



THE THINKING SKILLS PROJECT

Bob Semmens

Youth Research Centre

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Youth Research Centre
Institute of Education
University of Melbourne
Parkville 3052

Phone: (03) 344 8251
Fax: (03) 344 8256

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Contents

Introduction	4
Purpose	4
Significance of the Research	4
Review of Related Literature	5
Methodology	6
Procedure	6
Limitations of Project	7
What Happened?	7
Analysis of the Data	11
Personal Plan Data	11
'What Happens Next' Data	14
Evaluation Data	15
Journal Data	16
Conclusion	17
References	18

Introduction

Following reports of innovative cognitive development projects in Canada and California with recidivist offenders, application was made to the Melbourne University's Institute of Education Research Committee for a small grant to run a pilot project using some of the source material from California (1992).

An initial grant was approved for a project on the 'Impact of Participation in a Cognitive Development Program on Young Adult Recidivist Offenders'. While the project received approval from the General Manager of Prisons, it was finally decided to run this small project at a community corrections unit and to seek to develop a much longer project in a prison in 1994, making use of the experience and knowledge gained from the present project.

With the permission of the General Manager of Community Corrections and the cooperation of the Carlton Community Corrections Centre, the project eventually started at the end of November 1993. There had been some delays; there were insufficient volunteers from the Carlton Centre and other inner city Centres were contacted for support. The requirement of 'recidivist' offender was dropped in order to get a group of nine (8 men and 1 woman) together in time to complete the ten two-hour sessions in 1993.

Purpose

This project aimed to assess the impact of participation in selected cognitive development tasks on a small group of young adult offenders. Impact was measured in terms of increase in the range of options proposed by each participant for solving a set of interpersonal problems.

Significance of the Research

This research addresses the issue of cognitive development for adults and the relationship between cognitive development and social competence. Even if only a small change can be measured through participation in cooperative problem-solving tasks, there are implications for teacher training and teaching practice.

The research also has potential significance for the wider community in that the current cost of the recidivism rate (in the vicinity of seventy per cent at a cost of \$1,000 per prisoner per week), may be reduced by appropriate program intervention. Similar research to that proposed in this research project is claimed to have reduced recidivism rates in Canada and possibly California.

Review of Related Literature

While there has been a lot of research, both in Australia and elsewhere, on basic and vocational education in prisons (eg Sutton, 1992), there has been very little on cognitive competence. While it is generally acknowledged that basic and vocational education provide essential practical skills, there are few accounts indicating significant improvement in the post-release situation of participants (Jenkins, 1990). There is also general agreement amongst prison educators that prisoners' problems are greater than any solution offered by skills training for the labour market. For example, Semmens found (1986, 1992) that in samples of young offenders and prisoners, those who were first time incarcerates were more likely to gain employment upon release than repeat offenders, especially if they had a relative or other advocate assisting them in gaining employment. This outcome occurred regardless of the type of prison training and was related to a lower recidivism rate. Other studies overseas support this finding (Sutton, 1992).

Such data have influenced the Canadian correctional authorities to attempt a different approach based on the work of Professor Robert Ross (1989). According to Ross:

our research and the research of others, revealed that almost every successful [correctional] program shared one characteristic in common: they included some technique which could be expected to have an impact on the offender's **thinking**.

Ross (1989) also reports that many offenders demonstrate deficits in cognitive skills, and he lists these as: impulsivity, externally controlled, concrete thinkers, conceptual rigidity, deficient interpersonal problem-solving skills, egocentricity, and irrationality. The offenders who are most likely to evidence these deficits are: adolescent offenders, alcohol and drug abusers, violent offenders, sex offenders, and chronic offenders. Ross teaches these offender groups how to develop empathy for the victim perspective, how to work co-operatively with others, how to think logically etc, through use of videos, role plays, group discussions, peer tutoring etc.

In California, a pilot project (called Personal Responsibility Curriculum, or PeRC), has been developed (Hsia-Coron, 1992). This project does not diagnose cognitive deficits - it simply focuses on the most hardened criminals, and while it uses similar teaching methods to those of Ross, it focuses much more specifically on problem-solving tasks related to successful parole, such as substance abuse, parenting, victim awareness, pre-release skills, citizenship and self-esteem. The Californian Corrections Authority is supporting the project because of its potential to reduce recidivism. The Victorian Division of Correctional Services supported this proposal for the same reason.

