

Practical Reasoning in Corrections Education

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Some recent literature in corrections education has focussed on the need to develop the quality of thinking and reasoning of inmates. As part of a research project, The Association for Values Education and Research (AVER) at the University of British Columbia conducted a course on "Critical Thinking" at a medium security institution. Over a six-week period students were exposed to some of the competencies deemed necessary for rational thought. Results have lent credence to the belief that the approach used would be appropriate to corrections education.

Des ouvrages récents dans le domaine de "l'éducation correctionnelle" ont mis en lumière les besoins de développer la qualité de la pensée et du raisonnement chez les "détenus." A l'intérieur des cadres d'un projet spécial de recherche "The Association for Values Education and Research (AVER) de l'Université de Colombie Britannique" a mis sur pied un cours sur la "pensée critique" à l'intention des détenus d'une institution carcérale à sécurité moyenne. Durant une période de six semaines on a enseigné aux élèves (détenus) les composantes d'une pensée rationnelle. Les résultats permettent de penser que cette approche serait efficace en "éducation correctionnelle."

In some of the recent literature in criminology there has been a shift away from the study of personality and/or the socio-economic background of incarcerated offenders and juvenile delinquents to the nature and quality of their thinking and reasoning. This focus on prisoners' reasoning deficiencies has important implications for programming in prisons. Whereas rehabilitation programs, by and large, have assumed a medical treatment model, an educational model may be more suitable.

Ayers (1979) and Wagner (1978) see prisoners as being deficient in reasoning skills and recommend educational programs to remedy this deficiency. Ayers (p. 3) states that "an alternative (to the medical model) and more tenable assumption is that most prisoners are deficit in certain analytical problem solving skills ... If this alternative assumption is relevant then educational intervention models ... are more appropriate for the majority of prisoners." Wagner feels that "an acquired proficiency in reasoning is clearly essential to successful criminal rehabilitation" (p. 26). Yochelson and Samenow (1976, 1977), after having spent thousands of hours of interviews with 240 persons, most of whom had been found

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not guilty of criminal charges by reason of insanity, identified a large number of what they called "thinking errors characteristic of the criminal." Similarly, Reuvan Feuerstein (1972) has devised a comprehensive theory explaining how deficient "mediated learning experiences" result in a failure to develop adequate thinking strategies and problem-solving abilities. Without such strategies and abilities, an individual's capacity to understand and operate effectively in the world is impaired. Feuerstein's list of cognitive deficiencies includes such things as inadequate and insufficient concepts with which to define and organize experience, inability to gather and assess data relevant to a situation and inability to apply principles to particular cases. Generally, the thinking of those whose behaviour leads to crime has been characterized as immature, inefficient, uncritical and illogical. Yet there is evidence that intelligence seems to be distributed amongst prisoners much as it is in the general population (OISE Report, 1979).

Since 1970, the Association for Values Education and Research (AVER) has been concerned with studying how people reason about value issues, particularly those involving moral considerations, and with determining what factors influence rational ways of reasoning and acting. Its members have engaged in a variety of activities related to moral education, viz., conceptual and empirical research, curriculum development and evaluation, education of teachers and other professionals by in-service workshops, pre-service and graduate courses in education. All of these activities are based on the assumption that a morally educated person will possess a complex set of abilities, understandings and attitudes, that is, the components of moral competence.

Coombs (1980) has conceptualized the attainments a person must have to be competent in moral reasoning.¹ Briefly, they are as follows: (1) First, one must recognize that it cannot be right for me to do x unless it is right for any person in the same sort of circumstances to do so; second if the consequences of everyone's doing x in a given circumstance would be unacceptable, then it is not right for anyone to do x in that circumstance. (2) One must be sensitive to morally hazardous actions, that is, actions which require assessment from the moral point of view. (3) One must have the ability and disposition to seek out all of the morally relevant facts about actions which are morally hazardous. (4) One must have the ability and inclination to imagine, when contemplating a morally hazardous action, the consequences ensuing if everyone in your circumstance were to engage in the action. (5) One must have the ability and inclination to put oneself imaginatively into the circumstances of another person and thus come to know and appreciate the consequences of a proposed morally hazardous action for that other person. (6) One must have the ability and disposition to seek advice and counsel from others about moral decisions being made. (7) One must have the ability and disposition to check the validity of moral arguments and to reject invalid arguments. (8) One must

possess the disposition to require justifying arguments from others who propose morally hazardous actions, and the resolution to do what one has decided is right and to refrain from doing what one has decided is wrong. (9) One must possess a sense of self-worth including the belief that achieving one's interests, and so on, is important. (10) One must have the knowledge of how a person's perception of things harmful to himself differs radically from that of people in general.

