perhaps because they have criminal records and lack the foundational skills necessary to make the first two options realistic, are left with only the third option.

At the national level, 2.2 million people in our prisons and jails, more than any other country in the world, could benefit from increased literacy training (International Centre for Prison Studies, 2008). This number rises to 6.8 million or 1 out of every 34 people when those who are on parole or probation are added into the equation (BJS, 2011). To maintain facilities and supervise this expansive population, the United States spent over \$48 billion on corrections in 2010 (BJS, 2010). On average, states spent over \$28,000 per inmate for each year of incarceration.

Implementing writing classes within Wisconsin's correctional facilities may lower the state's 46% recidivism rate and the state's overall number of inmates. Not counting local jails and those on extended supervision, there were over 22,000 individuals behind bars in Wisconsin's state and federal prisons in 2011 (BJS, 2011). The average annual cost per inmate for 2010 was \$37,994—higher than the national average, and the total cost to taxpayers for the

same year was over \$870 million (Henrichson & Delaney, 2012). In essence, a large amount of money is spent each year to house undereducated prisoners.

At the same time, an increasing number of jobs require an education and the ability to communicate clearly in writing to a variety of audiences: supervisors, peers, and clients. In a 2013 national survey, employers' responses expressed that the "Ability to verbally communicate with persons inside and outside the organization" and the "Ability to create and/or edit written documents" were among the top ten skills valued in the workplace (National Association of Colleges and Employers). Furthermore, in order to complete a GED or to enter post-secondary education to compete with their peers, these same inmates will need to be able to pass a literacy test or compose a letter of intent to an institution of higher education. If released inmates lack an understanding of communication skills, they may find it difficult to gain or maintain employment, or enter college, increasing their probability of reoffending.

The high number of Americans locked up each year combined with the overall cost of incarceration raises questions regarding how we can help inmates return to productive lives. In their study on post release recidivism, Nally et.al. (2012) stated, "Consequently, in recent years, the demand for correctional education has steadily increased but funding for correctional education has been systematically decreased" (p. 70). While teaching specific skills to inmates is one solution to high levels of recidivism, available funding for academics is a limiting factor. In addition, within local jails, inmates are often not incarcerated long enough to complete a traditional length class. In other words, correctional educators must find ways to build inmates' skill levels with minimal funding and time.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate the impact of teaching a 12 hour writing class to inmates. Specifically, it will measure inmates' ability to analyze audiences, improve writing clarity, and apply knowledge of grammar rules. These are all essential elements needed to prepare a professional document in an effort to enter the workforce. Moreover, through developing literacy skills, inmates will be better equipped to access and comprehend other knowledge—such as reading a book or journal article and synthesizing that information with their own thoughts through writing—critical for academic success. To place this investigation into context, Chapter two will provide a review of the current scholarship in the field of correctional education and inmate literacy. Chapter three will describe the methodologies used in this study to measure inmates' literacy skills and Chapter four will present the findings thereof. Chapter five will answer my research questions to draw conclusions and shed light on how to help inmates improve their professional writing skills in preparation for gaining and sustaining employment in the workforce or entering an educational setting upon their re-entry to mainstream society.

Chapter II: Review of the Literature

There is a vast amount of statistical data and academic literature related to incarcerated populations. The majority of this data and literature, however, pertains specifically to federal and state prisons. Organizations such as the Bureau of Justice Statistics and the Pew Charitable Trusts monitor and publish data on federal and state prisons, as well as minimal information on local jails. In addition, individual states provide yearly reports on the condition of their prison systems and populations. Perhaps one reason that there is more statistical information for state and federal facilities is because they are regulated by state and federal agencies and must adhere to data collection requirements. Local county and city jails lack state and federal oversight and local jurisdictions may not require that jails collect and report data.

Regarding academic scholarship, jails pose a specific problem for researchers. During 2011, local jails housed slightly more than 700,000 inmates, but admitted nearly 11.8 million individuals (BJS 2011). This indicates that there was a high volume of admissions and releases of inmates relative to the size of the average daily population in local jails (BJS, 2012 p. 3). Because of this high turnover rate of inmates, with an average length of stay of 14-19 days, it is difficult for academic and government institutions to conduct long-term studies that depend on consistent attendance of participants (Smith & Silverman, 1993, p. 422). For that reason, the research has been on federal and state institutions that house populations who are less transient and more predictable because the length of sentences is longer.

At the same time, county jail inmates consist of the least educated of the incarcerated populations. Caroline Harlow (2003) found that 46% of local jail inmates reported their educational attainment as some high school or less, compared to 39% of state prison inmates, and 26.5% of federal inmates (p.1). In essence, local jail inmates are in need of effective

educational programs, but few resources exist to provide educators with a framework for successful literacy outcomes. Tewksbury and Vito (1994) stated, “However, their sheer number, proximity to the streets, and high illiteracy rate make jail inmates a prime target for educational programming” (p. 56). Because a high volume of inmates are released into communities each year, it is essential that these individuals are prepared for release and do not become part of the recidivism cycle.

Best Practices

Several themes are common among successful correctional education programs. In his 2004 article, Vacca provided an overview of current scholarship in the field of correctional education and summarized these common themes. He noted, “The results of this study showed that inmates reported that they were more inclined to participate in programs when they saw clear opportunities to improve their capabilities for success after being released” (p. 300). Although there are many fields of education, classes that prepare inmates with transferable skills may be the most effective in terms of prisoner participation and reducing recidivism. Vacca further noted, “Inmates who are released from prison are frequently unable to find jobs because they either lack experience and/or literacy skills” (p. 302). If released inmates cannot find work, it is more likely that they will resort to criminal behavior.

Therefore, teaching inmates skills such as how to prepare written documents is relevant in that it improves literacy, and it prepares inmates to make the transition from incarceration to the workforce and allows them more of an opportunity to advance their education. Vacca stated, “Literacy skills are important to prisoners in many ways. Inmates need these skills to fill out forms, to make requests and to write letters to others in the outside world” (p. 302). Building

inmate literacy offers students immediate and tangible benefits as well as long lasting skills needed for participation in a competitive and literate society.

By providing specific skill sets to inmates, they may not only develop their literacy skills, but also their ability to see themselves as individuals rather than solely as prisoners. As a result, inmates may be more likely to seek employment or education that will allow them to participate in society rather than return to prison. In their 2012 study on sustainable correctional education programs and community needs, Boghossian, Glavn, O'Connor, Boyer, and Conway argued:

Research has shown that providing key skill sets necessary for economic competitiveness (among other factors) of recently released inmates not only makes inmates feel self-empowered but often through this feeling translates economically into increased opportunities and personally into prosocial attitudes, thinking patterns, and behaviors (p. 33).

Indeed, while teaching academic content, educators must encourage inmate students to take ownership of their work and participate in discussions about new concepts. In doing so, inmates will have an opportunity to take pride in making positive academic gains and positive contributions to the class as a whole. This will also provide an opportunity for students to reflect on what is being learned. Cynthia Blinn (1995) noted that such activities will “Interrupt the criminal community by immersing offenders in settings where prosocial activities are prevalent” (p. 146). Vacca argued, “Most of all, the programs must enable inmates to see themselves and be seen in roles other than that of prisoners” (p. 302). While prison sentences are punishments, they also need to utilize taxpayer dollars to provide opportunities for prisoners to increase their skill sets.

Creating an educational environment that promotes student interaction and equality is important so that inmates may begin to develop both the academic and social skills required in the modern workplace. Blinn, who conducted a study in 1995 that looked at the linkages between literacy and post release success for prison populations stated, “High risk offenders generally lack the cognitive, behavioral, and social skills necessary for success as productive members of society” (p. 146). Thus, a democratic classroom environment (or as close as possible) that promotes responsible social interaction, positive opportunities, and practical learning may help inmates develop new personas to overcome barriers of a successful transition out of incarceration and into the fabric of communities.

While building an atmosphere that fosters learning and prosocial development among an at-risk population may be critical, this task poses a serious problem for educators. Shaw and Berg (2009) noted, “There are routines to be followed [inside of jails] and continual class disruptions such as visitations from family and friends, meetings with lawyers, court appearances, and being assigned to lockdown” (p. 100). All of these conditions reinforce the notion that inmate students are prisoners—rather than students who will one day return to free-life. Moreover, when students are called out of class or cannot attend, it diminishes learning. On an individual level, inmates may often be depressed and have emotional problems stemming from being in jail that may interfere with learning (Smith & Silverman, 1994, p. 424). These disruptions are inherent in correctional facilities and their populations, and to some extent will hinder any classroom progress, regardless of teacher or curriculum.