Methodology

Nine young adult offenders, aged between 18 to 25 years, from inner city Corrections Centres, volunteered to participate in what was advertised as the Thinking Skills Project. The project took place over ten consecutive weekdays in sessions lasting two hours.

At the first session participants were introduced to an outline of the program, a list of proposed rules, and completed two written exercises: a personal plan, and a set of five hypothetical situations. These two exercises were repeated at the last session to assess whether participants had developed their capacity to propose options for their future in a range of key decision-making areas and, secondly, whether they had increased their capacity to propose solutions to interpersonal problems. These two areas of cognitive development were selected for assessment because the literature suggests that recidivism is related to impulsive behaviour with little, if any, thinking through of options for problem-solving.

The other strong theme in the literature, that is, of taking personal responsibility for behaviour, was assessed by the extent to which participants abided by the rules that were agreed to at the first session. As with the Canadian and Californian projects, group co-operation in problem-solving was emphasised throughout.

Procedure

The group met with the researcher in a meeting room at the Carlton Community Corrections Centre on ten consecutive working days from 2 pm to 4 pm. The group sat around a table and were issued with pens for recording their responses to structured exercises. Normally, the researcher introduced and explained an exercise and then the group completed the exercise individually before discussing their responses with the rest of the group. The group respected the rule of one person speaking at a time and there were no put-downs of others' work.

At the end of each session, participants completed a journal which was handed to the researcher to be used in evaluation of the project. All other material developed in each session was taken home by the participants for their personal record of participation and for further thinking.

At the end of the final session each participant received a cheque for \$100, being made up of \$10 for each session attended. One member dropped out after two sessions, leaving eight to receive \$100 each.

Limitations of the Project

The short duration of the project was its greatest limitation because cognitive development takes place over time, and if new ways of solving problems are to be assimilated and accommodated in a Piagetian sense, then teaching and practice are required. However, it was decided to proceed with the project as a pilot for the proposed larger study in 1994. At least some of the Californian material could be trialled and modified, if necessary, for the longer project.

Another limitation of the project was the lack of a standard measurement instrument for assessment of cognitive change over the period of the project. The two instruments developed for the project have yet to be validated, so while it may be possible to check recidivism rates at some later date, it will not be known whether these rates have any relationship to the way that participants think.

The size of the sample would also make it impossible to generalise any outcomes from this project to other offender groups. The project is therefore largely an exploratory study to evaluate the impact of certain structured cognitive exercises on a group of offenders, and to establish what further work may be necessary before a larger study can be undertaken.

What Happened?

Session 1

Seven participants arrived and brief personal introductions were made around the table. The purpose of the project was outlined and proposed content for all ten sessions distributed. Participants also received and discussed a set of rules for conduct of the sessions. The rules were accepted.

After one hour there was a five-minute break for smokers and coffee drinkers. This procedure was repeated at every session.

Participants then completed the personal pro forma and the 'what happens next' exercise.

The session concluded with individual comments, recorded on a daily journal pro forma, which were handed to the researcher before leaving.

Session 2

Two new participants arrived today as they could not be contacted by their correctional officers in time for the previous session. After introductions, the researcher summarised the events of the previous session and requested comments from participants. There was general agreement that some cases in the 'what happens next' exercise were not particularly relevant to the age or life experience of the group and this affected their response. As the participants did not know that the 'what happens next' exercise was to be re-administered at the last session, the researcher decided to review the instrument before the last session.

The researcher introduced a discussion on aims, goals and objectives. Participants were given some practice in writing a personal goal and then completed a goal-setting exercise in which they each divided a circle into segments of life areas, the size of each segment signifying the level of importance of each life area. Participants were asked to write down a goal, in positive terms, for each of their two most important life areas. These were then discussed in turn by the whole group, clarified and modified where appropriate.

