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Creating space(s) for learning in prison: Developing an andragogical framework

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Abstract

Learning in prison is too often excluded from wider discussions of educational experiences, processes and impact. This paper proposes, for the first time, an iterative andragogical framework to conceptualise learning spaces within prison contexts. The authors followed a shared reflective process, drawing on the principles of collaborative autoethnography to consider our collective experiences and insights as researchers and practitioners who have worked across a diverse range of learning spaces within prisons. Through this analysis, we found four intersecting andragogical considerations, which we posit as fundamental to the curation of constructive learning spaces within prison contexts. The themes we present here are respecting the agency of participants, embedding co-production, and fostering trust and trustworthiness. In combination, these feed into an overarching theme which permeates the discussion: power. The article considers ways in which these themes shape the potential of learning spaces within prisons. These insights aim to spark further dialogue, inviting others to deepen, challenge, and evolve the propositions put forward in this framework.

KEYWORDS

andragogical framework, Learning spaces, prison education, prisoner learning

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Key insights

What is the main issue that this paper addresses?

- Learning in prison is too often excluded from wider discussions of educational experiences, process, and impact. This paper responds to a general absence of andragogical attention received by learning environments within prisons.

What are the main insights that the paper provides?

- This paper proposes an iterative andragogical framework to conceptualise learning spaces within the prison context. It presents the themes of agency, co-production, trust and power as significant andragogical considerations in the curation of constructive learning spaces in prison.

INTRODUCTION

Education provision has been a feature of the modern prison system since its inception. In contemporary practice, it has become embedded within the rehabilitative ideologies underpinning the Western carceral model. Yet, despite provision within every prison in England and Wales, the breadth and variety of educational spaces too often escape academic interrogation.

When education in prison is raised in criminal justice policy discussions, it is typically viewed through the lens of its ability to impact the future offending trajectory of the student. Framed in terms of rehabilitative outcomes, the intrinsic value of education is lost from view and becomes distorted to meet carceral objectives. This instrumental view of education in prisons is reflected in some strands of associated research literature. A recent scoping review of prison education research (Berglund et al., 2025) identifies neo-liberal ideas in existing research that “emphasises the utility aspect of education, such as reducing recidivism and increasing future employability” (p. 447). In this paper, we resist this perspective, focusing instead on the learning practices within prisons and reflecting on the pedagogical—or, as we shall go on to argue, andragogical—values that are shaped by and within the prison environment. This remains an underexplored area, which we aim to address through the original approaches taken in this paper. To do this, we draw on the combined experiences of the authors to propose an andragogical framework of values for consideration in the creation of learning spaces in prisons. In doing so, it moves away from the narrower, reductionist and instrumentalist perspectives so often attached to the value of education and learning in prison (as highlighted and challenged by Behan, 2014; Warner, 2018) and instead explores the pedagogical particularities and potential of these spaces.

Our approach is interdisciplinary and brings together – for the first time – insights from both prison education and prison library research. Although there is considerable overlap between these bodies of literature, especially regarding discussions of learning spaces and informal learning, they have traditionally remained distinct. Prison library research has largely been published within library studies journals (Garner, 2022) and fails to draw on criminological theories to aid understanding (Finlay & Bates, 2018; Stearns, 2004), while prison education research rarely alludes to the role of the library in the wider learning experience in prison. Integrating these two strands of scholarship has allowed us to develop a more comprehensive understanding of learning spaces within the prison context.

Whether exploring support for learning to read, IT skills, vocational programmes, or higher education, operating within the criminal justice system brings with it the neoliberal carceral frameworks of order, surveillance and control, which distort the intentions and objectives of the delivery of this education (Czerniawski, 2016). Current policies and practices within prison education are therefore shaped by the embedded 'meta-goal' of reducing recidivism (Cheliotis, 2014). Set within the environment of an inflated and inflating prison population, the legacies of austerity politics and now operating in a 'post' COVID world, spaces of learning within prison are uniquely shaped by this combination of cultural, policy and funding structures. The experience of learning within prison is therefore inescapably framed by an entanglement with the 'depth, weight and tightness' (Crewe, 2011) of the wider carceral experience, necessitating that these learning spaces be understood in their own right and with their distinct features.

This article begins by presenting a review of the literature exploring adult learning, with a focus on examining the experience, position, and impact of learning in prison. We contextualise our developing andragogical framework through an exploration of the ideas of learning spaces in prisons, capturing the diversity of educational experiences and practices and underpinning the values which we posit. We go on to set out our collaborative methodological approach before introducing our original, iterative framework. We hope that future engagement in enhancing these ideas will deepen, challenge and evolve the propositions which we put forward in this andragogical framework for creating spaces for learning in prison. We offer this article as a conversation starter to inform and provoke discussions among current or future practitioners, policy-makers and theorists of prison learning and learning spaces.

Contextualising adult learning (in prison)

As Merriam et al. (2007) observe, 'there is no single theory of adult learning'. Rather, they argue, there exists 'a number of frameworks, or models, each of which contributes something to our understanding of adults as learners' (p. 89). Since its inception in the 1970s, Jack Mezirow's (1978, 1990, 1991) ideas of transformative learning have been central to understandings of adult learning and are a popular framework for understanding experiences of students in prison. Mezirow highlighted ten phases of 'perspective transformation', starting with a 'disorienting dilemma', leading to 'self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame' and eventually 'reintegration into one's life on the basis of one's new perspective' (Mezirow, 1995). In their application of this perspective to prison-based learners, Pike and Hopkins (2019) argue that these processes can reflect the positive identity shifts, increased self-awareness and resilience that they saw in their study of higher-level learners at the end of their prison sentences.

