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# THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN PRISON : A “FEDERATING SPACE FOR RECIPROCAL ACTION” IN EDUCATIONAL SUPPORT

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## Abstract

Communication by means of language between the different teaching facilitators in penal centers (teaching staff and inmates) allows the setup of user help systems within the context of a “**federating space for reciprocal action**”. It underlines dimensions that are specific to prisons and promotes the development of human values and of identity in student inmates.

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## 1. Introduction

The main objective established National Ministry of Education (« Education National, or referred to henceforth as “EN”) Department of Penitential Institutions (Administration Penitentiaries, or henceforth “DAP”) is to “promote conditions for the professional rehabilitation of inmates”. Highlighted in annual report the year 2009 and the first term of 2010 on the subject of education in prisons, these objectives are concentrated around a number of pedagogical and organizational axes, on the national level.

The first axis points out that statistics for teaching adult inmates have increased in comparison to 2008. One of the consequences of this increase is the desire to organize teaching times differently. Indeed, the “rotations of persons in schools added to great demands for training from the incarcerated population, to the re-organization of home district prisons and to changes in institutions” signifies a risk with regards to the dispersion of teaching on short training periods”.

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Secondly, there were, in 2009, 47 594 individuals in training from a total number of 62 596 persons incarcerated in prisons. Specific data from field work has led our research to a particular type of learners: individuals incarcerated in prisons enrolled on secondary level courses – mainly at level 4, High School level (the French “Bac”) or on “Diploma for Access to University” Courses (henceforth “DAEU”) level as well as on university courses (Salane 2008) – higher level of education (henceforth “Sup”) Bachelor's Master's PhD level.

Thirdly, this particular context of training necessitates a strong implication on the part of Area Training Managers (ATM). Responsible for the coordination and the management of school training teams s/he has been allocated to, the ATM organizes the administrative and pedagogical enrollment of student-prisoners with Distance Learning providers. S/he receives the course material and is on the front line with regards to communicating with universities, for instance.

Lastly, European Prison Rules constitute fundamental elements present in teaching contexts in prisons environments today. They are inclined towards a qualitative change in the construction of training choices for incarcerated individuals. Consequently, they focused on tracking illiteracy and on the follow up of illiterate individuals.

## **2. Scientific position**

The study of language interactions for us is a means to understand what is taking place at the time of training between teachers/trainers and one or more student-prisoners involved. The place of language is thus at the core for three main reasons. The organizational power of language in social interactions has been demonstrated by socio-linguists. Socio-linguistic habitués are revealing in terms of the speaker, of value systems, personal history, the place s/he is seeking to take, to defend or the image s/he is trying to keep (Goff man 1991). In these approaches, language translates, expresses, claims personal or collective identity. your heading text and choose the appropriate heading level from the style menu. Insert your heading text and choose the appropriate heading level from the style menu.

Speakers display discursive strategies arising out of several language registers. These strategies were built individually and adapt to situations such as speakers perceive them. Language thus marks out the singular aspect of the strategy being used by the speaker. This strategy is creative in its coupling with the situation socially and culturally established. The social situation therefore integrates itself with a cultural context being pre-established but in construction.

Language accompanies and supports activity. It testifies the implication and commitment that facilitators have in the situation. In our case, words used, together with their gestures, by each teacher-trainer or student-prisoner, enable the designation of the object discussed or the task to be achieved.

## **3. Pedagogical mentoring**

We define pedagogical mentoring as a set of interventions carried out by a team of training facilitators for whom the goal is to train a student-inmate with a first perspective to acquire a

qualification recognized by the National Ministry of Education and secondly to facilitate his professional rehabilitation.

Each qualification is associated with a benchmark (or programmed or even sketch) which details the list of knowledge objectives to be attained by the potential laureate. The various participants involved in the training act in ways to promote learning of these knowledge. According to Docq (2008), all these actions revolve around three objectives. In our project, these objectives are reflected in three types of mentoring.

Mentoring learning necessitates the identification of factors for success which can be specific to a place or organization (Frenay, Noël, Parmentier et Romainville, 1998). They also require the setting-up of student support as, for instance, interviews during which course contents, subjects taught and associated professions are presented.

In detention centers, mentoring learning is carried out by means of meetings between student-inmates and teachers-trainers. Teacher-trainers are teaching staff from secondary education. Few university lecturers teach in prisons. The example of lecturers-researchers from the ITEEC team is certainly an exception. They gave their contribution several times in the centre where the data for this research were collected. Two Video conferences (Bonu 2007) between student-inmates and teachers from the Institute of Information and Communication Techno sciences of the University of Montpellier III also took place.

Classes are therefore given by teachers working in higher education (high school level). Exams are set in conditions similar to those for students at university except that student-inmates cannot leave the prison walls unless they have been authorized by the prison management (Penal code act sections D453 à 455).

Scientific research is currently exploring the efficiency of teaching practices by means of technologies as well as support to the professional development of teaching staff.