To overcome the problems associated with correctional education, instructors and curriculum must be flexible and have the support of the correctional facility—programs only run according to the rules and regulations of the jail administration (Gendron & Cavan, 1990 p. 35).

Thus, it is absolutely necessary that jail staff are fully aware that program instructors are present and that program instructors are fully aware of jail policy. That is, students may not be able to bring hardcover books, stapled documents, or other traditional materials back to their cells for review. Often classrooms in jails have limited technology—they lack whiteboards/chalkboards—much less offer overhead projectors. Gendron and Cavan concluded that:

Finally, if a correctional-education program is to operate successfully, instructor flexibility is absolutely necessary. This flexibility includes conducting classes in non-traditional environments: make-do rooms only marginally suitable for teaching or learning, inmates' living pods with their attendant sounds and tensions, and other unusual areas never envisioned by anyone as classrooms (p. 36).

From these best practices sources, it is evident that a successful correctional education program must be learner centered and truly meet the needs of the inmates. Programs must seek to increase inmates' skills that will have both immediate and long-term benefits. Moreover, programs need to work to build participants' confidence and self-esteem to a level that will allow for productive discussions and learning of such skills. To do this, programs must seek to create equality in the classroom. These best practices will guide my classroom approach while I attempt to teach inmates writing and measure their progress throughout this study.

Related Studies

Several research studies have examined the impact of teaching broad level academic literacy (e.g., reading, grammar, and mathematics) to inmates as they exist within a prison or jail environment. Furthermore, evidence can be found of programs that provide career and life skills training (e.g., preparing a resume, mock interviews). The majority of scholarship attempts to measure general educational achievement and inmate self-esteem patterns. Although research

suggests written skills offer both short-term and long-term benefits to inmates, no literature was found that specifically studied the impact of a professional writing class.

One method to enhance both literacy and technological skills among inmates is through computer assisted learning. A 1994 study by Smith and Silverman sheds light on INVEST—a computer based educational program that aims to increase literacy, among other factors, of county jail inmates through interactive computer programs and individualized instruction. Smith and Silverman stated, “The program goals for INVEST are to increase literacy competency levels of the inmates, develop the inmates’ sense of personal motivation and satisfaction, cultivate the inmates’ desire for increased knowledge, increase the inmates’ employability, and ultimately reduce recidivism” (p. 421). The curriculum included work in math as well as in reading, grammar skills, and employability skills. A benefit of a holistic approach to learning and self-improvement is that it may impact inmates’ perception of themselves and of their actions. It may also improve inmates’ cognitive, behavioral, and social abilities that limit successful transitions to freedom and allow inmates to see themselves in roles other than offenders (Blinn, 1995, p.146; Vacca, 2004, p. 302).

To place my research into context with studies like INVEST, I will employ the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE) —a test widely used by adult basic education programs to measure students’ grade equivalents in mathematics, reading comprehension, and language arts and mechanics—the same method used by INVEST. Participants of INVEST were given a pre-TABE to indicate an initial grade equivalent and a post-TABE to indicate any changes that occurred after completing the 60 hour, six week program. The average pre-test grade equivalent of participants was 6.47. The average post-test grade equivalent was 8.87, indicating that inmates improved approximately 2.5 grade levels following the instruction (Smith & Silverman, pp. 427-

429). Whereas INVEST measured literacy outcomes after 60 hours of instruction, my study will measure these outcomes after 12 hours of instruction to see if gains are still possible.

The INVEST program further sought to measure self-esteem and self-motivation. Because self-esteem and motivation are not tangible skills that can be easily measured, my research study will draw on classroom observations to gauge student reactions to the content and format. However, to measure these levels among INVEST participants, Smith and Silverman noted:

In addition to the TABE, several other measures were used in a pretest-posttest format.

First, an index of self-esteem and an index of depression were selected because offenders are often characterized by low levels of self-esteem and high levels of depression with these conditions aggravated during incarceration. These factors are also known to affect learning (p. 424).

Indeed, a struggle for correctional educators is that many students suffer from depression because of past and present situations and thus may lack the self-confidence needed for learning and re-entry to society (Vacca, 2004, pp. 301-302). Social psychology researcher Jason Piccone (2006) noted, “The stress and depression associated with adjusting to prison life may have an effect on the cognitive abilities of offenders,” (p. 240). The measures of self-esteem from INVEST did not produce significant findings. Smith and Silverman argued, “However, it should be noted that most people who enter jail become more depressed, lose their self-esteem, and lose control of their lives. That the program participants did not regress in these areas is significant” (pp. 428-429). In other words, educational programs may allow inmates to retain a positive outlook in an otherwise negative situation.

While INVEST offered computer assisted individualized instruction, a 1994 study by Tewksbury and Vito examined the initial results of individualized instruction of inmates through a traditional classroom in a manner similar to how my study will be conducted. The *Real Opportunities Behind Bars for Employment (ROBBE)* project aimed to provide assistance to improve literacy among state and local inmates in Kentucky. Participants in project ROBBE completed six weeks of individual training prior to being post-tested. Because of the quick turnover rate of jail inmates and the need to provide academic support to these individuals, my study will adhere to six weeks of instruction as well. As a result, inmates who are not serving extended sentences will still be able to attend.

Similar to the TABE, this study used the Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System (CASAS) in a pretest - posttest method to measure student literacy outcomes. From the initial test results, ROBBE instructors designed individualized curriculum to help inmates achieve individual goals. Vacca stated, “Prison literacy programs should be inmate learner centered and designed to meet the needs of the prison culture” (p. 303). Tewksbury and Vito noted, “Specifically, it sought to sponsor the development of the skills necessary to compete in a global economy” (p. 57). Thus, project ROBBE attempted to teach transferable life skills to inmates based on their individual needs.

The findings of the study indicated that the learner centered approach was effective. Tewksbury and Vito stated, “The goal of the project was to raise the CASAS scale score by five points (this equates to one grade level) in reading and math” (pp. 57-58). Students’ posttest scores went up 13 points in reading and 10 points in math—more than the original goals of the program. Tewksbury and Vito concluded:

The early results from the ROBBE program are promising. They indicate that jail inmates can profit from individualized instruction under CASAS. Of course, the major question here is whether this improvement translates into success on the streets (p. 58).

Although project ROBBE did not provide data on the outcomes of inmates upon their release, Borden, Richardson, and Meyer (2012) contend that, “Inmates who regularly attend and complete classes while incarcerated have the potential to acquire skills that prepare them for employment, to gain a sense of accomplishment and success, to become lifelong learners, and to avoid committing further crime” (p. 7). In essence, advancing inmates’ skills may build upon their desire to improve themselves and act responsibly when released.

Project ROBBE was a collaborative effort between a department of corrections and a K-12 adult education center. Boghassion et. al. noted, “Community-academic partnerships are increasingly seen as a way to bring vital resources to the community and to underfunded state institutions” (2012, p. 1). Although local jails may not always have the financial resources to institute educational programs, they may be able to partner with local community colleges or other literacy organizations to help inmates learn to read and write. These types of partnerships may become even more important if state and federal funding for correctional education is further reduced.

Whereas project ROBBE was founded on a broad educational program, a 2009 study, *Jail participants actively study words*, by Shaw and Berg provides insight on how a local jail increased inmate literacy through the study of individual words. Shaw and Berg noted, “The purpose of this study was to engage jail participants in learning about words through an active approach known as word study” (p. 103). During this program, inmates completed a two week

course that met for two hours per day and focused on orthography (the study and understanding of words) to improve spelling patterns and overall literacy.

Shaw and Berg's study began with 44 participants with an average reading ability of an 8.5 grade level equivalency. Of those, 33 inmate students remained for post-testing, as "Some participants dropped out because they were in lock-down or they participated in another program that occurred simultaneously. Participant attrition was also due to transfer or release from the facility" (p. 105). Shaw and Berg further experienced the disruptions inherent in a correctional education program with daily attendance. They noted, "The inability to be present every day typically resulted from the various duties of participants within the context of a jail as discussed previously" (p. 109). Within correctional facilities, inmates are often court-ordered to attend alcohol and drug abuse counseling, anger management classes, and other programs relevant to their specific situation. Religious classes and parenting classes are also generally provided, and often run simultaneously with academic programs.