Session 3

Two members were absent from this session, one apparently due to a personal hassle, but the other unknown and not heard of again.

The main issues for each of the participants arising from the previous session were discussed as a way of revising and consolidating their understanding and application of the goal-setting exercise.

Problem-solving was introduced as a rational process for developing options and predicting consequences of decisions. Problem-solving was seen as essential to achievement of personal goals.

Some practice situations were brainstormed as a group before each individual took a worksheet to develop options and select the best possible solution of a personal issue at the moment. Responses were then discussed by the whole group. Further discussion was requested on the problems of drug and alcohol abuse.

Session 4

The first part of the session was given to a brainstorm on reasons why people choose to use drugs and then what alternatives are available for meeting these needs. It was agreed that this was a difficult exercise because drug use was usually an emotional response rather than a rational decision. The researcher introduced some further discussion through explanation of a diagrammatic relationship between emotion, reason and will. There was agreement that the consequences of some uncontrolled emotional responses are destructive and that discussion of options for solving personal problems with trusted others would reduce the need to escape through drug use when problems get too big. However, long-term happiness versus short-term excitement and tension release was the central theme of the debate.

A similar discussion was conducted on alcohol abuse.

The second part of the session was a more light-hearted discussion of options and solutions for some brain-teasers.

Session 5

The relationship between morality and the options we see as acceptable for problem-solving was explored through the Alligator River exercise in which the actions of the five characters were evaluated. There was a lot of animated discussion and

participants felt that it was they enjoyed the most (along with the brain-teaser session).

After the smoke break, participants were asked to individually list the principles of their own moral code. This was followed by discussion of what each person had written. The predominant theme was care of self, family and friends, expressed in terms of personal appearance and/or loyalty in relationships, as well as staying crime-free.

Session 6

Revision. The way that one member, with the assistance of the researcher, had gone about exploring his options for returning to education over the last few days was used as a basis for revision of the sessions on goal-setting, brainstorming, exploring options, and weighing-up consequences before moving to a solution.

Another situation that affected every member of the group was the problem of how much to pay each member and how they might solve the problem of cashing their cheques on the last day of the project as some could not afford to wait the bank clearance period on payment of their cheque. The problem of how much to pay each person, as three members had missed one session for various reasons, was solved equitably. The problem of cash led to some explanation of how the University system works but the key question was how did the banking system work as it was the source of the money. The researcher was requested to speak directly to the bank. As a result, the next day, the bank found a way to cash the cheques. What reinforcement for the project's emphasis on thinking through options together in the problem-solving process!

After the smoke break, the group completed an interpersonal communication questionnaire, scored it, and then discussed it. This was preparation for the next session on interpersonal communication, especially how to handle put-downs.

Session 7

Some examples of put-downs were explored together and positive solutions proposed. Then each member was asked to write down a recent personal situation in which he/she felt put-down, and propose a positive outcome. The group discussed each member's example.

After the break, the group was asked to participate in a relaxation exercise. In the ensuing discussion, participants agreed that it was a simple and pleasant way to relax and that they would practise it regularly.

Participants were then given a pro forma sheet to take home and use in preparation for the personal problem-solving session the next day.

Session 8

With the exception of one member who was absent, the remaining seven members participated in discussion of options and solutions to personal problem situations presented by five members. Of the other two members, one wanted more time to

think about how to present the problem and the other felt that the group could not do anything about his problem, so did not want to discuss it at all. However, the level of involvement in the discussion demonstrated a sincere desire to provide practical solutions to problems.

Session 9

There was no new material volunteered by anyone who did not present a problem for group discussion at the previous session. However, there were some minor points arising from other presentations which were discussed before the group was asked to consider two hypothetical situations causing anxiety which were similar to two problems raised at the previous session. The focus was on how to reduce anxiety so that the most rational response can be made.

After the smoke break, participants were given a worksheet which required them to think of one of the biggest fights they have ever had and how it might have turned out better. Each participant then presented his/her work to the group for discussion.