Paulo Freire's ideas of transformation have also been impactful in prison learning literature, with his radical vision of education as a process of 'emancipatory transformation' (Freire, 1970). Similar to Mezirow, Freire also centralises critical reflection, yet for Freire, the transformation is necessarily a *social* (rather than individual/self) experience, and one that allows the more critically aware learner to rediscover their power (cf. Taylor, 1998), both individually and together. Freire's preoccupation with power, oppression and education as fundamentally linked to emancipatory freedom, provides an important context to the position of the in-prison learner, and his vision of 'education as the practice of freedom' is popular amongst prison-university partnership practitioners and academics (cf. Ludlow and Armstrong, 2016; King et al., 2019). Freire's close attention to power relationships is reflected in his promotion of non-hierarchical learning environments and horizontal relationships between student and teacher, where dialogue is based on 'mutual trust' (1972, p. 80).

Another important framework for understanding adult learning is proposed by Malcolm Knowles' (1973, 1978). His theory of andragogy identified six assumptions of adults as learners; they are independent, autonomous beings who can self-direct their own learning; their life experience provides a significant learning resource; they are goal-oriented; they are relevancy-oriented; they highlight practicality, and adult learning should encourage collaboration (Knowles, 1985). Although scholars continue to discuss the scope of the applicability of Knowles' approach, critiquing the universality of the notion of andragogy (cf. St. Clair, 2002) and the ability of the concept to explain adult learning rather than being a set of values for good practice in teaching (Brookfield, 1986), in combination with the perspectives discussed above, we argue that the concept of andragogy continues to provide a valuable framework for recognising the autonomous adult in education spaces and for comprehensively supporting learning undertaken by adults. We have decided to position our framework within the assumptions of andragogy (rather than pedagogy) as we see our principles as closely aligned with Knowles' approach, and we value the explicit focus on the adult learner. Other scholars have also suggested that andragogy provides a useful theoretical framework for understanding adult education in the prison context (e.g. Conway, 2023; Thomas & Glazzard, 2025). In carceral spaces, where adults are routinely infantilised, we see using the language of andragogy as a small part of our wider attempt to resist further embedding these hierarchical structures.

In applying an andragogical framework to prison education, it is important to reflect the characteristics of the learner cohort often represented within these environments. Learners within prisons present a complex picture of personal, social and health backgrounds with diverse educational trajectories and a higher level of neurodivergence than the general population (Criminal Justice Joint Inspection, 2021). For many learners engaging in education within prison settings, their prior experiences of education have been negative, with experiences of interruption, exclusion and unfulfilled potential dominating many educational narratives (Bennallick, 2019; Graham, 2014; Nichols, 2021). This is consistent with research on mature students returning to education more generally, which reflects that many see education (particularly higher education) as not for 'the likes of me' (Reay, 2002, p. 407), which echoes across the prison estate.

These experiences can be replicated by some of the spaces and practices of learning within prison environments, further limiting opportunities for autonomous expression and ownership over the processes of education they are engaging in (Bennallick, 2019; Condirston, 2023). Choice over the content, level and delivery of the provision is heavily limited within most prison education departments. Ministry of Justice policies mandate lower-level qualifications for progression within the prison; the majority of programmes funded through the central education contracts do not reach above level 2; technological limitations – including no internet access – restrict most learners to limited access to word processing devices at specific times, if at all. Although education departments in prison can be some of the least traditionally carceral spaces within a prison, with some of the sharper ends of the experience more muted (Crewe et al., 2014; Warr, 2016) they are still framed by the restrictions which heavily restrict a learner's opportunity to exercise autonomy, act independently and follow their goals, as per Knowles' andragogical values.

However, although there is an overrepresentation of previous negative schooling experience in the prison estate, journeys into education within prison are also diverse and deeply individual. Similarly, there is also a range of experiences of education *within* prisons. Practices within the more traditional classrooms of an education department account for a large amount of learning, but there are also varied practices outside of these. From peer-led models of learning to read (importantly Shannon Trust's Turning Pages programme) through to higher level distance learning in cells (including those supported by Prisoners' Education

Trust and the Open University), there are diverse examples of learning in prisons. It is across the range of practices that we position our analysis.

Creating spaces

As the above has sought to demonstrate, practices of education within a prison – despite being heavily restricted and largely focused on low levels – are widespread and diverse. They encompass learning in classrooms, self-directed learning in libraries, studying together, studying alone, accredited qualifications, informal practices, introductory courses and degree programmes. They can be isolating and mirror previous experiences of failed schooling systems (Graham, 2014), or they could be a vital connection to a former identity which is being otherwise eroded by the prison system (Bennallick, 2019). Whilst recognising that in this paper we will be unable to account for all these experiences, we ground our perspectives in the diversity of experience we have seen across our work in a range of prison learning environments. Many of the environments which we draw upon here fall outside the centrally contracted education provision. However, we propose that the andragogical considerations which we put forward are also valuable within these settings.