The design of the word study followed the framework for a successful literacy program noted by Vacca (2004). Specifically, it employed an active learning and small group approach to engage inmates in the word study and reinforce concepts for use at a later date (Shaw & Berg, p. 103; 106). Furthermore, the study focused on a practical skill (spelling) that would help inmates read and write in the short term as well as when they are released. Indeed, Shaw and Berg found "Across all inmates and groups, the participants' spelling level did improve significantly after the intervention" (p. 109). The authors found that the word study not only increased literacy, but it also positively affected 80% of the inmates' self-efficacy towards spelling and reading (p. 113). Building self-confidence in one area (reading) may build inmates' positive self-image and encourage further goal setting. Tewsbury and Vito (1994) noted, "The growth of self-esteem is a

basic tool in both the establishment and maintenance of a law abiding lifestyle” (p. 56). In essence, education programs will build specific skill sets, and improve inmates’ self-perception. Both of these factors will help inmates as they attempt to transition from incarceration to normal, productive lives.

Summary

These studies suggest that incarcerated individuals as a population are able to improve their literacy levels through correctional education programs. Edwards-Wiley and Chivers (2005) found that in both a 1993 and 2003 survey of correctional educators, inmates were thought to have equal academic ability when compared with their non-incarcerated counterparts who attended a college campus (pp. 75-76; 80). Moreover, Harlow, Jenkins, and Steurer (2010) found that, “However, in 2003, prisoners with a GED as their final educational experience scored better in reading skills than persons in the general population with the equivalent education” (p. 69). This suggests that not only are inmates capable of learning, they retain their educational experiences as well as, if not better than, the general population. Despite the obstacles associated with teaching in corrections such as a lack of time, materials, and individual inmate issues, inmate students do learn.

Education may offer a possible means to begin decreasing the number of released inmates who factor into the recidivism statistics. Vacca noted, “When inmates do not return to prison, the correctional education programs produce a national savings of hundreds of millions of dollars per year,” (p. 299). From these studies, it is evident that successful programs have several factors in common: they are learner centered, they promote discussion and reflection, they build confidence and self-esteem, and they focus on teaching inmates practical and usable skills. My research will attempt to follow a similar model—it will aim to be learner centered and promote

active discussion of course material and content. To measure the outcomes, it will utilize the pretest – posttest method used by the INVEST program and project ROBBE. This model will further be utilized in regards to writing samples.

Although educational programs have provided positive immediate outcomes for inmates, limited data can be found that monitors inmates' post release success after completing an educational program while incarcerated. Such studies may be difficult to conduct for multiple reasons. In addition, while studies do focus on literacy, employability skills, and reading abilities broadly, few studies describe the impact of teaching a specific skill such as writing as a means to improve both literacy and employability skills. The remainder of this paper will describe a study that investigates the use of professional communication skills to improve inmates' written literacy.

Chapter III: Methodologies

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine the impact that an instructor-led writing class would have on the written literacy of county jail inmates. Specifically, this case study examined participants' ability to analyze audiences, improve writing clarity, and apply knowledge of grammar rules before and after completing a writing class. This case study followed a constructivist paradigm that maintained the notion that individuals create meaning from their surroundings, peers, and the world in which they exist. I sought to understand how a specific social group (jail inmates) would learn within a specific context (county jail). Overall, this project followed the observation of J. Hatch (2002) that, "For qualitative researchers, the lived experiences of real people in real settings are the objects of study," (p. 6). Thus, this research examined the written literacy experience of real inmates, as they existed in a county jail. To do so, participants from this social group were encouraged to be actively involved in a writing curriculum to enhance their writing skills. Furthermore, students were encouraged to participate in class discussions to challenge concepts being covered and reflect upon how the content may be useful in life inside and outside of incarceration.

Research Questions

To guide my study, I formulated three research questions related to the educational experiences of inmates at this Wisconsin jail. The first question will attempt to place the educational attainment levels among the entire population of inmates at this county jail into perspective with other populations. Question two will answer whether or not the specific inmates who participated in my writing class benefited from the instruction and question three will illustrate the factors that may limit the ability of inmates to learn within a jail. The research questions I will attempt to answer are as follows:

1. What percent of this jail's inmates have a high school diploma or its equivalent and how does this compare with other populations?
2. Will teaching audience awareness/analysis, clear writing, and rules of grammar over a 12 hour period improve inmates' written literacy?
3. What challenges do instructors face when teaching in a correctional facility?

Participants

Enrollment for participation in this research project was open to all inmates on a voluntary basis. In total, 24 students signed up to participate (14 were males and 10 were females). Of the original 24 students who signed up, 12 inmate students, (8 males and 4 females) completed the full 12 hours of instruction required by this study. The academic makeup of the 12 inmate students who did complete the class was as follows: five had no high school diploma or its equivalent, four had a high school diploma or its equivalent, and three had some post-secondary education. Participants who did complete all of the training attended a total of six, two-hour writing classes. Over the six class periods, students received four hours of instruction in each of the three areas of the curriculum: audience analysis, sentence structure, (e.g., subject verb agreement) and the basics of punctuation—skills necessary to successfully complete workplace or academic writing tasks.

Context

This qualitative case study took place at a county jail in Wisconsin. Six class sections (12 hours each) were offered to inmates from September 2012 – February 2013. The length of class sections was determined by the relatively short sentences characteristic of inmates within the jail. Whereas a state or federal prison houses long-term, convicted inmates, this county jail housed

approximately 300 inmates who were typically awaiting trial, or who were serving sentences of less than one year for minor offenses.

Because many community organizations (e.g., schools, churches, AA etc.) provided programming to help the inmates at this jail, I relied heavily on the program coordinator to schedule classroom time for this research project. Once classroom space was reserved, students voluntarily signed up on sheets placed in their cell blocks by the program coordinator. The program coordinator then reviewed the lists from the different cell blocks to make sure that there were not any “no contact” inmates signed up for the same section. Class size was limited to eight students or less, although no more than seven inmates ever signed up for a section.

The first two sections of this class were conducted one night per week for six weeks allowing the first two hours for female students, and the second two hours for male students (male and female inmates were not allowed to attend programs together). Sections three and four followed the same format during the next six weeks. Sections five and six, however, due to jail and facilitator scheduling issues, met on separate days of the week and were male only due to low enrollment of female participants. Initial enrollment for each section typically ranged from three to seven students.

The classroom in which this research project took place contained nothing but several rectangular tables large enough to seat two students and a few unreliable computers. Before the corrections officers brought down the participants for each class, I arranged the room to optimize student-to-student and student-to-teacher interaction and to minimize any formal authoritative perceptions students may have held regarding a traditional classroom. To do so, I placed three of the tables into a square, seating inmates on three sides while I occupied the fourth side of the square facing the exit. Such an arrangement promoted adequate personal space and allowed me

to see all students and the door. Furthermore, while I led discussions and activities, the less formal arrangement created a sense of equality and respect among students and the instructor providing each student a chance to speak and to be listened to.

Data Collection Procedures

Over the course of this research project, four data collection methods were employed to measure student literacy outcomes throughout the learning process. The four methods employed in this case study included: 1) a general survey of inmate educational achievement, 2) completion of the Test of Adult Basic Education, 3) artifact analysis, and 4) observations. This data was examined both individually and holistically to determine the overall literacy of inmates within this jail and to determine if teaching writing techniques to inmates would improve their ability to compose written documents and their TABE scores.

Survey. To measure the educational attainment levels of the inmates at this jail, a survey was distributed by the program coordinator to the entire jail population. Of the 300 surveys distributed throughout the cell blocks, 104 usable surveys (35 %) were completed and returned to the program coordinator by inmates. The survey questions included:

- What is the highest grade level you have completed?
- Do you have a high school diploma, GED, or HSED?
- What is the highest credential you have received?

For each question, students indicated the appropriate answer from a list of options. Because this county jail does not collect this type of data, the findings of this survey will shed light on the overall educational attainment of a county jail located in Wisconsin. From this data it will be evident if there were academic variations between the inmate population and the general population within this local community and within the U.S. Lastly, this survey will place these

inmates into perspective with other local jails and state and federal prisons that do maintain academic information on prisoners.

