

Peer-led literacy: a prison library's collaboration with the Shannon Trust

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Abstract

This case study interrogates the delivery of the Shannon Trust literacy programme in a men's category B London prison (HMP Wandsworth). This includes an exploration of prison libraries' collaboration with the Shannon Trust, and how prison library staff practically facilitate the programme; from selecting prisoners to become literacy mentors, finding prisoners willing to become learners, and collecting feedback. This study also looks at some of the challenges faced by prison-based Library and Information Science (LIS) professionals when delivering a programme such as this. The study concludes with a set of recommendations for other LIS professionals considering programme delivery in the prison context.

Introduction

Literacy rates in British prisons make for sobering reading, 46% of prisoners are functionally illiterate, meaning almost half of the prison population have the equivalent reading age of 11 or less (Hopkins and Kendall, 2017). This means they could struggle to understand a

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road sign, food labels, household bills, or medical instructions (National Literacy Trust, n.d.).

Low prison literacy rates have a direct correlation with the offender's ability to find employment, contribute socially and culturally after release, and the likelihood of them reoffending (Hopkins and Kendall, 2017).

The Shannon Trust (ST) was formed in 1997 (Shannon Trust, n.d.) by Christopher Morgan following his correspondence with the life sentenced prisoner Tom Shannon (Alison, 2013, 2016). Christopher and Tom's letters were published into a book entitled 'The Invisible Crying Tree' (Morgan and Shannon, 1996), with the proceeds used to establish ST as a charity aimed at improving literacy amongst the prison population. The programme operates as a peer learning programme, whereby prisoners are trained to teach other prisoners to read using learning material designed around the phonic alphabet. Learning sessions take place on house block wings and prison workshops. The ST model is unique in the UK prison sector, with other literacy teaching provisions happening via classroom learning through prison education providers (NOVUS, n.d.).

The ST aims to reach those who have previously struggled to participate in classroom learning. Prisoners who felt disengaged with formal education in the past referred to feeling lost or exposed in large teaching groups (Hopkins and Kendall, 2017). HMP Wandsworth library is seen as an ideal facilitator of the programme as it sits outside of structured prison education yet has a strong association with life-long learning. The library's close engagement with the prison population makes it well placed to identify prisoners suitable to become mentors. ST acts as an 'outside' agency, providing learning material and training to prison library teams, who then deliver the daily running of the programme.

This case study will explore my experience of delivering the ST programme at HMP Wandsworth prison during 2019. This will include:

- Identifying and training prisoners to become mentors
- Identifying potential learners
- Monitoring mentors' and learners' progress
- Celebrating mentors/learners' achievements
- Programme improvements at Wandsworth prison
- Recommendations to facilitators

HMP Wandsworth is a category B prison, holding remand prisoners awaiting sentencing. Foreign nationals make up 36% of the UK prison population (for most of whom English is not their first language). The category of prison has been shown to have a direct relation to the prison populations' literacy abilities, with category A/B prisons having lower literacy levels than category C/D (Creese, 2016).

Identifying Mentors

My role involved identifying prisoners suitable to become mentors, providing them with training to teach others using the ST material. As described in Hopkins and Kendall (2017), the motivations of prisoners wanting to become literacy mentors are both altruistic and strategic. The mentor role carries status among the prison population, as those in the role enjoy freer movement on the wings, positive transcripts on their prison records, and increased time out of their cells. Considering this, it was important to select prisoners who would not abuse the position, but rather use it as an opportunity to contribute positively. As Garner (2019) highlights, prisoner

employment has a role to play in positive behavioural management by providing a sense of purpose and autonomy from rule-based prison life.

Prisoners applied for the role of mentor through the library by sending a written application, they were also referred to me by prison officers or civilian prison staff who had encountered a prisoner who they felt would be effective in the role.