This article seeks to shift the lens away from the content, curriculum and institutionalised purpose of prison education and instead focus on the places, relationships and processes that facilitate prison-based adult learning. We explicitly adopt a spatial frame for our analysis to unbind the discussion from restrictive understandings of the physical locations these processes operate in (often limiting analysis to the education department), as well as to detach it from pre-determined notions of what constitutes education and learning. In his literature review of education in prison, Behan (2021) points to the significance of the notion of 'space' when establishing a learning environment in prison, recognising that "education can take place in various spaces, and each space can entail the adoption of a different educational approach" (p. 63). However, this approach remains largely absent from prison education literature, as demonstrated by Berglund et al.'s (2025) scoping review, which identified eight main themes within associated research, including outcomes of education programmes, perspectives of learners and teachers, policy and ICT. None of the identified themes related to the role and significance of learning spaces in the prison environment. Here, we build on Wilson's analysis of education in prison as a *third space*, a space which 'supports its own culturally-specific discourse, generated, influenced and sustained by the interrelation of... notions of prison and [education]' (2000, p. 54). Within such third spaces, there exists a liminality leading to experiences which sit outside the usual social environment of both the prison and education within the community. By focusing on space, we allow for the relational aspects of the environment to take centre-stage, have flexibility in the meanings attached to an educational interaction and challenge assumptions of 'educentricity' which can restrict individual and institutional understandings of what education is and should be (Wilson, 2004).

Situated learning theorists understand learning to be deeply connected to the context in which the learning happens (Brown et al., 1989; Greeno, 1997; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Thus, knowledge is understood as generated through participation in cultural practices, and not simply to exist in a world of its own or in the minds of individuals (Paavola et al., 2004: 557). Under this conception of learning, the traditional 'acquisition' or 'transfer' metaphors are replaced by a metaphor of 'participation' (Sfard, 1998). Rather than acquiring knowledge, developing concepts or other deeply embedded conceptions of learning, learning becomes understood as an interactive network of learning relationships (Gallacher et al., 2007; Mayes et al., 2001; Sfard, 1998), participatory practices (Billett, 2002) and identity processes of 'becoming' a student (Lave & Wenger, 1991). We build upon these perspectives here in our own development of the situated experience of prison-based learning.

Crewe et al.'s (2014) analysis of the 'emotional zones' of a prison provides a valuable conceptual positioning for our andragogical framework. They argue that some learning spaces can become 'intermediate zones' or 'marginal spaces' which fit neither the 'front-stage' nor 'backstage' analysis of traditional sociological accounts of the prison. Within these environments, the 'normal rules of the prisoner society can be partially or temporarily suspended', allowing for a 'broader emotional register' than elsewhere across the prison (p. 67). Warr (2016) recognises the significance of these 'emotional contours' within education spaces within prisons, seeing these as 'nexuses of welfare—spaces in which the central concern is one of care not control, where interactions are predicated upon learning, mutual respect, creativity and personal development rather than surveillance and constraint' (p. 19). We recognise these dynamics within the wide range of learning spaces which we have collectively explored and seek to further develop the rich description of these spaces.

NARRATIVE METHODOLOGY

For more than a decade, the authors have each explored education in prison with various points of focus. The scope of our work includes exploring prison-based learning culture (Bennallick, 2019), prisoner leadership through education (Bennallick & Laryea-Adekimi, 2025), children's education in secure environments (Little, 2015; Little, 2020), belonging, ethical praxis and co-production in prison learning environments (Little, 2023; Little, 2024; Little & Warr, 2022), the role of the prison library (Finlay & Bates, 2018), prison library policy and practice (Finlay et al., 2024), informal learning in prison libraries (Finlay, 2020; Finlay & Bates, 2021), adult prisoners' experiences of education (Nichols, 2021), and delivering higher education in high security prisons (Nichols, 2018).

Throughout this time, we have been connected by our shared interests and commitment to education in prison and have often come together to discuss our work, challenges that we have faced, and our ideas for new avenues of exploration. Uniquely, alongside our research, we also all have experience in facilitating learning in prisons in various forms. This situates us collectively in a novel space where we can critically reflect on learning in prison from both researcher and practitioner perspectives. For the first time, this article brings together our shared reflections on our insights and experiences as researchers, educators, and librarians as a collective voice.

We came together to deliver the panel 'Creating Learning Spaces in Prison' at the British Educational Research Association (BERA) 2023 conference. The individual papers incorporated research on creating trustworthy learning spaces, recognising prisoners as adult learners, creating a culture of learning in the prison library, and the role of Higher Education in creating prison-based learning cultures. We audio-recorded the papers and subsequently listened back to them, after the conference, to draw out the 'golden threads'. We followed this with regular meetings over many months where we shared our perspectives and our experiences, seeking to find where these intersected and to create a common understanding. This enabled the core themes from the individual papers to steadily emerge, culminating in this paper's goal to instigate the iterative development of what could become a framework for creating effective spaces for learning in prisons.

Rather than attempting to engage with a predetermined methodological approach, this article has emerged organically from the process described above. To capture this process, we have identified that it could be articulated through the reflexivity element of collaborative autoethnography (CAE). CAE is an approach where researchers engage in dialogic reflection on both their individual and collective lived experiences with the aim of developing a meaningful understanding of sociocultural phenomena (Chang et al., 2012). It entails the 'collaborative pooling of stories to search for commonalities and differences followed

by an iterative discussion in which the researchers, working together, critically and reflexively search for meaning and contextualization through their socio-cultural contexts' (Dyer et al., 2024, p. 433). In our case, we came together as four academics with both research and practitioner experience of facilitating learning in prisons, and engaged in sustained dialogue to interrogate our respective practices and research findings to make sense of what we have collectively learned about creating effective learning spaces in prisons.