Session 10

The session started with revision of issues and conclusions from the previous session. Then, as this was the last session, it was decided (by the researcher beforehand) that no new personal material would be raised at this session because there would be only limited opportunity to follow through on issues arising from it. Instead, the group was presented with the Heart Transplant exercise in which they had to work together to decide which four out of ten applicants would receive a life-saving heart transplant. Some strong attitudes towards minority groups emerged but, generally, there was an attitude of tolerance of difference even if that difference was not understood.

The exercise was successful in taking the direct focus away from the personal situation of the participants and onto their attitudes towards others in the community. However, most participants saw it as the least interesting exercise in the whole program. Some conceded that this may have been due to this being the last session and their not wanting to work as hard as in previous sessions.

To complete the session, a program evaluation form was filled in by each member and then the 'Life Plan' and the 'What Happens Next' exercise were re-administered. Three of the initial five 'What Happens Next' situations were replaced in accordance with the relevance requirement raised by members in session 1. As usual, completion of the daily journal concluded the session. Participants were then handed an envelope containing a certificate recognising their participation, a personal note from the researcher, and, of course, the cheque - before a walk over to the bank.

Analysis of Data

Personal Plan Data

The personal plan form listed areas for planning and asked respondents to state their plans now, in three months, and in six months in each area. There were ten areas - income, job, accommodation, transport, legal, health, recreation, education/training, and personal growth. They were also asked to prioritise the areas into most important (ranking of 1) to least important (ranking of 10). If a plan for the present was listed, a score of one point was allocated in that area. If a plan was listed for three months, a further point was allocated, and again for six months - making a total of three points in each area and an overall possible total of thirty points for planning. An additional point was allocated for each area ranked, making a possible total of ten points to be added to the planning points. The maximum number of points available totalled forty.

On the first administration of the personal plan form, the following scores were obtained, as indicated in Table 1.

Table 1: Personal Plan - 1

<i>Area</i>	<i>Participant</i>							
	<i>A</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>G</i>	<i>H</i>
Income	1	0	2	3	0	1	1	0
Job	1	0	1	3	2	1	1	0
Family	0	0	0	3	1	1	0	0
Accommodation	0	0	2	3	2	1	0	0
Transport	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	0
Legal	0	0	1	1	1	2	1	0
Health	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0
Recreation	0	0	1	0	2	2	1	0
Education/Training	0	1	0	3	3	2	0	0
Personal Growth	0	0	0	3	0	2	1	0
Sub-total	3	1	8	20	12	14	7	0
Rankings	0	6	10	0	10	10	10	10
Total (out of 40)	3	7	18	20	22	24	17	10

Table 1 indicates that prior to commencement of the program, only one member (D) demonstrated some competence in planning his future in the areas of the planning form. However, he made no attempt to rank the areas according to their importance

to him for action. On the other hand, another member demonstrated no ability to plan but was able to rank all areas according to their importance to him for action.

Most participants had a sense of future in relation to some areas but not in others. The possible explanation for this is that some areas were of present interest or concern and others were not.

The instrument itself needs further refinement. Availability of objective measurement instruments in the area of cognitive development is a limiting factor for this project and qualitative data such as participant journals, researcher observations, and participant evaluations, were used to compare with data from the planning form. Despite its limitations, it was expected that the planning form would yield data upon re-administration which would indicate whether participants had learned to plan and prioritise in the areas of the form as a result of their participation in the Thinking Skills Project. Table 2 throws some light on that proposition.

Table 2: Personal Plan - 2

<i>Area</i>	<i>Participant</i>							
	<i>A</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>G</i>	<i>H</i>
Income	2	1	2	3	1	1	1	0
Job	1	0	2	1	0	2	2	1
Family	1	0	2	1	2	1	1	0
Accommodation	1	1	2	2	0	1	1	0
Transport	1	1	1	1	1	2	2	1
Legal	1	0	2	0	0	0	1	0
Health	2	0	2	0	2	0	0	0
Recreation	0	0	1	0	2	0	1	0
Education/Training	2	0	2	2	2	1	0	0
Personal Growth	2	0	0	2	1	0	1	0
Sub-total	13	3	16	12	13	8	10	2
Rankings	0	7	10	0	10	10	10	10
Total (out of 40)	13	10	26	12	23	18	20	12

Comparing data in tables 1 and 2, it appears that there has been no change in participants' ability to prioritise needs as measured by the planning form. Those who could prioritise at the beginning were able to do so at the end, and vice versa.