In addition to such requirements, there are a number of attainments significantly related not only to moral competence, but to competence in practical reasoning in general. Although these abilities need more careful analysis, it is assumed that they include such things as: skill in verbal and non-verbal communications; ability and disposition to assess the reliability of authorities; ability and disposition to assess the truth of empirical claims; and ability and disposition to use clear language in deliberating about issues.

Basically, practical reasoning is a process that leads to a decision about what a person should do or value. Two sorts of reasons enter into the process: (1) motivational reasons concerning the person's wants, values, purposes or rules of conduct; and (2) empirical or factual reasons concerning actions likely to fulfill the wants, values, purposes or rules of conduct.

Practical reasoning can be analyzed initially into six constitutive tasks, each of which must be done well if one's practical reasoning is to be rational or sound. The six tasks are as follows: (1) identifying and clarifying the issue of action or value to be decided; (2) assembling purported facts relevant to deciding what to do or what to value; (3) assessing the truth of the purported facts; (4) clarifying the relevance of assembled facts; (5) synthesizing the factual information to arrive at a tentative value decision; and (6) assessing the adequacy of the value principle used in making the tentative decision and revising the decision if necessary (Coombs and Meux, 1971). To be executed successfully, each of these tasks requires a number of different kinds of knowledge, abilities, sensitivities and dispositions. The second and third tasks, for example, encompass all the various abilities usually described as "critical thinking" skills. In moral judgment, as distinguished from other kinds of practical judgment, the motivational reason is some moral principle or ideal.

The skills and abilities AVER has set out as requisite for rational moral thought seem to be closely akin to those seen to be lacking in the thinking of prisoners and delinquents. Consequently, the AVER, with the support of the Education and Training Division of the Correctional Service of Canada, undertook a preliminary research project to determine the feasibility of implementing a moral education program in correctional institutions. The project was entitled, "Improving Practical Reasoning: Moral Education in Corrections."

Despite the broad conception of practical reasoning which guided our

review of the literature, little sound research bearing on the question of what deficiencies in practical reasoning are typical of prisoners was found.

The Yochelson and Samenow (1976, 1977) work cited earlier identified a number of "automatic errors of thinking" which, they claimed, were exhibited by criminals and which impede rational and responsible judgment and action. Unfortunately, only a few of the characteristics termed errors count as deficiencies in the abilities and dispositions necessary for rational practical reasoning. In addition, because of serious methodological limitations, including lack of a representative sample of prisoners, Yochelson and Samenow's findings cannot be taken at face value. However, their work does suggest the following hypotheses concerning likely deficiencies in prisoners' practical reasoning.

- (1) Prisoners will tend to have difficulty deferring gratification.
- (2) Prisoners will tend not to be disposed to imagine themselves in the situation of another person.
- (3) Prisoners will tend not to see the point of the concept of obligation.
- (4) Prisoners will tend not to trust other people.
- (5) Prisoners will tend not to gather relevant information and weigh the pros and cons of a course of action before deciding on it. They think they have all the information they need.
- (6) Prisoners will tend to be unwilling to suspend judgment on persons and courses of action.
- (7) Prisoners will tend to be closed minded. They will not listen to evidence which contradicts what they already believe.

These hypotheses concern mainly the dispositions of prisoners. Yochelson and Samenow have little to say about what sort of thinking of which prisoners are or are not capable.