In addition to the panel at the BERA 2023 conference igniting discussions for this article, we were also acutely aware that we were the only conference contributors representing education research in prisons. From attending the conference in previous years, we are also aware that this was not an anomaly. This provided further motivation to establish stronger links between our research in prison learning and the wider education research community.

ANDRAGOGICAL PRINCIPLES AND VALUES

This section presents three thematic concepts which emerged from our collective discussions. These themes draw together findings from both our own research endeavours and our critical reflections of our educational practice across the prison estate, and form the foundation of our andragogical framework for learning spaces in prison. The themes are: respecting the agency of participants, embedding co-production, and fostering trust and trustworthiness. In combination, these feed into an overarching discursive theme which permeates throughout: power. While the themes are approached separately, they are inextricably linked and as such are frequently signposted across the distinct sections.

Autonomy, choice and self-direction

Building directly from one of Knowles' core andragogic principles, the promotion of autonomy is a key theme within our framework of creating adult learning spaces in prisons. This principle centralises self-direction and choice in the curation of a learning space and positions learning spaces in stark contrast to elsewhere within a prison. For Mezirow, a key architect of the adult learning concept of transformative learning, the development of autonomous thinking is the 'cardinal goal' of adult education, which cannot be achieved without 'fostering self-direction' (1997, p. 11). Transformative learning spaces—for Mezirow—are therefore those which foster self-direction and promote independent decision making. Here, we discuss the relationship between prison-based learning and autonomy, reflecting on the conflict between this and wider carceral objectives.

The frustration or removal of autonomy is a structural feature of incarceration and a widely recognised 'pain' of imprisonment (Sykes, 1958; Crewe, 2011). Several authors have argued that education spaces can go some way to mitigating these experiences (cf. Behan, 2021; Crewe et al., 2014; Warr, 2016), with opportunities for enhanced autonomy and expressions of agency more possible than elsewhere within the prison environment. The impact of an enhanced sense of autonomy – when fostered through positive relationships to prison-based education – has been linked to broader internal outcomes such as enhanced self-esteem (cf. Condirston, 2023; Hughes, 2012), self-control (Callan & Gardner, 2007) and positive contributions towards desistance from crime (Cleere, 2020).

Although self-direction and autonomy are a prerequisite to a transformative adult learning experience, it is not the case that all adult learning spaces promote the types of autonomy which can support adult learners in their progression. Indeed, some prison-based education practices and environments can, in practice, work to uphold carceral constraints and hierarchies (Warr, 2016). Restrictions on choice are built into the central education provision

through contractual limitations and prison service directives, with mandatory educational engagement commonplace at the lower levels. These have also led to experiences for prison-based students repeating low-level courses and qualifications, when moving prisons or on entrance to prison especially if qualifications have not followed them (cf. Thomas, 2025). These frustrations erode the value of the educational provision and the relationship that a student can have with the learning process, limiting both the exercise of autonomy and the experience of studying.

Through our research and practice, we have repeatedly seen the significance of autonomy as a fundamental factor in resisting both these negative experiences of some structures of prison-based education and, in turn, some of the 'tightness' of the wider experience of incarceration (Crewe, 2011). Some forms of learning are more aligned with processes of self-direction, such as distance learning (cf. Hughes, 2012) and higher-level learning (cf. Farley & Pike, 2018; Little & Warr, 2022; Pike, 2014). Bennallick's (2019) study of a unique self-directed, peer-managed learning environment situated on a prison wing found that students experienced it as an 'oasis', characterised by relaxation and choice. *The Open Academy* was a further and higher education initiative, but students could either be formally registered as distance learners or could engage in informal learning. Having options of what to study, when and how were key features of students' developing studenthood, which were tentatively nurtured within this space. It allowed for a mutual understanding of collective standards whereby students maintained a quiet and comfortable environment, allowing for the resultant learning community to evolve. The creation of this 'oasis' was dependent on the student-led features of the Academy, with non-hierarchical relationships creating a mutually supportive environment. This contrasted with experiences of classroom-based learning that these students had had elsewhere across the prison estate, which were often experienced by students as infantilising. For example, Zakariya, a distance learner and student within the Open Academy, reflected on his experience of the Education Department within the prison: 'A lot of the teachers tend to treat us like we're in a school, which isn't a positive thing. Especially if you're a grown-arse person as well, who probably had businesses, had responsibilities, to be talked down to like that. It's no good.' (in Bennallick, 2019, p. 138).

The prison library is an often-overlooked environment which can provide a similarly comfortable, relaxing and self-directed learning space. Finlay and Bates (2018) argue that the ability to create a 'normal' environment – distinct from the disruption of elsewhere in the prison – is a crucial aspect of the prison library (p. 130). The option for library users to engage with recreational activities or more structured learning activities – providing freedom in how they spend their time—allows for autonomous decision-making, a foundation for such normality. In choosing which books or other resources to borrow, library users can also decide what educational or recreational interests to pursue. One library user in Finlay's study about engagement with library services stated, "It's the choice thing. I hate being forced to do things. It's all the mind isn't it—you think you're not locking us up, but you're imprisoning our minds. There's no freedom of mind at all...[The library] is different. You're not forced to do things." (in Finlay, 2020, p. 167). Participants in this study also drew a contrast between their experiences in this space and those of being in a classroom, noting the lack of pressure to speak up or participate during informal learning activities in the library.

