

FINAL REPORT
OF THE
PENTONVILLE PRISON DYSLEXIA PROJECT

A Joint Initiative of
The British Dyslexia Association
and
Pentonville Prison
Funded by
The National Year of Reading,
1998-1999

Jointly co-ordinated by:

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**PENTONVILLE PRISON DYSLEXIA PROJECT
FINAL REPORT OF A PILOT PROJECT INITIATED BY
BRITISH DYSLEXIA ASSOCIATION AND PENTONVILLE PRISON
FUNDED BY THE NATIONAL YEAR OF READING**

This one year Pilot Project, jointly proposed by the British Dyslexia Association and the Pentonville Education Service, with funding from the National Year of Reading, commenced in September 1998 with the official media launch held in early December 1998. Its main aim was to offer up to 70 dyslexic prisoners with poor literacy the opportunity to improve their skills through participation in the computer course **Touch-type Read and Spell**. This was an innovative use of ICT to promote literacy in this particular population and we expected to demonstrate a cost-effective model of good practice which could be easily replicated. Although not specifically identified as an objective for the project, we thought it logical that participants would develop skills which would increase the likelihood of employment post release and that this, in turn, would decrease the likelihood of re-offending because Home Office statistics show that ex-offenders who are employed are 35% less likely to re-offend.

Outcomes of the Project

The majority of the offenders who participated had not had their specific learning difficulty identified until they reached Pentonville Prison. Most had found school to be an excruciating experience, and many had dropped out of school or had been excluded by the time they had reached their early teens or even earlier. Although of normal intelligence, many had been wrongly labelled as thick or stupid by their teachers and peers in primary school. They had received no appropriate help whatsoever with their difficulty, and poor self-esteem was inevitably rife. Given this background, we worried whether men who had experienced this level of educational failure would want to come forward and risk failure again, and we had lengthy discussions about how best to promote the course within the prison. Our concern, however, was groundless. The course promoted itself. The first students who agreed to participate in a short mini-pilot experienced such immediate success and satisfaction that word spread through the informal information network within the prison and the course has run at full capacity with a significant waiting list since the very early days.

Following assessment by the Senior Literacy Tutor who has specialist qualifications in dyslexia, staff reported that many of the students seemed to feel better about themselves because they were given an explanation for their difficulties. Furthermore, the spectacular and high profile success of a couple of the Pilot's early participants, and the more plodding but consistent success of their other peers, has inspired considerable hope. It is very clear that the majority of these prisoners want very much to have a chance to improve their literacy skills, and that while they have scepticism about basic literacy classes, they are willing to give **Touch-type Read and Spell** a try because its multi-sensory approach is different and successful. Also, there is kudos and "street cred" about going on a computer course – especially one with such a high reputation which is reaffirmed by their peers. The Senior Literacy tutor reports that when she goes onto the Shop Floor men clamour around calling "Test me, Miss. Test me", in the hope that they may be identified as dyslexic and given the opportunity to sign up.

Since it means that students must give up employment for which they earn a meagre wage, this enthusiasm for a chance to improve their literacy skills is obviously genuine as it means a sacrifice in their ability to purchase modest comforts for daily living.

When we first designed the project, the intention had been to locate it in the Prison's Open Learning Area. However, once the grant had been received, the Prison decided to "up-scale" the location. This meant a slight delay in getting started, but a small storeroom was renovated and painted to become a dedicated classroom, thus demonstrating not just the Education Service Staff's commitment, but the support of Pentonville Prison regime as a whole. The room is fresh and airy, with **British Dyslexia Association** posters of famous dyslexic people on the walls, and when the course is in progress, there is what one staff member describes as a "buzz of engagement and energy". Tutors report that they have had to "tear the men off their machines at the end of their sessions". More advanced students spontaneously help others, and the course has consistently engendered a positive co-operative spirit which inevitably spills out into the prison culture as a whole. Frequently, students have been involved in showing off the programme to the many visitors who have wanted to see it in action, and this, in turn, has been a very positive and self-esteem enhancing experience for those involved. In fact, so many external people have wanted to have a look that the Department has had to restrict visitors as they were intruding far too much into the Education Service's regular work.