Tests. To provide research data related to participants' grade equivalency levels, I asked each student to complete a pre-TABE before completing the coursework and a post-TABE after completing the coursework. The variations between these two tests will indicate whether participants increased grade levels, decreased grade levels, or remained neutral after completing the curriculum. The TABE is a federally recognized assessment used by technical colleges, high schools, job placement departments, and other organizations to determine the grade equivalent of the participant. It gauges grade equivalents from 0-12.9—the 12 years of education that most high school graduates complete.

The language portion of the TABE used in this study included content in the following areas and indicated which area students missed questions in.

1. Language Usage (nouns, pronouns, subject-verb agreement)
2. Sentence Formation (complete sentences, sentence clarity, parallel structure)
3. Paragraph Development (main ideas, topic sentence, support)
4. Capitalization (proper nouns and adjectives, titles, abbreviations)
5. Punctuation (end marks, commas, semicolons)
6. Writing Conventions (quotes, apostrophes, business letters)

While the TABE does measure six areas of writing, the focus of the class content was most relevant to usage, sentence formation, and punctuation. This test does not include a section to measure audience analysis. The TABE is a timed test, with 25 questions to be completed in 25 minutes. The post-TABE consisted of different questions than the pre-TABE, but the level of difficulty remained constant. This was done to help ensure that the participants' answers were

based on their learned knowledge, rather than based on memorization of the pre-TABE questions.

Artifact Analysis. Student-inmates in each section were asked to complete an initial writing sample during the first class period. All of the students responded to the exact same writing prompt, (an interview style question) and were allowed to write as much or as little as desired. Because of the limited technology available, participants' responses were handwritten. I then transcribed these responses into Microsoft Word exactly as they were written for analysis. Using the Flesch-Kincaid analytics tool provided by Microsoft Word, I was able to determine the written grade level equivalency of students' papers for comparison with the TABE findings. The Flesch-Kincaid grade level is found through a formula that analyzes the average sentence length and average number of syllables per word within a document $(.39 \times \text{ASL}) + (11.8 \times \text{ASW}) - 15.9$.

To provide a perspective of participants' writing beyond a computer generated assessment, I further analyzed each initial document for student consideration of their audience (word choice), use of clear writing techniques (subject-verb agreement, complete sentences, etc.), and their ability to apply correct punctuation. This allowed me to examine the specific elements of writing that were taught in the curriculum, rather than rely solely on the Flesch-Kincaid formula. Errors were noted for each student and were recorded into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet for review.

After participants completed the class curriculum, they were asked to complete a post-writing sample. I then critiqued the participants' second writing samples using the Flesch-Kincaid analytics tool and the same method to critique for word choice, sentence clarity, and

punctuation. By comparing the pre and post writing samples, I will be able to identify whether or not the curriculum improved inmates' written literacy overall.

Observations. As a means to understand the overall environment in which this study took place, I observed the inmates' reaction to the curriculum as it was delivered in the jail classroom. In addition, I noted what they hoped the new skills would allow for in their present state of being and how they thought these skills would be useful upon their release. Beyond observing specifics about the curriculum, I also noted student attendance and the various reasons why inmates attended or quit the class. Lastly, I observed factors such as emotions and stress that inmate students shared with me and that were the result of living in a jail environment. Such emotional disruptions were noted as they may have had an impact on the ability of an inmate to comprehend and learn the content.

Summary of Data Collection Procedures

This study employed multiple data collection procedures to help provide the most accurate illustration of the participants' literacy outcomes. Through the triangulation of these data sources, I will provide a holistic view of the participants' educational experiences in Chapter four. Indeed, not only will it be evident whether students improved on a multiple choice test, but also if they improved their ability to compose written documents. Moreover, my observations will help determine if the atmosphere of a correctional educational facility had an impact on these results. In essence, rather than rely solely on one measure, I was able to ensure the credibility of my findings by drawing on multiple data sources.

Limitations

Perhaps the greatest limitation of this investigation was the relatively small sample size that the results were based on. From previous experience working with incarcerated populations,

I realized that consistent participation among inmates would be difficult because of the transient nature of an incarcerated population. Furthermore, literature noted previously described the obstacles of constant county jail inmate participation compared to state and federal prisoner participation. This was an issue that will likely plague any research study or class taking place within a local jail environment.

Another limitation of this case study was the duration of instruction that participants received. However, the length of the class may also be one of its strengths. Although 12 hours is short when compared with a traditional academic class (typically 54 hours), a jail is not a typical educational facility. Because of the short sentences of most local jail inmates, classes must be short enough to allow inmates to complete the programming within the time frame that they are incarcerated. If not, then inmates may be ill prepared for their transition back into society.

While this study does attempt to prepare inmates for release, it does not incorporate methods to measure the success of that transition. In essence, the methods used to measure student success do so only within the jail. They do not provide insight on whether these outcomes translate into post-release success. Few data are available that do measure post-release success, in-part because it is difficult to monitor individuals upon their release, and in-part because such a study would need to take place over a several year period—and even then a former inmate may re-offend after completion of the study.

One further limitation of this study was that it depended on my ability to deliver the writing curriculum in an effective manner. Moreover, the outcomes of this case study are specific to my instructional style based on my experience and history as a GED/HSED correctional educator, and as a remedial writing instructor at a technical college. Therefore, the results of

future writing classes led by different instructors with different experiences and educational history may vary.

Chapter IV: Findings

Overall, findings from the data collection measures indicated positive participant outcomes after completing a 12 hour, six week writing class while incarcerated. Results from the survey suggested that this specific jail population had a higher level of education when compared with other similar institutions. Data from the TABE and the Flesch-Kincaid analytics tool supported that students did improve their written grade level equivalencies. However, in examining participants' writing samples for word choice, sentence clarity, and punctuation, I found that their error rate did increase on the post-writing sample. Possible reasons for this increased error rate will be discussed in the Artifact Analysis section of this chapter. Evidence from my observations shed light on both positive feedback from students, and on the negative, but inherent, aspects of correctional education programs.

Survey

Prior to holding class sections, the program coordinator delivered a paper survey to the 300 inmates at this facility. Of the surveys that were submitted, 104 usable responses were returned to the program coordinator. From these surveys, it was found that a significantly higher proportion of inmates had attained a high school diploma or equivalent when compared with incarcerated populations nationally. Specifically, 15% of inmates who returned the survey indicated that they had not completed a high school diploma or its equivalent. Nationally, however, 46% of local jail inmates lack this credential. In other words, 85% of the reporting population at this facility had a high school level of education, whereas 54% of local jail inmates have earned this credential nationally. This indicates that 31% more inmates at this local jail hold a high school credential when compared to the national average.

The following statistics represent the educational attainment level of this specific county jail. Of the 85% of respondents who reported having a high school diploma or its equivalent, 20% had earned a GED or HSED, 16% had earned a high school diploma, 34% reported having some college, 7% had earned an associate's degree, and 8% had earned a bachelor's degree or higher. Overall, these statistics indicate that these inmates have higher educational attainment levels compared to other jail populations. Despite this fact, these individuals were still incarcerated—or earned their credential while serving time. This suggests that inmates may need more than a high school level of education to participate in society. Because the majority of inmates within this jail already hold a high school level of education, they will benefit from classes that teach specific, transferable skills sets, rather than attending basic skills lab sessions designed for GED students.

Although inmates within this jail had higher educational achievements when compared with other jails, they were less educated than the general population, both nationally and locally. Indeed, nationally, 87.1% of the general population (non-incarcerated) reported having earned a high school diploma or its equivalent (U.S. Census, 2010). At the local level, 88.8% of the population in the Wisconsin county where this jail is housed reported having a high school diploma or its equivalent (U.S. Census, 2012). These statistics indicate that the inmates within this jail represent a demographic with a negative 2% variation from the U.S. population and a negative 4% variation from this Wisconsin community's population in terms of having completed a high school level credential.