In both of the examples above, comfort emerges as a significant feature in shaping these learning spaces characterised by enhanced autonomy. Indeed, we have recognised across our work the significance of emotional comfort in the facilitation of autonomy in these environments. In the exploration of a learning space developed with university and prison-based students, Little and Warr (2022) found that facilitating comfort—through dedicating structured time and energy to cultivating strong group relationships, the use of the pedagogical approach of abstract questions and being responsive and flexible within the dynamics of the space—allowed students to develop a level of comfort within the space which shaped the

resultant dialogic exchange and learning made possible. It is through cultivating such comfort, built upon a necessary critical engagement with power hierarchies, that the exercise of agency becomes achievable.

Facilitating co-production

A second key thematic area of our proposed framework for creating learning spaces in the prison setting is co-production. Co-production is a central process within andragogic theory (Knowles, 1968), and it speaks to the need for adult learners to have the ability to facilitate their own engagement in directing how they are going to learn. This stems from the theoretical assumption that adults have a much more developed sense of their own identity and builds on the values of autonomy described above.

In education, co-production platforms learner voice in designing and planning programmes of education, as well as shaping the relational power within learning interactions, removing full control from the educator and facilitating space for shared responsibility in education and learning creation (Müller-Kuhn et al., 2021). This enables students to be partners in learning and teaching (Healey et al., 2014) and thus facilitates their engagement in the learning process, which, for some time, has been highly regarded in pedagogic scholarship (Dewey, 1916; Papert, 1993; Piaget, 1977; Vygotsky, 1978). The necessary sharing and disrupting of power in such exercises feeds into our examination of power later in this article.

Co-production as an andragogic tool has high value in the prison learning environment given the choice and decision-making processes that learners are able to engage with. The ability for learners to make choices, and to see those choices realised in the delivery and subsequent experience of education is fundamental to co-production. The Council of Europe (1990) asserted that education in prisons could only be meaningful if engaged in voluntarily; thus, embedding further choice within educational encounters enables the scaffolding of layers of choice, which, even if only in small part, can mitigate against the impact of an acute sense of lack of autonomy as discussed above (see Nichols, 2021). Co-production also has positive implications for educators, including the development of 'moral sight' (Little, 2023), which, via pedagogical praxis, facilitates consciousness of the humanity and personhood of others (see Velleman, 2013). Viewing the prison classroom as a community, co-production enables engagement in processes that may be framed as active citizenship and thus adds to the ability to 'see' and appreciate more about individual learners as people with valuable contributions to make to the community's learning experiences and production of a programme of education. Further to choice, co-production provides the opportunity for prisoners to achieve a sense of ownership over and within the educational space, which has the capacity to enhance engagement. Through the building of meaningful, collegiate relationships, learners can be enabled to generate ownership of ideas and pedagogical tools (see Garcia et al., 2018).

A number of the current authors have delivered higher education initiatives which involved bringing university students into prisons to facilitate shared participation in learning (Little, 2023; Nichols et al., 2019; Zampini et al., 2019). Central to our approaches—and indeed others researching these initiatives (cf. King et al., 2019; Ludlow & Armstrong, 2016)—is ensuring learner involvement in shaping the experience. Little (2024) explored the role of co-production in one such shared learning space. Laeon—a student within the study who resided in the prison—describes the experience and the impact of this collaborative approach to learning:

...giving people some part of it, is almost like you are giving them a percentage of the shares, ownership...we are all in this together; it's all about us and we

have all got a stake in it. And it gives you that confidence and openness to now be a bit more involved and talk a lot more... And then everyone is able to learn so much more than they could have

learnt. (in Little, 2024: p. 8)

Through Laeon's reflection, we can see the 'working-making-doing together' which is central to Johns et al.'s (2022) definition of co-production as a mechanism for 'disrupting power relations and traditional hierarchies [and] producing knowledge' (p. 28). Facilitating the initial interactions carefully allowed for a trusted dialogic space, which allowed all learners, regardless of whether their initial institutions were the prison or the university, to experience a sense of ownership within the group. Particularly for the prison-based students, the space was recognised as one wherein the institutional logics of surveillance and discipline did not apply, which was vital in fostering trust within the group, ultimately shaping the learning experiences made possible (Little, 2024, p. 9).

Within an established, co-produced learning space, collaborative learning can flourish, which champions dialogic approaches. Collaborative learning, or 'Co-Learning', centres on learners being empowered explorers whose 'mission' is to take responsibility for their own learning and that of their peers. Such group interactions, where people come together, rely on the sharing of authority and power, and suggest a way of dealing with people which respects and highlights individual group members' abilities and contributions (Laal & Ghodsi, 2012).