For the vast majority of students, progress has been steady and very satisfying. For a very small number of prisoners, the course has been like a magic key to new worlds. For these few, a member of the education staff has described the effect as a "transformation". One inmate, Louis, who had the typical early drop-out profile, romped through the course, praising it highly, and his success, and subsequent excellent performance on the A.E.B Achievement in Literacy Test influenced the decision to offer him early release subject to a monitored curfew using a tag. He has been outside for over six months and has found full time employment which offers him future advancement. Another inmate, Paul, who scarcely read at all, now looks forward to long weekends when he is locked in his cell for longer periods, giving him more opportunity to read. His cell mate bemoans the fact that he no longer wants to play dominoes. Paul enjoys both fiction and philosophy and has a general hunger for "anything which is good literature". He particularly enjoyed the humour of *Catch 22*, though his favourite novel so far has been *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* "because of the happy ending". Thanks to the project, Paul says "I'm not afraid of words any more". Progress for others, though not so spectacular, has been nonetheless significant. One student reported after just a few weeks, "I write home to my Mum and she's noticed the difference. Now I use full stops and everything". Said another "This is the first time they've ever taught me anything in here". Once member of staff comments on the sense of accomplishment she often witnesses. "They complete their modules, and they're so often full of pride. They look round to see if anyone has noticed what they've accomplished. It's quite moving".

The Numbers

- 82 men were given the opportunity to participate in the project, of whom two made repeated excuses not to attend and were dropped from the pilot.
- 80 showed consistent improvement in their performance over time, and for a small number this improvement was “phenomenal”.
- 12 men (included in the 82) are currently registered on the ongoing course. Two groups of six attend for one hour three times a week.
- 20 men used the course as a springboard into full time education within the Prison and a further 15 went on to part-time education. Education Staff are convinced that they would not have done so without the increased confidence, self-esteem and literacy skills which the project engendered. As most of these men had dropped out of school in their early teens and could be previously described as “disaffected learners” this is a remarkable achievement.
- Several Remand Prisoners were discharged to other Prisons, and their status within other Education Departments is unknown. Many had resisted their transfer to other “better” prisons until they had had the opportunity to complete the course.
- Six men were discharged. One is in full-time employment and participation in the project was instrumental in his early release. The employment status of the other five is unknown.
- One dyslexic “lifer” at a prison far from London heard about the project and requested (unsuccessfully) a transfer so he could have the opportunity to improve his literacy skills.

Spin-off Effects

As a result of the new-found enthusiasm for reading by several of the men, literacy staff and others have been donating books to create a small lending library as an adjunct to the Dyslexia Project. Staff have gone out of their way to bring in specific books they think particular students would enjoy and this had engendered enthusiasm for and about reading, as well as much mutual good will.

This report would not be complete without mentioning a significant beneficial and completely serendipitous effect of the course. A dyslexic Prison Officer who had previously failed his promotion exams, and who had decided not to sit them again and was even considering leaving the profession because of dyslexia, took the courageous decision to reveal his problem to Education Staff to see if the course could help him. At first he participated during his lunch breaks. His progress was both quick and significant, and gave him the confidence to admit his dyslexia to his employer. He has subsequently become a pioneer for dyslexic Prison Officers – of whom there are many – as he is now able officially to incorporate the course into his weekly Prison Officer Training. He intends to try the promotional exams again.

Whether or not he succeeds the first time, he says, doesn't matter. He now has the confidence to keep on trying. Other dyslexic officers frequently approach him, and he has become a spokesperson. By feeling free to be open about his dyslexia, he now also provides an important and positive role model for dyslexic prisoners. He gives the credit for his increased skills and confidence to the course.

As a result of seeing **Touch-type Read and Spell** in operation at Pentonville, and hearing of the officer's success, **the Butler Trust** has identified the course as an example of good practice, and representatives of the **British Dyslexic Association** and **Pentonville Prison** now sit on a **Butler Trust** working group looking at the development of a national dyslexia policy for Prison Service Employees.

How the course works

The computer course **Touch-type Read and Spell** is highly structured and delivers its content in the way dyslexic learners – and those who experience literacy difficulties for a range of other reasons – learn best. It offers small incremental steps delivered in a multi-sensory way with the opportunity to repeat modules as frequently as the student wishes. The course does exactly what its name implies. It reinforces reading, spelling and writing through teaching touch-typing in an audio-visual and tactile way. It makes the student immediately feel successful, and builds self-esteem and self-confidence from the very beginning. Each student is given a personal access code, and can review the record of accomplishment and progress with ease. One of the comments the inmates consistently make about the course is highly significant: ie. for the first in their lives they feel in control of their own learning.