Many studies of prisoners' practical reasoning in recent years have been based on Kohlberg's theory of moral development. These studies suggest that the majority of prisoners use Stage 2 moral reasoning (Parlett et al., 1975; Kohlberg, 1972) which is characterized by the view that the right thing to do is that which serves one's own interests. Persons at this stage will think it right to obey a law, honour a contract or help another person if and only if it will benefit themselves. Even the lives of other people are seen as having only instrumental value (Kohlberg, 1976). In terms of our conception of practical rationality, a person who is at Kohlberg's Stage 2 will have the following deficiencies: he or she will not understand that moral reasoning is based on the two generalization principles (it cannot be right for me to do *x* unless it is right for any person in the same sort of circumstances to do so; if the consequences of everyone's doing *x* in a given circumstance would be unacceptable, then no one ought to do it in that circumstance); he or she will not differentiate the moral point of view from the prudential point of view; he or she will not be sensitive to morally

hazardous actions; he or she will not be disposed to apply the role exchange or universal consequences test to the principle upon which his action is based.

Another approach to the study of the thinking of juvenile delinquents explores the relationship between delinquent behaviour and level of conceptual development, where conceptual development is portrayed as varying along a dimension of concreteness-abstractness. The model most often used in such studies is the Harvey Conceptual Systems Model (1961). A person in Sub-System I of this model has not yet assimilated basic social norms. Thus he exhibits negativism, egocentrism and the disposition to seek immediate gratification. In System I he assimilates the basic norms of the culture. A person in this system is characterized by high positive dependence on authority. System II persons break away from social norms. Their thinking is characterized by distrust of and rebellion against authority. System III brings the first awareness of others in terms of their own feelings and values. Only in System IV does the person adopt standards applicable to both self and others.

Juergs and Harvey (1964) found that 80 per cent of the delinquents in their sample were in either System I or II. In studies reported by Hunt and Hardt (1965), junior high school boys in Sub-System I were found to have more police contacts than boys in more abstract systems. Boys in Sub-System I also reported greater frequency of delinquent acts than boys at higher levels. It should be noted that these studies deal with juveniles rather than adults. Clearly, practical reasoning that is fully rational requires a System IV level of conceptual development. If adult prisoners tend to be in System I or II, it would be necessary to start at a fairly elementary level in building practical reasoning skills and dispositions. Kipper (1971) has provided some evidence that adult prisoners' thinking tends toward the concrete end of the abstract-concrete dimension. Using the Kahn Test of Symbol Arrangement, he found that prisoners' thinking is characterized by concreteness and conceptual perseveration. They have little cognitive flexibility and difficulties in synthesizing diverse cognitive input.

Following a different line of inquiry, Chandler (1973) found that delinquent boys were deficient in the ability to see other persons' points of view. Although it is not certain that adult prisoners will have this same deficiency, there is at least a strong possibility that they will. Because the ability to see another's point of view is crucial to practical reasoning, this finding is particularly significant.

Research concerning educational programs which have the development of reasoning skills as a prime objective is sparse. Projects using various intervention strategies to raise the level of prisoners' moral reasoning as described by Kohlberg's theory have had moderate success. A previously cited study by Parlett, Ayers and Sullivan (1975) suggests

that a course in the humanities offering frequent opportunities for moral discussion and judgment may be useful in raising the level of prisoners' moral reasoning. Other investigators have also reported successful interventions (Scharf, Hickey and Moriarty, 1973; Scharf and Hickey, 1976). One such intervention engaged inmates in group discussions of moral issues and in role-taking exercises, with the result that roughly one-third of the participants advanced at least one stage in moral reasoning. Another intervention combined a democratic community-governing process with counselling based on Kohlberg's theory. The authors believe that such an intervention produces greater development in moral reasoning than does discussion of moral issues alone.

On the basis of his research, Scharf (1973) argues that the moral atmosphere of the prison inhibits the development of moral reasoning. To facilitate moral development it is desirable that prisoners live in a community that they perceive as just or fair. Duguid (1979) describes a program in which prisoners who take university-level arts courses are at the same time incorporated into an "alternative community" which, because it is perceived as just, reinforces more advanced levels of moral thinking and behaviour. Although the results of this study are somewhat mixed, the program overall appears to have had reasonable success in raising the level of prisoners' moral reasoning.

On the basis of the Kohlberg-based studies reviewed, there is reason to be optimistic that the practical reasoning abilities and dispositions of prisoners can be improved. However, such improvement is not likely to come easily. Rather, it will require a concerted, long-term educational effort to bring about any appreciable improvement. Moreover, there seems to be good reason to believe that direct teaching of reasoning abilities will have to be supplemented by structuring the prisoners' environment in such a way as to encourage and reward the use of practical reasoning abilities and dispositions.