A significant difference, however, between this county jail and the national and local free populations was the attainment of a bachelor's degree or higher. That is, while 8% of this incarcerated population had earned a bachelor's degree or higher, 30% of the U.S. citizenry had

earned a bachelor's degree or higher, and nearly 22% of this Wisconsin county's population had earned a bachelor's degree or higher (U.S. Census 2010; 2012). Thus, in general, while this county jail represents a well educated population in terms of the attainment of a high school diploma, it had significantly fewer individuals who earned a bachelor's degree or higher compared with both national and local statistics (See table 1). The fact that a significantly higher percent of the general population holds college level degrees supports the notion that inmates may need skills beyond that of a high school equivalency to compete for jobs or to enter into post-secondary education upon their release.

Table 1

Educational Attainment among Study Participants and the General Population

Educational attainment	Study Participants	General population of people 25 years and older (U.S. Census 2010)
No high school diploma or equivalent	15%	12.90%
GED/HSED	20%	
High school diploma	16%	31.20%
Some college	34%	16.80%
Associate degree	7%	9.10%
Bachelor degree or higher	8%	29.90%

TABE

To determine one aspect of the participant's written literacy (ability to recognize grammatically accurate forms of writing in a multiple choice format) a pre and post TABE in

language skills was administered. The results from the pre-test were then compared against the results of the post-test. Overall, these test scores indicated that students did increase the number of questions answered correctly. Consequently, they increased their grade equivalencies after completing the twelve hours of writing instruction.

Grade Equivalency. Nine out of twelve students either increased their TABE scores or remained consistent. The overall mean grade equivalency of the pre-test scores was 9.2 and the mean grade equivalency of the post-test scores was 9.8. This indicates that the curriculum positively impacted the participants' overall grade level by 0.6 grades. This variation in the scores represents six participants in this study who raised their grade level, three participants that remained at a constant grade level, and three participants who scored lower on their post-test. The average initial grade level of 9.2 (high school level) among all twelve participants represents a participant population that was at a high school educational level.

The mean grade level change of the six students who did improve was an increase of 1.05 grade levels, which would allow students to move from an 8th grade (pre-high school) to a 9th grade (high school) level. In doing so, it would prepare students for high school level coursework required of GED writing programs. In addition, for students who entered the program at the 10th or 11th grade level, this curriculum would prepare those students for college level writing requirements attained by typical high school students. Indeed, the most notable increases occurred among three students who raised their grade level from a 9.7 to a 12.9.

Three participants remained at the same grade level on the post-test. Of these, two scored at the 12th grade level initially, and thus could not earn a higher grade equivalency. The other student scored at the 5th grade level on each test. It should be noted that one of the students who scored at the 12th grade level did answer more questions correctly on the post-test—the other two

participants scored exactly the same number of answers correct. Therefore, seven out of the 12 students answered more questions correctly on the post-test. Whereas two students initially attained a 12th grade writing level, five students reached this achievement by the end of 12 hours.

At the same time, three participants did score lower on the post-test. Overall, their scores decreased by a mean of 1.8 grade levels. This is a significant decrease—the most apparent student score decreased from a 10.7 grade equivalent to a 6.3 grade equivalent (See Table 2). Several factors inherent of a correctional education program may have contributed to this decrease in test performance. These factors will be discussed in the observations section of the findings.

Table 2

Pre-Test and Post-Test Scores of County Jail Inmates

Participants	Pre-Test Grade Equivalent	Post-Test Grade Equivalent	Grade Change (+) (-)
Student 1	20/25 = 9.7	23/25 = 12.9	(+) 3.2
Student 2	24/25 = 12.9	25/25 = 12.9	No variation
Student 3	20/25 = 9.7	21/25 = 10.7	(+) 1
Student 4	18/25 = 7.4	19/25 = 8.4	(+) 1
Student 5	16/25 = 5.6	16/25 = 5.6	No variation
Student 6	14/25 = 4.2	13/25 = 3.5	(-) 0.2
Student 7	20/25 = 9.7	23/25 = 12.9	(+) 3.2
Student 8	23/25 = 12.9	25/25 = 12.9	No variation
Student 9	17/25 = 6.3	19/25 = 8.4	(+) 2.1
Student 10	21/25 = 10.7	23/25 = 12.9	(+) 2.2
Student 11	21/25 = 10.7	17/25 = 6.3	(-) 4.4
Student 12	21/25 = 10.7	20/25 = 9.7	(-) 1

Diagnostics. Beyond data pertaining to grade equivalents, the TABE also provided diagnostic information that indicated the exact areas of writing that students struggled with. The pre-test scores indicated that the twelve participants missed a collective total of 65 out of 300 problems. This data further revealed that students missed problems in the areas of language usage, sentence formation, paragraph development, capitalization, punctuation, and writing conventions. Participants missed the most questions in usage (18), punctuation (12), sentence formation (11), and writing conventions (11). Slightly fewer incorrect answers occurred in

capitalization (7), and paragraph development (6). It should be noted that although the TABE measures capitalization and paragraph development, these aspects of writing were not covered in the course curriculum.

Participants' post-test scores revealed that the total number of missed answers across all participants decreased from 65 to 57. Language usage and punctuation problems remained the most difficult areas for students. However, scores dropped from 18 incorrect usage problems to 12 missed usage problems. Scores in punctuation remained constant at 12 incorrect answers. A decrease in the number of problems students answered incorrectly also occurred in sentence formation (5) and writing conventions (9). Conversely, students missed an increased number of questions in capitalization and paragraph development. Thus, this curriculum proved most effective in teaching sentence-level content and sentence formation (See Figure 1).

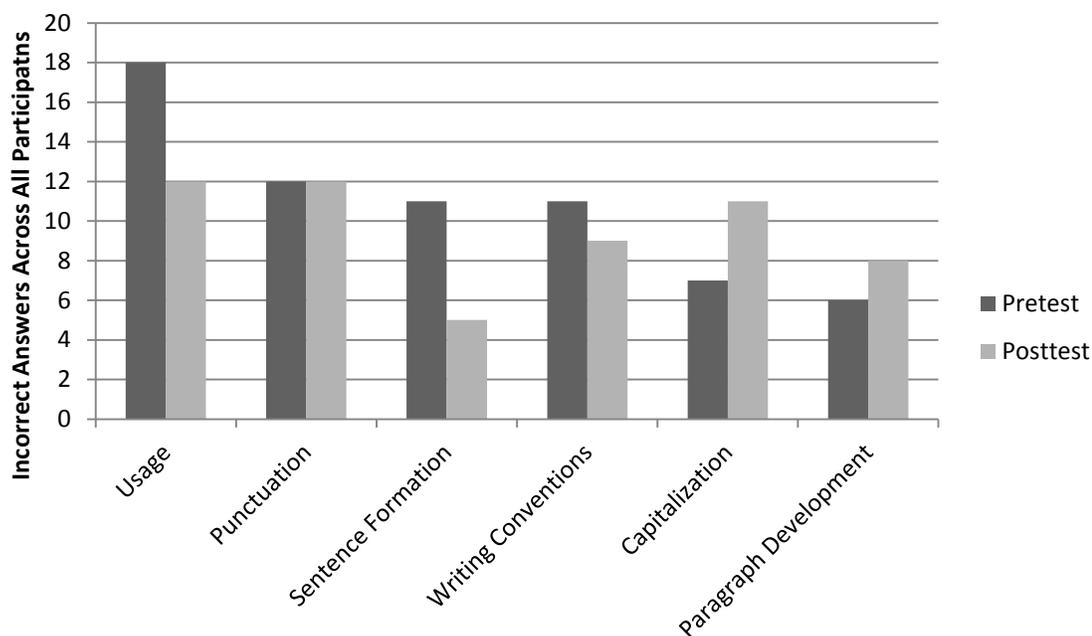


Figure 1: Incorrect pre-test and post-test answers .

Summary of TABE Findings. Overall, data from the TABE suggested that students who completed the 12 hours of instruction improved their grade equivalencies. While three students did perform worse on the post-test, the majority of students did benefit. Moreover, it revealed that students did improve their ability to recognize proper subject verb agreement, noun and pronoun usage, and sentence formation. Indeed, a primary aspect of the instruction was to increase students' ability to write clearly through the use of proper grammar and complete sentences. Although students did score lower in the areas of capitalization and paragraph development, these were not areas of focus during instruction.

While a multiple choice test is one method to determine an individual's written grade equivalency, it is also necessary that students be able to go beyond recognizing correct writing and apply such skills in crafting their own written documents. Whereas a student may be excellent at taking a test, she or he may struggle with writing, and vice versa. As a result, it is necessary to examine the students' pre-writing samples compared with their post-writing samples.