Touch-typing is an important skill for many dyslexic people with literacy difficulties. Not only can it make writing easier and quicker, it can also facilitate access to the spell checking facility in word processing packages. Students for whom writing is difficult are frequently offered their first opportunity to produce pieces of work which are "clean", attractively presented and of easily legible quality. In addition, some Pentonville students reported improved spelling ability by visualising the keyboard, and remembering where their fingers would fall.

The other key aspect of the Project's success has been the sympathetic assessment process and the supportive learning climate by Pentonville's Education Department. Staff have been enthusiastically committed to the Project, and have taken on additional work to reinforce the learning which has taken place for students through their interaction with the software. They have shown genuine delight in students' progress, and this, in turn, has served to reinforce the students' sense of accomplishment and improved self-esteem. It is important to acknowledge the role of the supportive culture when attempts are made to replicate the project elsewhere.

Project Costs and Sources of Funding

The cost of the joint co-ordinators' time was donated respectively by the British Dyslexia Association and Pentonville Prison Education Service. The Prison contributed the cost of assessments, instructor time, room renovation, and escorting inmates to and from classes. The National Year of Reading Grant of

£8,300 covered the cost of the **Touch-type Read and Spell** site licence which includes instructor training, instructor support pack of training materials, the purchase of 6 computers and a printer, consumables and various incidentals.

Publicity and Media Coverage

The project attracted considerable positive media attention. Highlights include *The Evening Standard*, 10 December 1998 (Dyslexic Prisoners turn to technology"), *The Times*, 16 December 1998 ("Literacy Initiative Put Behind Bars"), the lead story in *The Times Educational Supplement Friday Magazine*, 19 February 1999 ("Escape from Dyslexia: How Computer-aided courses are liberating Pentonville Prisoners"), a mention in the *Guardian Weekend Magazine* 24 April 1999, ("When Words Dance"), and a feature piece on the Esther Rantzen show "*That's Esther*", 18 April 1999. Islington community newspapers and *Prison Service News* also covered the story. Media attention has been particularly gratifying to the Prison's Governors as positive national press is a rarity for the prison service, and much kudos has come to Pentonville as a result of the project. There has been interest from other Prisons all over the country, and the Pentonville Education Service has been deluged with visitors wanting to see the project in operation with a view to possible replication.

Continuation

- The project has far exceeded our expectations and **Touch-type Read and Spell** will continue to be run at Pentonville Prison. Education Co-ordinator Jane Broadfoot says "This course has been phenomenally successful, and I feel extremely lucky and proud to have it as part of the Education Programme here at Pentonville. We owe a debt of gratitude to the British Dyslexia Association without which the Dyslexia Project would not have come about, and also to the National Year of Reading for providing funding for the pilot." Jane has been nominated for an award by the Butler Trust for her role in setting up and managing the Pentonville Dyslexia Project (*see Addendum).
- At the Press Launch in December 1998, Chris Swan of Amersham and Wycome College, which administers the Education Service Budget, announced the intention of his Department to take the course in to the 13 other prisons in and around London whose budget it administers.
- The Home Office has now written to Prison Education Providers all over the country to recommend the course, saying "It seems that **Touch-type Read and Spell** is an excellent teaching/learning tool for use in prisons for students who are non-readers, need to improve their basic skills and/or diagnosed as Dyslexic". Many prisons are hoping the funding will be forthcoming to enable them to run it.

"I get out in December. Where can I take this course on the outside?"

Christine Freeman (020 8361 3013)
British Dyslexia Association
September 1999

ADDENDUM – MARCH 2000

- Gradually, an increasing number of other Prisons and Young Offender Institutions are introducing **Touch-type Read and Spell** into their educational regimes, and with equal success. However, funding continues to be a constraint for many other institutions which would also like to be able to offer this course.
- Offenders on the course frequently comment that they'd like to see their own children have the opportunity to take it. The British Dyslexia Association has flagged up the course as an example of good practice in the **Dyslexia Friendly Schools Pack** which has been financially supported by the Department for Education and Employment, endorsed by The Right Hon. David Blunkett, M.P., Secretary of State for Education and Employment. A copy of the pack has recently been sent to every Local Educational Authority in the Country.
- Jane Broadfoot will receive a Butler Trust Award in March 2000 for her role in setting up and managing the Dyslexia Project at Pentonville prison. It will be presented at Buckingham Palace by Her Royal Highness Princess Ann.

***February 2000**

New Pilot of Touch-type Read and Spell

HMYO Dearbolt:

Lesson 1, after 30 mins, on the programme:

Young Offender (aged 17): "I've never read so many words in all my life!"

Instructor: "And you haven't written as many, have you?"

Young Offender: "No".