Very little is known about the best means of raising conceptual level as described in the Conceptual Systems Model (Harvey et al., 1961). We found no studies in which a significant educational program was carried out for the purpose of raising persons' conceptual levels. Hunt and Hardt (1965) suggest that there is an optimal environment for progressive development at each level. Although they have no research findings to support this view, their speculations on this point could prove useful in developing teaching materials and procedures if data were obtained on the conceptual level of prospective students.

The most encouraging findings bearing on the possibility of teaching practical reasoning to prisoners come from a study conducted by Waksman, Silverman and Weber (1979). Using Feuerstein's Learning Potential Assessment Device, they secured evidence suggesting that even prisoners with low IQs and those who have failed in past academic efforts

have the potential to learn. In particular, their research shows that low academic achievers often have the ability to learn new thinking strategies and skills.

The Waksman, Silverman and Weber study was the only direct attempt to teach reasoning to prisoners that we found. Kohlbergian studies seem to assume that whatever thinking abilities and dispositions are needed for rational practical reasoning will be picked up indirectly through dilemma discussions or through taking part in democratic decision making. This assumption is supported neither by evidence, nor by logic. There is little evidence at present to support the notion that university arts courses will significantly improve the overall practical reasoning abilities of prisoners. It may indeed raise the level of moral reasoning as defined by Kohlberg, and significantly increase student reasoning about the subject matter being studied, but development of practical reasoning as outlined in this article may only be marginally improved.

A review of the literature on teaching and learning in corrections institutions revealed a number of significant difficulties that must be overcome in order to mount worthwhile educational programs in prisons. The difficulties, however, should be kept in perspective, for a number of prison educational programs have had considerable success (Forster, 1976; Duguid, 1979; Parlett et al. 1975).

The research group decided that there was important information to be gained from trying out AVER's existing teaching materials with a class of prisoners. Although the materials have been developed for use with public school secondary students it was felt that a field trial could facilitate later development of materials and methods tailored to prisoner-students.

Over a period of six weeks, seven students in the GED program at a medium security institution participated in twice weekly, two-hour sessions of a course entitled "Critical Thinking." The course was taught by three Fellows of AVER. The purposes were: (1) to determine the ways in which AVER's existing materials and methods for teaching practical reasoning were appropriate or inappropriate for use with adult prisoners; (2) to generate hypotheses concerning the most efficient techniques to use in teaching practical reasoning to adult prisoners; (3) to gain first-hand experience of the context within which teaching and learning takes place in prisons; (4) to ascertain if adult prisoners felt that practical reasoning was useful in their studies and in their everyday lives.

The first two weeks were spent on activities such as distinguishing factual claims from value claims, assessing the truth or falsity of factual claims, judging evidence, observations and authorities, distinguishing valid arguments, and recognizing informal fallacies. The remaining four weeks were taken up with learning the process of value reasoning and the application of value reasoning skills to the topic of war.² Some of these objectives were: understanding what constitutes a war and why; appreci-

ating different people's views of war; understanding the concept of point of view, especially the moral point of view; becoming aware of some reasons why people sometimes behave immorally during war; becoming aware of some considerations in the nature of heroism; recognizing and critically evaluating arguments for going to war; understanding the form of the practical syllogism; and being able to use the role exchange, new cases and universal consequences tests to determine the validity of a value claim.

As no formal tests of achievement were given, observations are necessarily impressionistic. Activity sheets used to teach various skills apparently were suitable. The readings from the *War* unit appeared appropriate although some of the questions related to them are too unsophisticated for adult audiences. It should be pointed out that students were apprehensive about the time spent discussing the moral issues raised in wartime situations. There was suspicion that we were attempting to ascertain student reasoning concerning violence and, more particularly, crimes of violence. In fact, the program seemed to have generated a great deal of controversy, and the final session was initially devoted to a heated discussion concerning our objectives. Part of our success was due to the reasoned intervention and mediation of the prisoner students in the university arts program. It would seem that before designing materials, content, and teaching approaches for prisoner-students, some time ought to be taken to discover what issues and content are of interest to them and what teaching approaches would be appropriate. The content area is, after all, only the vehicle to apply the skills necessary for practical reasoning. In developing curriculum materials, then, the content must be chosen for its degree of interest and, of course, the moral issues inherent in it.