In the first instance I would access PNOMIS (Prison National Offender Management Information System) to establish applicants' offence and behaviour whilst in prison. It is desirable that mentors be respected by prisoners and staff alike, and are in a position to gain access to potential learners. Fostering prison establishment support for the programme is critical to its daily operation (unlocking of prisoners) and those who are known for good behaviour increase the validity of the programme in the eyes of the prison establishment. With this in mind, I gave preference to prisoners housed on induction wings and Vulnerable Prisoner Units (VPU), or involved in prison workshops (bricklaying, textiles), as they are in a good position to identify and access other prisoners in need of literacy support.

I received and took part in instructor training. A group representing prison libraries in London and the South East attended. We discussed the process of identifying suitable mentors within our respective prisons. It is preferable that prisoners selected for the role of mentor will remain in the prison for at least six months (consistency in the provision is incremental to learners' progression). HMP Wandsworth (Category B) contains a fast-changing prison population. Comparatively, a Category C prison houses a longer-term, stable population. Thus, the training of mentors needs to happen more frequently at Wandsworth. Few long-term prisoners (and the speed with which they are transferred to other prisons) makes the selection of mentors challenging.

Training Mentors and Confirmation

Once prisoners were identified to become mentors, I invited them to attend group mentor training at the library. The training enabled me to appraise their suitability to become mentors, observing how they interacted with one another and their commitment to the aims of the programme. At Wandsworth, I conducted monthly mentor training to ensure mentors could take up their roles quickly.

Mentor training was done in small groups. As an opening activity the participants were asked to introduce themselves and say what attracted them to the role of literacy mentor. I would then lead the group through activities in the first ST manual book. This involved asking all participants to sound out the phonic alphabet, and then complete the numbered tasks together (from sounding out words, to completing words with the cue sections missing).

I then asked the group to pair up and work through the remainder of book one. As they did this, I observed their behaviour. I had chosen a group of prisoners unknown to each other. This provided an opportunity to gauge their suitability for the role: were they self-conscious speaking in front of others? Were they actively listening? Were they showing off? Learners have referenced the ‘peer status’ of mentors as being instrumental to their ability to learn, feeling that mentors were ‘on the same side’ and able to see problems through the lens of the adult learner in a prison context (Hopkins and Kendall, 2017). This emphasis on peer learning makes it pedagogically distinct from classroom learning, and the mentor’s ability to feel empathy is important.

At the end of these activities, we each read aloud from an activity sheet designed to give the participants the experience of being a poor reader (the text they read from was spelt backwards). The aim of this exercise was to help them feel empathy for their future learners.

Some refused to read this out, and I encouraged them to describe to the group why; with prisoner's citing feeling foolish or embarrassed as common responses. A training goal is to equip mentors with the skills to 'open up' and engage with potential learners, developing an empathetic approach, encouraging prisoners struggling with literacy in making that first step towards learning. ST provided learner case studies which I shared with mentors to help communicate the struggles of being a poor reader.

Out of the initial group of six, I would typically confirm five in the mentor position. Mentors received a ST t-shirt, which acts as tool for advertising their role to potential learners and prison staff. The aim being that prisoners will reach out to mentors for literacy support, and prison officers will allow mentors to conduct sessions with learners.

Finding Learners

In theory, mentors are responsible for identifying and approaching prisoners who need support, with peer mentoring taking place on the wings and within prison workshops. In practice, approaching other prisoners in need of support can be challenging, they may encounter hostility or embarrassment. Stigma around poor literacy is a barrier to finding learners willing to engage with the programme.

To address this, I selected mentors in areas of the prison with the highest concentration of potential learners. Induction (E wing) is an area of the prison where men are housed when they first enter Wandsworth. All prisoners complete an initial mandatory literacy assessment when they first enter the prison system, and this information is shared with mentors on the wing to enable them to assist. This can also be used to match potential learners with mentors when they move to other wings.

