



Photo: Gage Skidmore

Prison Stories

How research at Sydney's LCT Centre for Knowledge-Building is impacting the rehabilitation of inmates at Durham's high security prisons

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An Associate Member of the newly created LCT Centre for Knowledge-Building, Steve Kirk of Durham University (UK), is helping take Legitimation Code Theory (LCT) inside the walls of UK prisons.

LCT is a theoretical framework for analysing and changing knowledge practices created by Associate Professor Karl Maton of SSPS. The approach is rapidly growing in its international reach and transformative impact in education and beyond. One idea created by Maton involves exploring 'semantic waves' in knowledge, or movements between concrete and abstract ideas and between simpler and more complex knowledge. Over the past three years Steve Kirk has been using these ideas to inform teaching and learning at Durham University, across disciplines from anthropology to physics.

In the past year, tutors at Durham University's English Language Centre have extended their use inside Durham's high security male prison, HMP Frankland, and its women's prison, HMP Low Newton, through their work supporting the Criminology Department's modules in 'Issues in Social Justice'. These modules, led by Professor Fiona Measham, bring together inmates ('Insiders') and university students ('Outsiders') as peer learners, receiving the same readings and meeting weekly to discuss the module face-to-face within the prison in order to submit a portfolio of four reflective writing assignments. Durham is the first UK university to implement this 'Inside-Out' program, receiving positive, high-profile interest from both the national media and British Government. Key to its success is the academic credibility and transformative potential of the reflective writing assignments and it is here that LCT is playing its part.

Using ideas from LCT, staff from the English Language Centre are providing support sessions for both Insiders and Outsiders, utilising the way LCT allows its ideas to move between highly complex theory and simple, concrete practice. Here, teachers are using pictorial and even gestural representations of 'semantic waves' to show students, both at university and inside prisons, how concrete experience and abstract ideas from criminology can be weaved together to create powerful understandings of both. As well as teaching how to write their reflective assignments, this work is having transformative effects for both Insiders and Outsiders.

Initially some Insiders believed that only the academic knowledge in their readings was valuable, discounting their own personal experiences. Teachers showed Insiders how their own experiences were not only valuable for grounding and engaging with academic ideas but could in turn become informed by criminology to generate generalisations. For example, in a memorable encounter for one teacher, an Insider drew an analogy between connecting theory with empirical evidence and the idea of members of a court appealing to expert witnesses in a trial. The teacher reported this as a breakthrough moment in the tutorial: the Insider student saw for the first time how academic knowledge could be brought to bear on his everyday experiences

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to inform and problematise them, enabling new interpretations and understandings of that experience. These ideas from LCT are also proving transformative for the Outsiders, who felt they they had little of value to say because they lacked the richness and depth of Insiders' prison experiences.

The LCT notion of semantic waves that weave together concrete and abstract ideas is thus informing the Durham English Language Centre staff's work with the Inside-Out students, contributing to the transformative experience these modules are offering. Moreover, thanks to the ways in which LCT helps make visible the 'rules of the game' for succeeding in education, other parts of the LCT framework are likely to be drawn on to enhance this work further. This innovative program is thereby highlighting how the highly sophisticated theoretical framework of LCT has real, concrete outcomes that support social justice.

As well as Associate PG Member of the LCT Centre (undertaking his doctorate using LCT), Steve Kirk is Senior Teaching Fellow, English Language Centre, at Durham University, UK.