During the course certain skills and concepts were taught and certain questions assigned right or wrong answers. However, much of the time was spent on debating value issues, with the instructors attempting to adopt a Socratic approach involving questioning procedures designed to help people reflect upon claims for or against a particular position. Although this approach is not easy to operationalize, as by tone of voice or gesture the instructor's value stance can be inferred, there is reason to believe the approach was successful. Discussion ensued throughout the six weeks and was at times animated. Initially students addressed their statements to and through an instructor but, as classes progressed, there was far more student-to-student interaction. In the final session one student challenged another with "Where's your evidence?" Another commented: "If a guy got good at this stuff he'd realize he'd been doing things wrong his whole life." At various times students from other programs joined the class and participated in the discussion.

As in most classes at whatever level, some people participated more than others. Although most students completed class assignments and

appeared, to varying degrees, to be able to apply the skills taught, some were more prepared than others to engage in discussion and debate. Presumably, the apprehension generated by the discussions of violence in war time also mitigated against full participation.

Generally, the instructors found teaching this course both challenging and exciting. It would appear that students could understand and apply the various skills and concepts taught. They were willing to learn, willing to take a position, and willing to debate and argue. This is not always the case in public school and university classrooms.

Educational programs in prisons have been viewed, by and large, as a way of relieving boredom for prisoners, thus contributing to the maintenance of institutional security, or preparing prisoners for employment after release. According to J. W. Cosman, Director of Education and Training, Canadian Correctional Service:

Penitentiary education has simply not been conceived of in terms of the development of the powers of the intellect, in terms of enlightenment and the strengthening of reason, in terms of the development of man as an historical person, as a member of a society and a civilization.

AVER is in accord with Richard Peters (1971) who views education as initiation into worthwhile knowledge and understanding. It should be noted that "knowledge," as Peters is using the term does not mean mere information but rather, at the least, a true belief and an understanding of the evidence which warrants it. Having knowledge involves having rational belief.

If educating a person implies initiating him into justified or rational beliefs and the modes of reasoning by which such beliefs are established, then moral education involves, minimally, initiation into rational moral beliefs and the modes of reasoning by which moral judgments are justified. In addition, as the point of moral beliefs is to guide conduct, moral education involves, at least indirectly, initiation into rational modes of conduct.

AVER realizes that much research and conceptual work remains to be done before a detailed specification of rational practical reasoning can be developed. Our brief experience in this preliminary research, however, has lent credence to the belief that AVER's moral education approach would be well-suited to corrections education for a number of reasons. First, it is educational; that is, it equips people with cognitive skills and abilities enabling them to assess their own experience, making rational, defensible decisions about their actions, and so dealing effectively with the world. Second, the focus on reasoning skills in the area of values, particularly in the area of morality, is precisely the area in which the majority of prisoners have demonstrated lack of reasoning ability. Third, most adults have had considerable experience with moral situations and the complexity characteristic of them and find a focus on such questions

very interesting. When they come to understand that moral reasoning fits into a rational framework requiring sophisticated abilities, they also find work in the area intellectually exciting.

The inclusion of values education in corrections educational programs would not only have the potential of producing positive effects on the future thought and action of people who have demonstrated lack of ability in this area, but would make such programs more balanced and educationally sound than they would otherwise be. Prison life, by its very nature, presents, to both prisoners and staff, moral problems of the most difficult sort – problems which call for considerable competence in reasoning ability.

NOTES

¹ For a detailed description of each see J. Coombs, "Attainments of the morally educated person" in D. Cochrane, and M. Manley-Casimer (Eds.), *Practical Dimensions of Moral Development*. New Jersey: Praegar, 1980.

² These skills are discussed in and the activities taken from AVER. Teachers' guide and student reader, *War. Value Reasoning Series*. Toronto: O.I.S.E. Publications, 1979. Other units in the Value Reasoning Series are *Prejudice*, *The Elderly*, *Population Problems*, *War*, *Ecology*, and *Prisons*.

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