

Doing Action Research in the Secure Estate

A Guide for Educators

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INTRODUCTION

Welcome to Doing Action Research in the Secure Estate: A Guide for Educators. This guide has been developed as a companion guide to Doing Action Research: A guide for post-16 practitioners (ETF, 2021).

The aim of this guide is not to replicate what is already written in Doing Action Research, but to complement it with some specific and important considerations for teachers who are interested in carrying out action research projects within the secure estate.

You can read an [e-book version of Doing Action Research: A guide for post-16 practitioners](#).



Who is this guide for?

This guide is for anyone working in the secure estate (e.g., a prison or probation team) who is interested in action research. Our primary focus is on action research within educational spaces, so it may be of particular interest to:

- Teachers/ Learning Support Assistants (LSAs) and workshop/ vocational specialists working within the secure estate.
- Educators within the secure estate who are thinking about using action research as a way to explore/ develop their practice.
- Leaders and managers who are interested in how action research can help educators to work together to explore and improve their teaching and training practices.

A note on terminology

For brevity, we use the terms 'teacher', 'learner' and 'classroom' throughout this guide. Please note that when we use the word 'teacher', we are referring to anyone who works in an education and/ or training role within the secure estate (e.g., vocational specialists, workshop facilitators, learning support specialists, prison librarians). Learners include anyone within the secure estate who is accessing teaching, learning and/ or vocational training or workshop activities, and 'classroom' incorporates any space where teaching and training activities are taking place (e.g., in workshops, vocational training spaces, libraries or within the prison grounds).

What is included in this guide?

This guide is split into several key sections that will support you to develop your understanding of action research and how it can operate successfully as a way for educators to develop their practice within the secure estate.

Part 1: Where do I start with my research?

This section includes:

- Where to start with action research within a prison environment
- Getting approval for action research within the secure estate

- Doing action research as part of your everyday teaching practice
- What happens if your plans are interrupted or if changes happen within the prison that are beyond your control?

Part 2: Working as part of an action research team within secure settings

This section includes:

- How to gain the interest of your colleagues in your action research ideas and activities.
- How to gain the interest and/ or support of your multi-disciplinary peers.
- Thinking beyond the classroom; using action research within secure estates to help develop sustainable, prison-wide educative practices.

Part 3: Ethical and safeguarding considerations for prison-based action research

This section includes:

- Educational risk taking, and how this can help you to develop innovative teaching and learning practices within the secure estate.
- Guidance in relation to issues of learner confidentiality and anonymity during action research.
- Guidance in relation to safeguarding practices during action research activities.
- Some practical examples about how to work collaboratively with learners through action research activity.
- Some guidance relating to the development of ethical action research activities that seek to 'do no harm'.

Part 4: Resources and further reading

This section includes:

- Five case studies that illustrate how action research is successfully used to develop and improve teaching practices within the secure estate.
- Some useful reading about the utilisation of trauma-informed approaches within education, and the importance of trauma-informed working practices for teachers and learners within the secure estate.
- A video sharing some ethical considerations for action researchers working within further education.

As you work your way through each section (or indeed as you turn to the section that interests you most), you will find many authentic examples from action research projects that have taken place within secure estates around England. The examples from practice are provided as short, illustrative examples to help you appreciate how some of the ideas we are sharing can work in practice. Additionally, in part 4 of this guide, we share some more developed case studies from five action research projects, each of which help to demonstrate how action research projects can be facilitated within secure settings.



PART 1:

**Where do I start with
my research?**

PART 1: WHERE DO I START WITH MY RESEARCH?

Starting a research project may feel like a bit of a daunting prospect, particularly within the secure estate. However, the process of engaging in research can be empowering and revitalising for learners and for teachers alike. For teachers, action research gives you the opportunity to explore and develop the aspects of your practice that interest you most. For learners, they repeatedly tell us that they value having teachers who take time to listen to them, who value their opinion and input, and who make meaningful changes within their teaching that encourage and support learning.

Whilst you do not have to have a formal research question in mind before you begin your research, it is useful to have a general idea of a topic or area of practice that you are interested in developing (as an individual or, even better, collaboratively, as part of a research team). You might want to start off by reflecting on what you are curious about in your practice – has anything happened lately in your classroom that has sparked your interest or that has prompted you to read further or discuss your experiences with your colleagues?



Novus: Working together as a research team to decide a shared area of focus.

Example from practice

English teachers working in two Category C prisons and one Reception prison in Northern England had recently adopted phonics approaches within their English teaching practices to support learners' literacy development. During inspections across vocational areas, observation reports stated that learners frequently misspelt vocational terminology, and that a lack of confidence to use key words sometimes held learners back from progressing.