I approached prisoners identified by the education department as needing support, matching them with a mentor on their corresponding wing. However, as Creese (2016) highlights, initial literacy assessments (conducted by prison education departments) vary in their methods from prison to prison, and there is currently no agreed upon literacy assessment tool across all prison establishments. This problem is further reinforced by inconsistencies in the way prisoner's literacy assessment data is shared, with some prisons updating PNOMIS, others using the Learning Records System (LRS), and others failing to record assessment results at all. This means relying on data to identify those in need of literacy support is currently not a fully reliable means of reaching all potential learners

Mentors who worked within workshops (bricklaying and textiles) were selected. The ST experience indicates that workshops often attract prisoners with lower literacy abilities, and having a mentor installed in these areas helps to identify learners.

My approach at Wandsworth was to concentrate on induction wings, workshops and VPU: whilst seeking to have one mentor on wings which have a stable population (longer term prisoners) such as C, K, G and F wings (as the frequent transfer/release of mentors impacts consistency of the provision).

In delivering the service on the wings, the ST provides material for mentors to advertise their teaching services. These include cell drop leaflets, posters, and door signs to place on cells. Historically the programme was conceived to operate solely on the wings, within cells. However, the stigma around poor literacy makes this approach less impactful.

Delivering the Programme

I was responsible for tracking the mentors' and learners' progress. I undertook weekly visits to wings, workshops, and induction areas where mentors were located: discussing progress,

issues encountered, and collecting and monitoring feedback forms. The programme is measured by number/frequency of learning sessions undertaken by mentors, and learner's progression through different stages of the course material.

Mentors were supplied with activity log sheets as a tool for evidencing the amount and length of sessions they had undertaken with learners. These were signed off by a prison officer to add legitimacy to the session and build prison staff trust. Learners also completed monitoring and progress sheets (Appendix 1 and 2).

My role was coordinating the programme at Wandsworth and acting as a point of contact for ST. The onus is on mentors to record learner's progression through the material, with myself acting as a conduit to channel data back to the ST. Once I had collected feedback forms from the mentors, I collated them into monthly statistics and submitted them to ST via their online portal.

In 2019 I trained 23 new mentors (see Figure 1), significantly adding to our mentor network, helping to ensure mentor availability across the prison. However only 489 learning sessions took place across 2019 (see Figure 1) which is roughly five or six sessions per learner over the year (ST recommends two sessions per learner, per week). This demonstrates the challenges at Wandsworth in having a high transient prison population (Cat B, remand prison) where prisoners are moved frequently, and the difficulty I experienced building operational support for the programme from the prison officers (mentors and learners need to be unlocked for sessions to take place).

Figure 1: HMP Wandsworth Prison Statistics 2019 (Argent, 2021).

New Mentors	23
New Learners	87
Total Learning Sessions	489

The Wandsworth statistics also reflect the challenge mentors face in engaging learners. For their Personal Barrier's Strategy (Cairns, 2019), ST commissioned User Voice to research the opinions of over 260 mentors across four prisons, ascertaining some of the barriers to engaging learners (User Voice, n.d.). Mentors referenced the wearing of ST t-shirts as a barrier to potential learners, as it highlights their low literacy abilities to others. Meeting with learners off the wing (to avoid identification by other prisoners) was recommended. This demonstrates mentors/learners' belief that the wings are often unsuitable for literacy sessions.

Celebrating Achievements

Celebrating learners' and mentors' progression was an important part of delivering the programme. It provided an opportunity to formally recognise the difficulties of learning to read as an adult, and the respect given to those who had embraced the challenge. ST provided certificates aimed at each level of progression, and a certificate for those who had not reached a formal progression stage, but whose hard work should be acknowledged. Mentors were also awarded certificates to thank them for their work.

I ran these quarterly celebration events from the library, inviting senior members of prison staff (Governors, Senior Prison Officers) and ST representatives. These events provided an opportunity to publicise the programme across the prison. Prison officer support is vital to the operational success of the programme, and mentors' ability to conduct sessions with their

learners is sometimes affected by a lack of prison staff awareness of the programme. Having senior prison leaders attend the event alongside officers and prisoners, helped build continued support for the programme. Prison Governors or external visitors (such as journalist Erwin James) awarded certificates to mentors and learners, which helped publicise the programme to the wider prison.