In the application of these principles within prison learning spaces, the establishment of the learning space before the active learning process begins is fundamental. An example of this can be seen in semi-formalised agreements such as learning contracts, which can be collaboratively written and agreed upon, enabling learners and educators together to set the nature, ethos and culture of the learning space. In doing so, such a collaborative process embodies shared ownership, mutual respect, trust and citizenship to achieve an educational experience that realises the principles set out in this thematic area of our framework. As experienced by the authors of this article, the co-creation of the learning space through co-developed learning contracts or agreements at the beginning of a programme of learning has facilitated the creation of a co-produced environment built on trust and transparency (see Little, 2024; Nichols, 2018). Providing a platform for this kind of activity affords learners with autonomy to establish the parameters of the learning space and to have open conversations to navigate reciprocal perceptions of power imbalance between learners and educators.

Building trust and cultivating trustworthiness

A further theme to emerge from our collective research and reflections, intertwined with the themes presented above, is the importance of cultivating learning spaces underpinned by trust and trustworthiness. The concept of trust is an ambiguous and challenging one, but one which has attracted an increasing amount of research attention across disciplines, particularly following Putnam's (1995) assertion that trust is a vital component of social cohesion. In relation to adult learning, Henschke (2013, p. 2) argues that 'trust and its related concepts of empathy and reciprocity' are central to developing relationships that nurture learners and learning. According to Levi and Stoker (2000), trust is fundamentally relational: 'it involves an individual making herself vulnerable to another individual, group, or institution that has the capacity to do her harm or to betray her' (p. 476). This vulnerability is heightened in a prison setting, where trust levels are inherently low (Ugelvik, 2022). While teachers tend to occupy positions of trust in mainstream education, people in prison are disproportionately likely to have experienced educational exclusion earlier in life (Coates, 2016), alongside

a broader mistrust of authority figures (Liebling & Arnold, 2012). Learning experiences in prison are therefore likely to be approached with suspicion and mistrust, underlining the need for educators to intentionally cultivate a trusted learning space.

Foundational to building trust in the prison learning space is the recognition of the humanity of individuals in that environment. In discussing what she calls 'pockets of thicker, interpersonal trust', Waite (2024, p. 8) notes that this type of trust exists in relationships 'where people believe they matter as human beings, have time to know each other, and see staff going beyond the regime for them.' Cultivating these relationships has been key to our own educational practices in prisons. Little (2023) reflects on facilitating a prison classroom shared by prison learners and university students wherein seeing prison students 'primarily as human learners' rather than 'offenders' was key to setting the tone in the classroom (Little, 2023, p. 8). He notes the importance of recognising people in the learning space as individuals with the capacity to learn, who have a variety of interests and needs and as people with something of worth to contribute. Finlay's (2020) research on informal learning in the prison library also revealed this to be a key element of what makes the library a trusted and respected space within the prison. Library staff in this study noted that they viewed individuals in the space as 'library users' or 'readers' rather than 'prisoners' (p. 131), causing one library user to state, 'Another good thing about the library. [The librarian] treats you like a human being. She doesn't treat you like a number' (p. 172).

To be trustworthy, according to Davids (2024, p. 134) 'means that one can be counted or relied upon', a quality often absent in prisons, where even the most basic requests frequently go unmet, causing frustration for those in custody (His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons, 2025a, 2025b). In Finlay's (2020) study, library users specifically expressed appreciation for library staff who took the time to respond to requests and locate specific resources for them, actions that contrasted with the indifference they encountered in other areas of prison life. One participant noted, 'we can't always get what we want, but she tries' (p. 173). These seemingly small demonstrations of follow-through and reliability can be significant in establishing trust in the educator and shaping learners' overall experiences within the learning space.

In the low-trust environment of a prison, distance from the institutional agenda and disciplinary logics can also contribute to a trusted learning space. This distance is sometimes in the form of the presence of people not associated with the institution, such as where prison learners and university students take part in a shared learning experience (e.g. Little, 2023; White et al., 2025). Educators or facilitators within the learning space are viewed differently from officers and other prison staff in their roles as non-uniformed staff within the space. This is evident in Finlay's (2020) study of prison libraries, where participants suggested that being civilian, non-uniformed members of staff helped to create trust in the library space. Similarly, in Nichols' (2018) study, one teacher participant noted: 'If someone is wearing black and white, their role is discipline. If I'm in as a civilian I am an enabler for something. The relationship we have with prisoners is different and we often see a different person to those seen on the wings' (p. 17). This distance can also come in the form of reorienting educational goals away from the reductionist, instrumental goals of employability and reducing re-offending—as discussed above—to the creation of a space where 'learning for learning's sake' is 'privileged, embraced and celebrated' (Warr, 2016, p. 23). The creation of such a space requires learners to develop confidence in the intentions of other participants, particularly those with the most responsibility for facilitating activities or discussion (Little & Warr, 2022).

As discussed in previous sections, the principles of autonomy and co-production play a vital role in fostering trust in the learning space. These approaches challenge traditional, hierarchical models of education and create opportunities for learners to exercise agency. Co-production, in particular, holds the potential to redistribute power in the classroom and

reduces barriers to trustworthiness (Little, 2024) by allowing learners to shape both the content and approach to learning within the space.