Artifact Analysis

To determine if students' ability to consider their audience, write clearly, and apply rules of grammar and punctuation to written documents improved during the twelve hours of instruction, students prepared a pre-writing sample and a post-writing sample. This data was used in concert with the TABE to help determine if students improved overall, rather than solely on a multiple choice test. The comparisons of the writing samples using the Flesch-Kincaid software suggested that participants did raise their grade levels on the second writing sample. This grade level increase was based on an increase of the average sentence length and the average number of syllables used per word among participants. However, a more specific

analysis of students' ability to use correct word choice, write clear sentences, and apply rules of grammar and punctuation within their documents indicated an increased error rate (total number of errors divided by total number of words) of 1% on the post-writing sample. Although the Flesch-Kincaid software found that participants' writing samples were written in a more sophisticated manner, specific errors occurred more frequently.

Grade Equivalency. Using the Flesch-Kincaid grade level software provided by Microsoft Office Word 2010, I found that participants prepared their initial writing samples at a mean grade level of 7.2 and their second writing samples at a mean grade level of 8.7. While these grade levels are lower than the grade levels indicated by the TABE (9.2 – 9.8), the mean grade increase of 1.5 levels is a larger increase than data revealed by the TABE. This increase represents seven participants who improved their grade level on the post-writing sample, and five students who had a decreased grade level on their post-writing sample. Unlike the TABE findings, no student scored at the same grade level on both writing samples.

The largest decrease was a participant who scored initially at a 9.7 grade level, followed by a 6.8 grade level. Of the five students who decreased grade levels, three were the same students who decreased grade levels on their post-TABE. Furthermore, one student who decreased a grade level on the writing sample had remained at a consistent level on the TABE. One student who scored lower on the post-writing sample did increase his or her score on the post-TABE. Thus, students who performed poorly on the second TABE also performed poorly on the second writing sample (See table 3).

Table 3

Grade Level Comparison of Pre-Writing and Post-Writing Samples

Participants	Pre Writing Sample	Post Writing Sample	Grade Level Variation
Student 1	4.1	7.5	(+)3.5
Student 2	7	10.8	(+)3.8
Student 3	6.7	9.9	(+)3.2
Student 4	4	15	(+)11
Student 5	8.1	5.7	(-)2.6
Student 6	6.1	4.5	(-)1.6
Student 7	6.4	8.5	(+)2.1
Student 8	9.3	11.1	(+)1.8
Student 9	6.8	11	(+)3.8
Student 10	9.9	8	(-)1.9
Student 11	9.7	6.8	(-) 2.9
Student 12	7.8	6.1	(-)1.7

Diagnosics. In addition to analyzing the grade level of participants' writing samples, I critiqued each writing sample for consideration of audience, clarity, and punctuation. The pre-writing samples of the participants were comprised of a collective total of 3,448 words, or an average of 287 words per student. Within these texts, a collective total of 170 errors were found. This equates to an error rate per writing sample of 5% or 5 errors per 100 words of text (170 divided by 3448). Of these 170 errors, 17 were words identified as not appropriate for academic or workplace writing, 88 were sentence clarity issues, and 65 were punctuation errors. This data

supports the TABE findings that students missed the most problems in sentence level language usage, followed by punctuation. The least problematic area for students was consideration of their audience. In general, students utilized acceptable academic and workplace communication language suitable for a large audience. The most common word choice errors were colloquialisms such as “gonna” or “wanna.”

Participants post-writing samples revealed that students wrote a collective total of 1595 words or 133 per student—or 46% fewer words than the pre-writing sample. A total of 99 errors were found, indicating an error rate of 6% per student (6 errors per 100 words). Of these 99 errors, 12 were words identified as being inappropriate for academic or workplace writing, 59 were sentence clarity issues, and 28 were punctuation errors. This suggests that the highest level of errors remained in the area of sentence clarity followed by punctuation. The only area that students showed a decreased error rate was in punctuation (See figure 2).

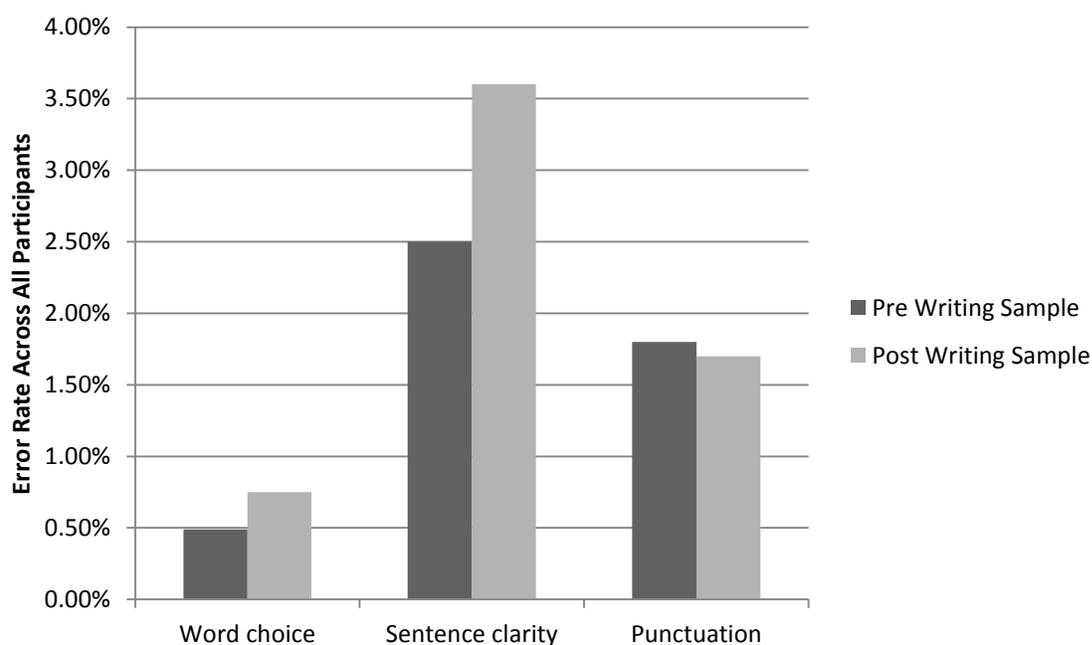


Figure 2: Percent error rate of pre-writing and post-writing samples.

One factor that may have resulted in the increased error rate among post-writing samples was the performance of a specific student. Student 11, who scored at a lower grade level equivalency using both the TABE and Flesch-Kincaid measurements, composed 874 words with 31 errors to complete the pre-writing sample. This equates to an error rate of 3.5%. This student composed a significantly fewer 121 words with ten errors to complete the post writing sample. This equates to an error rate of 8%. The large number of words and low error rate on this participant's first writing sample compared with the low number of words and high level of errors on this student's second writing sample may have impacted the overall results. In essence, this student performed at a lower level using all three measurement tools after completing the class.

Students such as this one may have had personal problems that occurred after their first TABE and writing sample that impacted their ability to learn the content throughout the class. Furthermore, if a significant event (court date, visitation, fight, etc.) impacted the life of such a participant on the day that the post-TABE or post-writing sample was administered, she or he may not have been able to concentrate or put forth the same level of effort that was used on the initial writing sample or test. These types of variables do exist, and may have had an impact on student performance.

Summary of artifact analysis. Data from participants' writing samples indicated that students wrote at much greater length while composing their initial writing samples compared to their post writing samples. While this is not a positive or negative finding, it does suggest that students eliminated unnecessary words to create more direct and concise documents. Participants' grade equivalents did increase overall—seven students performed at a higher grade level on the post-writing sample—five students scored lower. When comparing these grade

levels with the TABE findings, the students who performed poorly on the post-TABE also performed poorly on the post-writing sample.

Beyond grade level analysis, participants' individual error rate did increase on the post-writing sample. Errors were most abundant in the areas of sentence clarity and punctuation in both the pre and post-writing samples. Word choice problems did exist, but were not prevalent. The fact that the majority of errors occurred in sentence clarity and punctuation affirms the TABE results which found that students struggled significantly with language usage, sentence formation, and punctuation. However, students' error rate in punctuation specifically did decrease.