Improvements at Wandsworth

Delivering the programme at Wandsworth involved responding to problems encountered by mentors or learners, and implementing local improvements to the ST provision.

Staff awareness

Mentors told me that they were not being unlocked for the mentoring sessions as officers did not know about the ST programme. To remedy this, I attended prison officers' morning meetings (weekly) to communicate the aims of the programme and share who the mentors were in each area of the prison. ST representatives attended monthly full prison staff briefings to present the programme and its aims to the entire staffing body. I also used celebration events to build staff awareness.

Communication

Mentors told me that they lack the soft skills to communicate optimally with learners (encouraging them to undertake learning, overcoming challenges experienced with the learning material). Training material design was not part of my facilitator role, however, ST is developing Mentor Training 2.0 to address mentor's communication skills, using case studies, building empathy exercises into training sessions, and sharing learner's feedback.

Learner Privacy

Ensuring privacy was key to programme involvement, with many learners uncomfortable receiving their mentor sessions on wings or in workshops. Mentors highlighted the following recommendations to me regarding learners' privacy:

- Providing a choice of places to learn
- Learning in a place where it is not obvious someone is learning to read
- Consider not wearing the ST mentor t-shirt to sessions

This feedback highlights the programme's evolution. The original conception of a wing only learning programme was a response to learners' reluctance to engage in classroom learning. However, the potential stigma that poor readers face from other prisoners has been better understood, and the wing is no longer always suitable as a place of learning.

As a result, I allowed education and workshop-based mentors/learners to conduct their sessions in the library; and wearing the mentor t-shirt was not obligatory for these sessions. However, the prison required mentors to wear the t-shirts on wings to identify them and this barrier will need to be addressed for wing-based mentors in the future.

Recording Participation

Mentors and learners told me that it was important to have their involvement with the programme recorded in some way, as positive recommendations help them when seeking to transfer to other prisons or release. Programme participation should be recorded to incentivise the programme to the prison population.

I updated mentors and learners PNOMIS, reflecting their achievements on the programme, and awarded certificates at progression points in their learning (including informal

stages). The extension of gym privileges for mentors and learners was instated at Wandsworth, acknowledging the difficulties of participants managing their time between sessions. The gym is a popular activity and creating an either/or scenario would have resulted in a lack in uptake in the programme.

Findings and Recommendations

Finding 1

I was well positioned to lead on the programme due to the library's recognised role in lifelong learning, a high amount of contact with prisoners (which facilitated the selection of mentors), and the library's separation from formal education (which many prisoners felt alienated from due to negative experiences). However, delivering the programme is time consuming, and as a voluntary role for the ST, comes on top of daily library tasks.

Recommendation 1

Five hours per week should be set aside for the delivery of the programme. Library staff should use this time to engage in programme advocacy among prison officers and other senior staff (to foster operational support), and to collect feedback from mentors, which involves physically visiting different areas of the prison.

Finding 2

Despite screening mentor applicants to ensure suitability, some were selected that proved unsuitable for the role, either behaviourally or due to their leaving the prison shortly after being instated as mentors.

Recommendation 2

In addition to checking PNOMIS and asking prison officers about their behaviour, those delivering the programme should liaise with internal prison departments (movements, security). This provides a further means of checking prisoners' behaviour and time remaining in the prison. Selecting unsuitable mentors damages prison wide respect for the programme.

Finding 3

Learning sessions taking place on the wings (ST model), was not realistic in a Cat B remand prison like Wandsworth. With prisoners locked behind their doors for long periods, the ability to undertake learning sessions in addition to the basics (showers, phone calls) was not achievable.

Recommendation 3

The ST should make the programme design more reflective of individual prison challenges (e.g. category B, transient prisoner population) with consideration given to how the programme can be contextually extended in different category prisons (placement of mentors, transferring of mentor roles across prison establishments). Library facilitators should select mentors who will have ease of access to learners and should look at alternative areas off the wing for learning sessions to take place. I selected mentors in areas of the prison where learning sessions could be undertaken more readily (workshops, induction, VPU) as these areas are less reliant on prison officer operational support.