Recognising power differentials in prison learning spaces

The final theme within our andragogical framework underpins all those previously discussed: the pervasiveness and complexity of power. As noted above, power is rendered explicit in some conceptualisations of pedagogy, such as Freire's (1970) work. However, it commonly receives insufficient attention, either because of its 'taken for granted' quality in prison settings or owing to a combination of its perceived elusiveness, its contextual dependence and the variety of its expression. Power is a complex and multi-faceted phenomenon that shifts in form according to perspective and context; it is dynamic, 'essentially contested' (Lukes, 2005) and evolving. Power is theorised and understood in different ways, and its application is rarely elucidated in practically enlightening ways (Gaventa, 2003). This section serves to acknowledge this fact and recognise that power differentials must be appreciated if we are to better understand voluntary participation in educational activities in spaces conducive to learning.

A question may arise here about the extent to which anyone in prison is able to engage voluntarily. However, this would be to misunderstand the nature of agency and autonomy in prison. For example, some people in prison refuse to attend educational classes if they find them too limited and infantilising or of little worth (Little, 2023; Nichols, 2021). Others may attend, but choose not to participate, or participate in a limited way, giving little of themselves. Education classes, education departments and libraries experienced as useless or oppressive will only be engaged with superficially, if at all. Even apparently relatively 'healthy' prisons, or ones that might reasonably be expected to be healthy, such as open prisons, struggle to engage sufficient numbers of people in education provision (His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons, 2025b). This interacts with notions of Autonomy, Trust and Co-production to consider the conditions under which people in prison feel sufficiently comfortable and motivated to participate in educational activities. What follows is a brief consideration of three elements of andragogical power relations connecting with the work discussed thus far: firstly, the pervasive effects of scriptural dominance and the diffidence associated with it; secondly, that spaces in prison conducive to learning are those that are relatively free, or distanced from, institutional disciplinary logics, and thirdly; a useful way to distance the space from the corrosive effects of institutional disciplinary logics is to bring elements of the outside community into it.

Firstly, the work of Crewe and colleagues has identified how prisons, and the operation of their disciplinary logics, commonly engender a state of *diffidence* amongst people serving punitive sentences, particularly long sentences. Diffidence refers to a state of '... generalised insecurity and a consumptive wariness' that exists between those with whom one is compelled to co-exist (Hobbes, cited by Crewe et al., 2014: 58). As places where hostility can flourish, dynamic matrices of power foster competition for resources, feelings of mistrust, interpersonal suspicion and surveillance and justified paranoia (Warr, 2020). People serving prison sentences become wary about sharing something of their real selves and emotional lives with people employed to survey, manage and assess their levels of risk. Staff with responsibility for writing reports possess a particular form of power that people in prison are acutely aware of. In such a context, open, honest dialogue becomes the exception, not the norm, representing a fundamental barrier to ethical praxis (Little, 2023).

It is important for educational professionals working in prison to appreciate this diffidence and its associated effects. Taking a relatively flexible, dialogic, informal approach to education is helpful in fostering shared engagement in a learning space, consistent with an

ethics of care (Noddings, 2013). Andragogical approaches which are rigid, or do not take into account the potential diverse educational histories in the space, are unlikely to be well received. Likewise, those that require particular forms of written reflection may encounter reluctance amongst students suspicious of engagement, especially where relationships of trust have not been established. Failing to recognise such barriers and how they can affect people's choice to participate, or not, in education in prison, increases the potential threat for prison participants (Castro, 2024). Consideration is thus required for how a learning space becomes relatively freed from institutional disciplinary logics (e.g. Little & Warr, 2022).

Secondly, spaces experienced as being relatively free of the 'depth, weight and tightness' (Crewe, 2011) of the prison are likely to be those where the most fruitful educational exchanges are able to take place. This is partly about the distance from dominant disciplinary logics and, conversely, proximity to new possibilities for engagement and learning. The status of education in prison as the runt of the regime (House of Commons Education Committee, 2022) and the even lower priority afforded to prison libraries (Finlay & Neri, 2025) means that the standard educational offer can be experienced as infantilising and poorly suited to individual emancipation (Little, 2023). As noted by library staff, being a non-uniformed staff member within the prison is symbolically significant, and matters to prisoners: 'We are seen as non-prison workers... they will confide in us and ask for advice or just want someone to listen' (Finlay, 2022: 62).

Being seen as a 'non-prison worker' offers the potential for a more human, informal form of interaction, free of the potential of being 'written up' for something said. Such informality can serve as a way to dilute the power structures and hierarchies typically inherent in prison space. It allows for the potential for reciprocity (Bennallick & Laryea-Adekimi, 2025), for a professional and human empathy to enter the space. There is something different, potentially special, about the types of relationship that may develop between people in prison and those non-uniformed staff with the responsibility of providing educational tuition (Nichols, 2021). This raises the possibility of how bringing something of the community from 'outside' may benefit the dynamics of learning inside the prison institution.

Thirdly, carceral geographers such as Moran (2013a, 2013b) have documented the existence of 'liminal spaces' in prison, which, whilst situated within the prison walls, have qualities which bring them socially, emotionally or culturally beyond its boundary. Such spaces can include the chapel, the gatehouse, visiting rooms, and classrooms (Crewe et al., 2014). Significantly, as Crewe et al. have elucidated, such spaces allow different forms of emotional display and communication than in other deeper, more overtly restrictive 'prison-like', parts of an institution. The *Open Academy* in HMP Swaleside, for example, was found to be neither part of the campus nor part of the prison; a liminal space in which education and learning can be prioritised, relatively distanced from disciplinary logics (Bennallick, 2019).