In relation to ability to articulate plans in the areas of the planning form, it appears that there were some small increases for most participants. The exceptions are participants D and F. However, D had worked hard during the sessions and had

established some clear goals for education, accommodation, and family in particular. He may have felt that writing these plans down was an unnecessary activity. Such a proposition would be consistent with his lack of attention to his daily journal in which he recorded very little information, although he worked hard in every session.

In the case of F, it may be that his impending court appearance was interfering with his motivation to plan or to demonstrate his ability to plan. Again, he was a consistent worker in the Thinking Skills sessions.

Nevertheless, some questions remain about the Planning Form. Firstly, some of the areas require greater capacity to discriminate than others. For example, the difference between 'income' and 'job' is not as great as the difference between 'legal' and 'transport' so that much the same information could be recorded under 'income' as 'job' for a maximum score of 6, whereas quite different information would have to be recorded to score 3 plus 3 for the maximum combined score of 6 for 'legal' and 'transport'. Further, the area of 'education and training' can be related to 'income' and 'job', so a respondent who is active in all three areas at present has a chance of scoring disproportionately higher than others who are pre-occupied with other areas at the time of completing the Planning Form.

Hassles of the moment may also influence thinking and planning in the various areas of the Planning Form. For example, those who did not have any recent court appearances or fines to pay, had no plans in the legal area and consequently, gained no points. Similarly, if a respondent is content with his/her accommodation at present, he/she is unlikely to have plans in that area.

These observations point to the need for a much more sensitive instrument for measuring ability to plan and ability to prioritise actions in relation to those plans - assuming that these are among the most important cognitive skills that offenders need to learn to improve their chances of taking initiative and responsibility for their lives, as opposed to reacting impulsively to situations in which they find themselves, which Ross and others (1985) claim is a major cause of recidivism.

'What Happens Next' Data.

In this exercise, participants were asked to write down as many options for possible solutions they could think of that were available in each of five situations. The options were then counted and that became the 'score' for each individual. Unknown to the participants it was proposed to present the same situations again at the last session to see whether further options had occurred to participants during the course of the program. However, there was agreement after the first administration that some situations were so far outside the experience of participants that they were too hypothetical for them to think of a large number of options. Taking note of this, the researcher replaced the more 'hypothetical' situations with some new situations for the second administration of the exercise.

Two participants were not present at the first session and there was no time for them to complete the exercise at the second session, so there is no data from them shown in Table 3.

Table 3: What Happens Next - 1

<i>Situation</i>	<i>Participant</i>							
	<i>A</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>G</i>	<i>H</i>
1	1	1		1	1	2	2	
2	1	1		0	1	2	1	
3	0	1		1	1	2	1	
4	1	1		1	1	2	2	
5	1	1		1	1	1	2	
Total	4	5		4	4	9	7	

It is clear from Table 3 that ideas were not running fast on the first administration of the 'What Happens Next' exercise and the participants' criticisms may have been warranted.

On the second administration, situations 1 and 5 remain the same and provide a basis for comparison with possible developments in capacity for thinking through a range of options and consequences before responding to situations. The responses to the second administration are presented in Table 4.

<i>Situation</i>	Table 4: What Happens Next - 2.							
	<i>Participant</i>							
	<i>A</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>G</i>	<i>H</i>
1	1	1	2	4	1	3	2	1
2	1	2	3	2	2	2	2	2
3	2	2	2	2	2	3	2	1
4	4	1	3	1	2	2	2	1
5	3	2	2	1	2	2	2	1
Total	11	8	12	10	9	12	10	6

If situations 1 and 5 are compared, omitting participants C and H, there was an increase from a group total of seven options for each situation to twelve options for each item. This may be due to practice effect as the situations had been considered less than two weeks apart. However, the three new items also attracted a similar number of responses at the final session. This may indicate that where situations are more closely related to the experience of the respondents, they will think of a wider range of options. Practice in brainstorming during the program may have also increased the range of options developed. The sample is too small to draw any firm conclusions or to apply any tests of significance, but the method of presentation of common human problem situations for solution, could be worth pursuing further trials in preparation for future evaluations of Thinking Skills projects. The approach is simple to score as there is little opportunity for ambiguity in responses - a stated option is counted as an option with no judgment about its practicality as a viable solution.