Finding 4

Ensuring that mentors and learners were unlocked to undertake their sessions was difficult and was often stymied by a lack of prison staff awareness about the ST programme.

Recommendation 4

Library facilitators should work with ST representatives to advocate the programme to the prison service. They should also involve prison officers in the mentor selection process, which helps foster prison officer buy-in for the programme. Additionally, embedding the programme within the prison regime as a core activity would increase operational support (prearranged unlocking/movement of prisoners).

Finding 5

Mentors struggled to find prisoners willing to become learners, being unsure of how to approach individuals who might need support.

Recommendation 5

ST training material should focus more on the communication skills needed to engage learners and understand individual barriers to literacy. To enable library facilitators to share information with mentors, prison education providers should implement one literacy assessment tool across all prison establishments, to build a more reliable picture of prison literacy and enable data sharing across the service. The programme could also be aligned as ‘one to one’ learning support that supplements formal classroom learning (fostering links with educational departments in prisons). This would provide increased access to learners.

Glossary of Terms

Cat A, B, C, or D – Category of prison relating to severity of offence and stage in sentence. With A being highest security, and D being lowest.

LRS – Learner Records System

PNOMIS – Prison National Offender Management Information System

Prison Regime – Planned daily unlock and movement of prisoners around the prison to attend activities (education, workshops)

Remand – Held in prison awaiting trial/sentencing

ST – Shannon Trust

VPU – Vulnerable Prisoner Unit

Wing – Housing area within the prison

Workshops – Prison based functional skills workshops in bricklaying, carpentry and textiles

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Appendix 1: Learner monitoring form

Learner Monitoring Form (to be completed at first session)



Learner name	
Learner prisoner number	
Date (Day/Month/Year)	/ /

Your age range:

- 14-17 18-24 25-29 30-35
 36-45 46-55 56-64 65+ Prefer not to say

Is English your first language?

- Yes No If no, what is your first language?

Choose one option that best describes your ethnic group or background:

White

- English/Welsh/Scottish/British Northern Irish Irish
 Gypsy or Irish Traveller Any other white background

Mixed/multiple ethnic groups

- White & Black Caribbean White & Black African White & Asian
 Any other mixed/multiple ethnic background

Asian/Asian British

- Indian Pakistani Bangladeshi Chinese
 Any other Asian background

Black/African/Caribbean/Black British

- African Caribbean Any other Black/African/Caribbean background

Other ethnic groups

- Arab Any other ethnic group, please describe: _____
 Prefer not to say

Appendix 2: Learner Log Sheet

Learner Log Sheet



Learner name <small>(please use sheet for 1 learner only)</small>	
Learner prisoner number	
Mentor name (if any)	
Staff supporter name (if any)	
Month / Year	/

	Date of session	Type of support Please circle: 1. Mentor 2. DVD/digital self-study 3. Staff	Which manual is learner currently working on? Please circle: mini manual, dark blue, light blue, dark green, light green, purple	Last page completed	Tick if manual was completed during session If ticked ensure progress profile is then completed
1		1 2 3	MM DB LB DG LG PU		
2		1 2 3	MM DB LB DG LG PU		
3		1 2 3	MM DB LB DG LG PU		
4		1 2 3	MM DB LB DG LG PU		
5		1 2 3	MM DB LB DG LG PU		
6		1 2 3	MM DB LB DG LG PU		
7		1 2 3	MM DB LB DG LG PU		
8		1 2 3	MM DB LB DG LG PU		
9		1 2 3	MM DB LB DG LG PU		
10		1 2 3	MM DB LB DG LG PU		
11		1 2 3	MM DB LB DG LG PU		
12		1 2 3	MM DB LB DG LG PU		
13		1 2 3	MM DB LB DG LG PU		
14		1 2 3	MM DB LB DG LG PU		

Continue overleaf if necessary

If learner has stopped Turning Pages (or plans to stop soon) please circle the reason:

Chose to stop - goal met	Chose to stop - didn't like	Completed programme	Regime issues	Released	Transferred	Other:
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