Relatedly, Turner (2016) proposes a 'boundary patchwork' of spaces within prison which interweave with social processes that allow for connection with the outside. In such a conceptualisation, the boundary is more permeable than commonly supposed, and the possibilities often more varied than typically imagined. Herrity pursues aural lines of inquiry to explore 'the ebb and flow of the everyday tune... a complex concerto of call, response, variations and deviations' (2024, p. 102). *Sound, Order and Survival* explores the inter-related, and yet distinct, concepts of power and order, highlighting that 'in prison spaces, sound is a means of mediating power, control and inclusion for those within its soundscape' (2024: 103).

If power is understood to be an outcome of collective action (Latour, 1986), then the power balance might be shifted, where new understandings and forms of interaction emerge and become possible. Learning spaces are, after all, social spaces (Lefebvre, 1991), sites of possibility (Hooks, 1989) and spaces of potential. Power lies in this *potential*. This is also recognised by Giddens when he proposes that action depends on the capability of individuals

to make a difference to the course of events. An individual agent ceases to be such if they lose this capacity to make a difference, i.e. exercising some sort of power (Giddens, 2014).

This provokes a question about what may constitute ‘a difference’, to exercise ‘some sort’ of power. Even small actions, or inactions, have potential consequences for how people feel about interacting in a space. Being listened to, and listening to others, for example, is a fundamental way in which we ‘co-produce’ a space together. Taking a Foucauldian perspective, power is *diffused* through social space through the ways that we share time and space together (Christensen, 2024). There is something of a connection here with ‘Latour’s paradox’: that when one simply has power “...*in potentia* – *nothing happens and you are powerless; when you exert power – in actu* – *others are performing the action and not you*” (Latour, 1986). Little and Warr (2022) argue that being recognised as a student, or learner, and recognising oneself as such, constitutes a form of *pedagogical capital*, a form of symbolic power, of accumulated labour (Bourdieu, 1986). Enabling people in prison to see themselves as learners, and be seen by others as such, is a fundamental element of creating learning spaces with people in prison.

CONCLUSION

Through our exploration of the values and principles we see reflected across our research and experience, we have sought to reframe education spaces in prisons through an andragogical lens. In our analysis, learning spaces in prison—in classrooms, libraries, on wings, in chapels and in a myriad of other contexts—emerge as distinct ‘emotional zones’ (Crewe et al., 2014) which can temporarily suspend the rigid carceral logics of surveillance and discipline. Building on this perspective, our collective research reflects the significance of cultivating these spaces with care, allowing adult learners to exercise autonomous decision-making, co-create their learning experiences and build relationships nurtured through mutual trust. We argue that the intertwined, embedded and complex nature of power which permeates throughout is a significant feature of learning spaces, particularly within a prison. To grapple meaningfully with these power dynamics is to create the foundation to build constructive learning environments.

As authors, we need to acknowledge our own power as people who have been recognised as legitimate actors by two relatively powerful institutions. But such power is temporary, fragile and repeatedly subject to review. Fundamentally, our collective efforts outlined in this paper are inspired by a philosophical approach that seeks to not ‘reinscribe power dynamics of prison authority’ (Castro, 2024, p. 17). This is an almost constant work in progress, for there are “...sharp power differences between people who become incarcerated and those who are able to remain free from imprisonment” (p. 21). Castro also notes that mitigating power asymmetry and increasing quality “...are difficult to achieve in prison education” (p. 19). We agree, and this is why it is important to better understand the ways in which we can work to recognise power dynamics and share power where it is pedagogically useful to do so. The ongoing renegotiation of power is a fundamental element in enabling policies and institutions to work.

Institutions have the capacity to either support or limit a culture of learning, which in turn either promotes or inhibits the development of constructive learning spaces. In order to utilise these findings at an institutional level, we encourage curating the space for informality, distanced from disciplinary logics, with flexibility and responsivity to mitigate reductionist logics which see the purpose of learning in prison through instrumentalist agendas (such as enhancing employability, the reduction of reoffending or even the acquisition of qualifications). We see informal learning spaces as integral to the educational ecology of prisons, and yet informal learning practices are too often lost when resource-stripped establishments

are required to meet metrics which focus on outcomes outside such andragogical values. Student identities in prisons are often delicate and tentatively developed, requiring careful nurturing. Informal learning routes—whether these are activities within the library (Finlay, 2020), peer-led initiatives (Bennallick & Laryea-Adekimi, 2025) or self-directed study (Bennallick, 2019)—provide invaluable opportunities to rehearse and authentically perform these studenthood identities. Centralising comfort is an important route to building a trusting foundation (Little & Warr, 2022) and permitting the critical discourse required to access the types of transformation described above by Knowles, Mezirow and Freire.

This paper has served to critically explore what constitutes an effective learning space for adults in carceral settings. Proposing an original andragogic framework has laid the foundations for what we argue is a much-needed revitalisation of scholarship on education in prison. In doing so, we hope that this publication facilitates further discussion and the production of practical outcomes grounded in our framework, developed from many years of research and practice across academic disciplines.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

This paper reflects a range of research studies and data. The data that support the findings of these studies are available from the corresponding author, upon reasonable request.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This paper does not require specific institutional ethical approvals. However, the studies referred to throughout have each been granted relevant institutional approvals. There is no funding attached to this study.

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