Evaluation Data

At the last session all participants completed an evaluation sheet which asked them to:

1. list the three activities they liked best, with reasons;
2. list the three activities they liked least, with reasons;
3. what improvements they would make if the project were run again;
4. what other activities they might include.

The best liked activities were the Alligator River exercise, the brainteasers, group problem-solving, and handling put-downs. These activities were rated in the top three preferences of three or more participants and the main reason given was that everyone got involved.

The least liked activity was the Heart-Transplant exercise. This was the only activity that was disliked by three or more participants. Most participants did not use up their three choices in response to this question. The main reason given for disliking

Heart-Transplant was that it was not related to their personal situation. It could have been, but the researcher chose to keep the focus on tolerance of difference in the community because the issue of prejudice is directly related to their own appreciation of their situation in the community, and because the researcher more strongly resisted the attempts of some members to turn the sessions into some sort of personal therapy group. This was the last session and he did not want to leave loose ends that may have needed to be dealt with at a further meeting. This was of concern to the researcher because there was continuing pressure from three members to take a more therapeutic approach to the project. There was equal pressure from others not to delve into personal emotional health.

Despite their expressed dislike, the group did develop some perspectives on how to solve the problem of who should get the transplants - random allocation, equal ratio of males and females of child-bearing age, and the top four on the list, as well as the expected process of exclusion of the least liked people on the list.

The question about improvements to the program drew some interesting responses. Some would like more brainteaser exercises and Alligator River-type exercises. One thought that at the beginning everyone should be asked their opinion on what issues to discuss. Three others thought that video could have been used to stimulate discussion on issues such as job-seeking, communication skills and learning skills. One suggested that a bonus payment be paid to those who arrive on time. Another thought there should be deeper exploration of individual problems while two others thought that the sessions should be longer and the series should be for more than ten sessions.

The fourth question, on additional activities, yielded positive comments about the project. There seemed to be agreement that the provided activities were suitable - more of the same would have been better.

Journal Data

A common theme in the journals was that the group provided a positive atmosphere for discussion of personal problems. They did seem to like each other and feel safe with the researcher. An oft-expressed opinion was that "there are other people in the world with problems at least as big as mine".

Participants expressed relief that they could 'open-up' as if it were a new experience for them. For example, one wrote: "I am getting better at opening-up and it's good being able to think of options for other people." A similar view was expressed by another who wrote: "the best thing was meeting new people and talking openly about feelings and problems."

Yet another wrote that he had a 'feeling of belonging' in the group and that it was valuable to him to hear other points of view and to think that his opinion might be valued by others in the group. Everyone mentioned the personal value of discussion and conversation. They liked participating and they seemed to like each other. The high attendance rate supports this general observation.

An overall impression of the researcher is that these unemployed young offenders were concerned about their lack of self-esteem and generally wanted therapy for

this. They were not apathetic about work although some had been out of work for a long time - one had never had a job although he left school six years ago having completed Year 12. There was some anger about lack of employment opportunities but this group was a long way from being anarchic - they wanted desperately to be part of mainstream society. They hated being on the dole and they resented the frequently off-handed treatment of CES staff and insensitive employers who advertise jobs and then treat applicants with contempt.

Conclusion

This project set out to teach cognitive skills to a group of young offenders. From personal reports of participants, it appears that some progress was made towards that goal in the short space available for the project.

The instruments for measurement of the degree of learning that took place need further refinement and at this stage can only support the general observation that participants appeared to gain something from their participation. Participant reports suggest that they learned some new things about themselves and problem-solving, and that they also gained emotional satisfaction from the opportunity of meeting together and discussing issues. Unfortunately there is no provision for formal follow-up but the researcher indicated to participants that he is available on an individual basis if there are issues that they wish to follow up over the next few weeks.

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