These teaching devices are being explored, experimented upon, evaluated and regulated. Their implementation requires of teachers that they think their practices differently and this indeed is at the core of current concerns in Teachers Training Institutes (Grau & Etienne 2010). In prisons, we are searching for distance learning devices that will answer the requirements of their population. Habits and abilities with regards to technological use are currently being observed (Cyber Base® Justice project). The implementation of each of these devices is different from one penal centre to another.

Pedagogical mentoring requires first of all the implementation of managing, coordinating the different departments which make up a training organisation. Implementing digital technologies such as Digital Working Environment (Fr “ENT”) in academic contexts reveals different practices (Charnet & Bonu 2007).

In prison centres, such environments tools as the ENT's do not exist for training courses. They are implemented on a demand basis from inmates, by the teaching team supervised by the Area Training Manager (ATM). Procedures for processing requests for enrolment as well as the actual implementation of these courses take a long time and are irksome. Timetables for classes and

exams can sometimes be difficult steps to organise but necessary from an organisational point of view.

As we have seen, mentoring learning, teaching and university training courses more particularly is justified and requires some leeway from which to build a “federating space for reciprocal commitment”.

Mentoring is an action to which the main protagonists of training devices (teachers-trainers and student-inmates) participate. Its meaning is revealed in different intellectual activities (since we are referring to teaching and training) which occur in a specific way within the context of pedagogical mentoring. According to our observations, User help can be seen as a “federating space” in the sense where it can have a crucial influence on different “forms of socialization (Simmel 1908) in prison environments. Consequently, we studied individuals' actions in the context of teaching in prisons. The specificities noted (meaning: the conditions present in a situation, or context) from the learners, student-inmates and trainers we met can be grouped together into the temporal, social and practical dimensions of pedagogical mentoring. The latter can be described as a relational space in which communications between teachers-trainers and students-inmates do occur. Seen under the three aspects just described, language in effect appears as a capture of teaching and training experiences which take place in prisons.

Mentoring implies the value of personal commitment, implication and motivation. One of the students-inmates who is implicated in the *Blitz* session described, at an interview in the Maison Central, the value of his commitment in the activity we chose to call “doing a course” in prison. He shared his own understanding of it built partly on the basis of “inmates entourage”: it is perceived as arrogance, so you want to raise yourself above us”. The battle of wills highlighted by the student raises the question of personal commitment and the great part of motivation he must have.

The process is visible in two ways: the first encourages the student-inmate to integrate himself into a group of learners in a context outside detention where the people involved and artifacts are different from the detention pole. The place differs too, since student-inmate have access to class rooms.

In the penitential centre where the corpus of the ITEEC team was created, we found that several student-inmates work during the day. Classes, therefore, take place after their working day. These class sessions between student-inmates and teacher-trainers are sustained by a code of conduct representing the way prisons are organized: the listening space privileged by the teaching programmed is elaborated accordingly.

The apparent confrontation with activities “dealt with *as if* they were normal activities” (Fabiani 1995), necessarily integrates an invisible safe threshold so that the general state of the prison environment is not altered. Within the space accommodated by both the teacher and his students, two practices are implicit in the different teaching modes we observed. On the one hand, the prison security context dictates a safeguard, a set of rules aimed at constantly adjusting

actions undertaken as far as training and the prison in general are concerned. On the other hand, the teacher and students have at their disposal some leeway with which to set up teaching situations on an individual basis. A student on a distance programmed who encounters difficulties to do either with learning or organizational matters can request help from the teacher. The shared space which would thus be claimed is for the implementation of this user help according to the constraints of prison environments.

The second level is concerned with the inmates' desire to (re)recreate social relationships with individuals from private social circles. An interview with a prisoner from the Maison d'Arrêt in Fresnes has revealed several motivating factors for training. The latter are concerned with the value given by individuals who are committed to a course, to actions that are undertaken for the purpose of their access to learning. This particular student is enrolled on the DAEU option A (literary) distance learning course. The CNED is responsible for the distance training programmed. The student can interact with teachers on the spot, for help on theoretical or organizational matters.

His commitment to such a qualifying course can be explained in terms of his desire to support his family's needs. Thus, obtaining the equivalent level to a high school qualification tallies with the hope of finding a stable job. Family and educational values held go hand in hand with his implication in the training course. It is worth noting that each prison centre has its own particularity which participates in the implementation of inmates trajectory in prison, of their penal and cultural identity.

Consequently, socialization is the motivation to act as it is experienced in pedagogical mentoring, promoting the multiple interactions and influences from the outside world on the training path taken by the person incarcerated.

This is altogether possible on the condition that inmates can be offered a distance learning programmed already tested from the organizational point of view. Indeed, practical requirements are high in the context of prison centers, so as to enhance the students' perseverance as well as their follow-up.

#### 4. To Conclude

In this article, we have shown that linguistic activities between different teaching facilitators in penitential centers (teachers and inmates) give the possibility to specify pedagogical mentoring. This educational support can be analyzed in three levels: learning, education and training. So teaching in prison is a « federating space for reciprocal action » in which educational support is structured around personal commitment of inmate and develop « socialization ». Concluding in qualifying this filed work *to be appropriate for the implementation of innovating teaching programmed*, signifies the desire to promote the appropriation of new knowledge, new learning practices for incarcerated individuals.

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