Observations

Throughout each six week class section, I noted both positive and negative examples of teaching within a local jail setting. The positive observations were typically the result of participants providing me with direct feedback regarding a topic we were learning about or the atmosphere of the classroom. Negative observations were comprised of individual student comments and actions, and they illustrate some of the inherent problems of a correctional facility. In both cases, the goal of this section is to provide an illustration of county jail inmates within the context of their daily living environment as they participated in this correctional education program.

Inmate feedback frequently indicated that participants enjoyed the environment of the small and respectful class atmosphere. One student commented that it was so nice to escape the other noise and irritations of the cell block—to come to a class and actually be able to think and learn in a small group. Another student stated, “It’s so much more quiet and peaceful here than back in the blocks.” Part of what encouraged retention among students who did complete the

research study was the atmosphere within the classroom that promoted learning. On one occasion, a participant looked up during a discussion regarding comma usage and stated, “I actually learned something here today—wow.”

Participants also stated that the class content would be useful both immediately and in the future. One student stated that she had very poor writing and reading skills, and that she hoped this class would allow her to more effectively write letters. Another student commented that, “We can take what we learned here, what you offered us, and run with it when get released from this place.” The notion that inmates were able to connect the class content with immediate and future opportunities was encouraging as this is an attribute of a successful correctional education program. More than one student asked if there would be additional classes like this one in the future.

Although participants generally seemed to enjoy the class content, 50% of students who did sign up were not able to complete all 12 hours of class. Attrition was a negative impact of teaching within a local jail and was typically the result of circumstances outside of an inmate’s control such as a transfer to a different facility, an early release, or a mandatory court date. In other cases, I arrived to class with my list of students only to hear a corrections officer state that a student was in “lock down” for the night or had lost their program privileges entirely for committing a violation of jail policy. One student, so I was told, ceased to attend class because she or he was emotionally troubled as a result of a court hearing not going as expected.

Emotional distress is inherent among an incarcerated population and was evident among the participants in this research study. Although only one student reportedly ceased attendance because of emotional distress, other students orally noted being “stressed”, “pissed-off”, and “tired” during class. On one occasion, a typically hard working and on task student arrived in

class, sat down, and stated that he never received his mail and that his child's picture was in that mail. He was angry that another inmate, perhaps a pedophile within the jail, may have accidentally received his mail. Visibly agitated, he continually asked me and the other inmates what we thought of the situation—what we thought of the jail—limiting the quality of focus during the discussion and inhibiting overall learning for everyone during that class period.

During a separate section of class, we overheard an inmate talking with his or her child in the visitation room adjacent to the classroom. We could not make out the conversation specifically, but we could hear laughter. As a result, an inmate broke down to tears, suddenly, and began crying in class. The other students in the class immediately began to console the crying inmate. This situation escalated to a general discussion of visitations among the inmates which lasted for approximately 15 minutes. Once again, participants asked for my opinion of the jail policies and procedures. Consequently, students, for the remainder of the session, were more focused on their own visitations or lack thereof than they were on writing.

Examples such as these were not avoidable and affected the ability of a specific student to concentrate in class. Perhaps more importantly, such disruptions negatively impacted the class as a whole and affected the learning of multiple inmates. Additionally, when participants were upset, they expected that I, as the instructor, would take their side, and provide my opinion and advice in support of their situation. Not only did these instances disrupt learning, they also created awkward, volatile situations for me to deal with. In some cases these situations limited my ability as a teacher to focus on the lesson plan and to transfer my knowledge to the students due to concerns of safety rather than class content.

Summary

These findings imply that participants in this study improved their grade level equivalencies based on both a multiple choice test and through their written texts. Conversely, participants' error rate on the post writing sample did increase. Participants also seemed to enjoy the structure of the class as well as the content and environment. However, limitations to student participation and learning resulted from this research study taking place within the walls of a correctional facility. These limitations were unavoidable, and classes must be flexible enough to still allow for learning among a majority of interested inmates.

Chapter V: Discussion

This study sought to answer three research questions relevant to the education and literacy of local jail inmates. To answer these questions, 104 surveys were evaluated, 12 participants' pre and post-TABE scores and writing samples were analyzed, and classroom observations were noted. The research questions that guided this research were as follows:

1. What percent of this jail's inmates have a high school diploma or its equivalent and how does this compare with other populations?
2. Will teaching audience awareness/analysis, clear writing, and rules of grammar over a 12 hour period improve inmates' written literacy?
3. What challenges do instructors face when teaching in a correctional facility?

Limitations

The conclusions reached during this study were based on a small and specific group of participants. Therefore, if this research was conducted in an environment different from that of another local county jail, the results may differ based on the demographic of the participants and the environment of the research location. While students did prepare their tests and writing samples under my supervision, there was no guarantee that the survey forms were filled out honestly. Moreover, only 35% of the jail population returned the survey, and thus the results of the survey instrument may not provide a complete illustration of the educational attainment levels among inmates at this local jail.

Conclusions

Education is an important necessity for participation in modern day society. Without an education, individuals will have difficulty finding or maintaining employment in an increasingly competitive workforce. Beyond the need for a high school diploma, individuals need to have

transferable skills that will allow them to communicate within the organization they work for or to succeed in post-secondary training. Jane Campanizzi (2005) noted, “Few skills are more powerful or influential in an organization than effective writing” (p. 45). If recently released inmates cannot transfer information effectively through written mediums, they may find that their prospective goals are hard to achieve.

At-risk individuals, such as those recently released from a correctional institution, are already disadvantaged in that they have a criminal record. If former inmates are to have any chance of success in the workforce or in continuing their education, they will need to be able to write clearly. A 2004 study conducted by the National Commission on Writing found that, “People who cannot write and communicate clearly will not be hired and are unlikely to last long enough to be considered promotional” (p. 5). Indeed, if inmates are released back into communities without an education and with limited communication skills, they will find it difficult to compete with their non-criminal counterparts, much less be promoted if they are hired. Consequently, inmates without an education—without the ability to write effectively—are more likely to return to criminal behaviors.

Research question 1: What percent of county jail inmates have a high school diploma or its equivalent and how does this compare with other populations?

From the analysis of the survey instrument, it was found that the local jail population of this study had a significantly higher rate of high school diploma attainment (85%) when compared with other jails and state and federal correctional institutions. At the same time, these inmates were still incarcerated—despite having earned a high school diploma. This population reported lower attainment levels of a high school credential than the national (non-incarcerated) population, as well as the local community population in which it was housed—however, the

difference was within a 4% margin. Thus, individuals in this jail were more educated than other inmates, but slightly less educated than those individuals who were not incarcerated.

A larger contrast in educational gaps was found when comparing this population's attainment of a bachelor's degree with the general population. While only 8% of reporting inmates at this jail had earned a bachelor's degree, 22% of the local population and 30% of the national population held this degree. This may indicate that inmates need more than basic, high school level skills to be competitive in the job market or in academics upon their release. That is, correctional educator, Johannes Wheeldon (2011) stated,

It may be that simple skills in math, reading and writing may no longer be enough by themselves for incarcerated individuals to succeed post release. Postsecondary level skills offer a means to both improved employment outcomes and assist the formerly incarcerated to manage the challenges associated with reintegration (pp. 95-96).

People who earn a post-secondary degree are less likely to be incarcerated within a county jail in central Wisconsin and in the U.S. in general. As a result, educational programs within jails may need to consider offering not only high school training, but college level course work as well.

At local jails, however, it is often not practical to provide the post-secondary options available to state and federal prison inmates because of the short sentences and high turn-over rate. At the same time, these are skills necessary for workplace and academic competitiveness in modern society. An alternative to offering timely, credit bearing classes at local jails is to offer short, but specific classes that build specific skill sets related to workplace and academic success including writing. In so doing, inmates will be better equipped to enter either secondary GED education programs or post-secondary education.

More than prepare inmates with skills for post release circumstances, local jails may be able to partner with local community colleges to create pathways to postsecondary institutions for inmates to follow. Borden, Richardson, and Meyer (2012) found that, “Time and time again we documented students and staff saying that having postsecondary academic programs in place motivated secondary students to obtain a high school diploma or equivalent in pursuit of higher education” (p. 16). Interested inmates could be provided with opportunities to meet with an enrollment advisor before their release to discuss possible courses of study, financial aid, and the demands of college. This would not only help students realize different post-release possibilities, but it would also provide the inmate population with a contact at the college to help with the anxiety of transitioning from a life of incarceration to assimilating into an academic culture.

Linking inmates with the appropriate personnel at a college is a way to promote successful reentry. Borden, Richardson, and Meyer noted, “Furthermore, most students are unprepared to navigate the complex maze of agencies, departments, credits, and certifications offenders encounter to reach employment and continuing education” (p. 16). Inmates could also be granted Huber privileges to take any required entrance exams—or these exams could be offered within the correctional facility. As a result, inmates would be ready to enter college—either directly into a program or into remedial classes—immediately upon their release. By eliminating these types of hurdles, inmates may be able to quickly immerse themselves into college, rather than return to crime. Although investing in these types of initiatives requires a financial investment, the broad rewards of reduced recidivism, the opportunity to help individuals economically and personally, and the fact that such initial costs will likely result in increased student enrollment, outweigh start-up costs.

Research question 2: Will teaching audience awareness/analysis, clear writing, and rules of grammar over a 12 hour period improve inmates' written literacy?

Because writing is a crucial skill for academic and workplace success, even modest gains in inmates' ability to compose written texts will benefit them as they transition into college programs or as they attempt to prepare workplace correspondence. Kellogg and Whiteford (2009) argued, "Effective writing skills are central in both higher education and in the world of work that follows" (p. 250). Data from the TABE indicated that inmates participating in this research study had an initial grade level equivalency of 9.2 which improved to grade level equivalency of 9.8 following the 12 hours of instruction. Data from the writing samples provided a slightly lower grade level among participants, although the gains were larger. Indeed, initial writing samples were prepared at a 7.2 grade level, and writing samples composed at the end of the course were prepared at an 8.7 grade level.

The average grade increase among participants based on both of these measures is slightly larger than one grade level—a significant increase for a 12 hour class (the goal of project ROBBE was an increase of one grade level). Such an increase will allow inmates to realize that they are capable of learning, and that they are capable of self-improvement. This will not only allow inmates to improve academically, but also personally, perhaps encouraging inmates to see themselves as learners, rather than as offenders. Changes in attitude and self-esteem among inmates will benefit not only inmates, but the correctional institution at large, as well as the communities that these inmates are released into.

Like similar studies that measured inmate literacy gains (Shaw & Berg, 2009; Smith & Silverman 1994; Tewksbury & Vito 1994) participants who completed this class did make modest gains. While there was a 1% increase among participants' second writing sample, their

ability to answer language arts test questions and prepare written documents at a higher grade level both improved. These skills are necessary for post-secondary academic success, and the latter is crucial for gaining and maintaining a job or career. The National Commission on Writing found that, “86 percent of responding companies report they would hold poorly written application materials against a job candidate, either ‘frequently’ or ‘almost always’” (2004, p. 10). Because students did show success in their ability to improve their writing skills, this type of short-term class does prove to be an effective model for increasing inmates’ skill levels in a specific content area (writing).

The need for an education is universal. The ability for one to improve his or her ability to communicate will be of benefit in any post-release situation. The type of instruction outlined in this research study may benefit not only inmates who lack a high school diploma, but also those who have attained a high school credential. Indeed, Kellogg and Whiteford (2009) argued, “Too many high school seniors in the United States appear to lack the writing skills needed for college and even some college graduates are unprepared for the advanced writing tasks required in the workplace” (p. 250). Whether inmates have a high school diploma or its equivalent, or are in need of that certificate, a writing class will help them improve their employability and academic skills. Thus, writing classes are relevant to any individual seeking to improve personally, academically, or prepare for the workforce.

Research question 3: What challenges do instructors face when teaching in a correctional facility?

A significant limitation of this study was the environment in which it took place. There were a variety of factors that created emotional distress among the participants during class and while in their cell blocks. These distractions in some cases had a significant impact on students’

ability to concentrate and learn the class content. Although any student in any setting may have events arise while in school, inmate-learners face many physical and mental obstacles on a day-to-day basis that non-incarcerated students do not. Thus, inmates who performed at lower levels after completing the class may not represent individuals who did not learn or who were incapable of learning. Rather, these individuals may have performed at lower levels because of emotional problems or factors that occurred as a result of incarceration, but that were outside of their own control during the six week period that this study took place. These are the realities of a research project attempting to measure learning among county jail inmates as they exist on a daily basis within a correctional facility.

Implications for Future Research

Correctional institution program options deserve continued research. The incarceration rate in the U.S. costs tax payers billions of dollars each year. Educationally, inmates are disadvantaged compared with the general population. If they are to positively participate in society—to live a normal productive existence—they need to learn the skills necessary to facilitate a crime free life. These individuals are capable of learning as indicated by this research study, as well as by previous studies. Perhaps more importantly, through educational opportunities, inmates may discover that they are capable of making positive changes in their life.

To better understand the impact of teaching writing skills to inmates, future research on local jails should attempt to analyze larger participant groups. In addition, future studies would benefit from a longer term curriculum. Both of these suggestions may prove difficult to implement due to the inherent circumstances of a correctional facility. More than examining participants within a jail, research that monitors inmates' post-release habits after completing

educational programming would shed light on an area that has limited data. While teaching and researching within jails poses difficulties, they house populations that could truly benefit from continual research.

There are best practices to help overcome the obstacles to learning that were encountered during this study. First, there must be communication between researchers and jail personnel to guarantee that the regulations and procedures of the institution are followed. This will help to promote a safe learning environment for everyone involved. In addition, through communication, a mutual respect between the correctional officers and the teachers may be achieved. As a result, the corrections officers may be more likely to help facilitate classes with minimal interruptions. Within the classroom, researchers should set forth the expectations of the class immediately and demand that the expectations be met. This will help eliminate participants who may want to attend for reasons beyond learning and self-improvement. Distractions are unavoidable, but such measures may help create an adequate learning environment.

To build upon this study, the next step in the research process will be to examine a larger participant group. Gaining a larger cohort of participants may be achieved by observing multiple correctional educators within different correctional facilities as they implement this curriculum. Analyzing an increased number of student artifacts will more accurately illustrate the impact that teaching an instructor-led writing class will have on inmates' literacy. Consequently, the findings will provide data relevant to correctional institutions seeking to implement specific educational programs as a means to increase inmates' writing skills in preparation for a successful transition back into society.

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Appendix A: Jail Population Survey

1. What is the highest grade level you have achieved?

Did not attend School

1-6

7-11

12

Above 12

2. Do you have a high school diploma, GED, or HSED?

YES / NO (Circle the appropriate answer)

3. What is the highest credential you have received?

No credential

GED

HSED

High School Diploma

Some College (postsecondary credit)

Short term diploma

Vocational diploma / certificate

1 year diploma

2 year diploma

Associate degree

Baccalaureate

More than a Baccalaureate

Appendix B: Pre-Writing Sample Prompt

Identify one instance in which you overcame a problem. Describe in-detail what the problem was, and how you worked through it. Consider writing about work, school, life at home, or even life in jail.

Appendix C: Post-Writing Sample Prompt

We can achieve many things by ourselves. However, there are instances that require team work, cooperation, and sacrifice to meet a goal.

Please identify one example of a situation that required you to work with another person or a team of people to complete a goal. Explain your goal, and how you and the other person or persons worked together.

Appendix D: Pre-Writing Sample Error Rate

Student	Word Choice	Sentence Clarity	Punctuation
Student 1	2	14	3
Student 2	0	2	0
Student 3	0	0	5
Student 4	1	6	9
Student 5	4	8	6
Student 6	0	9	4
Student 7	1	4	4
Student 8	1	11	13
Student 9	0	9	5
Student 10	0	8	4
Student 11	7	13	11
Student 12	1	4	1
Totals:	17	88	65

Appendix E: Post-Writing Sample Error Rate

Student	Word Choice	Sentence Clarity	Punctuation
Student 1	1	4	6
Student 2	0	0	0
Student 3	1	3	0
Student 4	0	2	3
Student 5	6	6	12
Student 6	1	8	1
Student 7	0	3	3
Student 8	1	9	0
Student 9	0	7	1
Student 10	0	4	0
Student 11	1	9	2
Student 12	1	4	0
Totals:	12	59	28