The English teachers were curious to discover whether they could support learners with their vocational work by introducing a light-touch phonics approach to vocational tutors, so that vocational specialists could support learners with their vocational terminology and key word spellings.

The English teachers met with some of their vocational colleagues, who although initially quite nervous about the idea of learning about phonics, were nevertheless keen to investigate whether phonic approaches could support learners' vocational vocabulary development. The vocational specialists enjoyed discovering how a little knowledge of phonics might help them to encourage learners to write and spell more confidently and saw their participation in the research project as a useful way to develop their practice.

At this point, the English teachers and vocational specialists were able to formalise their research project, seeking the necessary approvals and gaining the support of their line managers.

To read more about this project, please visit: <https://ccpathways.co.uk/practitioner-research/otla-6/project-10/10d/>

In *Doing Action Research* (ETF, 2021), the partner guide to this resource, we share several further examples and lots more information about how teachers might get started with their research.

Part 1a: Getting approval for action research in the secure estate

The category of the prison establishment that you work in may have a significant impact on your educational role within the classroom or workshop. In turn, this may have an impact on, or restrict, your chosen research topics. It will be important to discuss this with your line manager or mentor to ensure that you have approval and understand any resulting implications. For example, security in a category A/ high security establishment may have more emphasis on safety and security than a category D open prison. A young people's (YP) establishment (under 18-years-old) may have more in-depth safeguarding policies and procedures and be likely to have more specialist staff assigned to the safeguarding role. Having said this, all prison establishments have their own policies and guidelines, and it is important for individuals to familiarise themselves with these and know what action to take and who to see for help and advice if needed. As a prison educator, you may work for a sub-contracted organisation and many of the prison policies and procedures will be in addition to your own employer's guidelines.



Categories of prison in England and Wales

A brief explanation

In the UK, prisoners are divided into 4 categories of security. Each adult is assigned a category, depending on the crime committed, the sentence, the risk of escape and possible violent tendencies.

Adult male prisoners

For adult male prisoners there are 4 security categories:

- Category A – Prisoners whose escape would be highly dangerous to the public or the police or the security of the State and for whom the aim must be to make escape impossible.
- Category B – Prisoners for whom the very highest conditions of security are not necessary, but for whom escape must be made very difficult.
- Category C – Prisoners who cannot be trusted in open conditions but who do not have the resources and will to make a determined escape attempt.
- Category D – Prisoners who present a low risk, can reasonably be trusted in open conditions and for whom open conditions are appropriate.

Women prisoners

Women prisoners may be held in one of 4 security categories:

- Category A – Prisoners whose escape would be highly dangerous to the public or the police or the security of the state and for whom the aim must be to make escape impossible.
- Restricted Status – Any female, young person or young adult prisoners convicted or on remand whose escape would present a serious risk to the public and who are required to be held in designated secure accommodation.
- Closed conditions – Prisoners for whom the very highest conditions of security are not necessary but who present too high a risk for open conditions or for whom open conditions are not appropriate.
- Open conditions - Prisoners who present a low risk, can reasonably be trusted in open conditions and for whom open conditions are appropriate.

Adapted from Grimwood, (2015).

In prison settings, all research must be approved by the governing Governor of the prison. The governing Governor will often refer approval for research to the prison psychology lead. In many

prison establishments, various research projects will be on-going both by internal multi-disciplinary teams, such as psychology or probation, or by external organisations, researching topics such as recidivism or the usefulness and/ or credibility of particular offender behaviour programmes.

To give your chosen research topic the best chance of approval, you may wish to give an emphasis on how your action research work may benefit your prison. An obvious route to approval, given that your research is related to improving your practice, and therefore the learner experience, could be by relating your research to HMIP/ Ofsted inspections or national reports on prisons/ prison education.



Weston College: using action research to build on recommendations from the Coates' (2016) review of prison education.

Example from practice

Building on recommendations from Dame Sally Coates' review of prison education (Coates, 2016), teachers at Western College used action research to help them address an issue of national significance within their classrooms; how to accurately assess the ability of learners with English as a second or other language (ESOL learners). Noticing some of the gaps in traditional initial assessment practices (e.g., using tools like BKSB), which often saw ESOL learners placed in classes that were the wrong level, the team devised and trialled an ESOL-specific initial assessment, comprising initial verbal screening questions, a writing activity and a reading activity. As the team developed and refined their initial assessment approaches, they found that ESOL learners' levels were being assessed more accurately, and that those who were beginner readers and writers in their home languages as well as in English were also identified and supported more efficiently.

To read more about this project, including examples of the screening questions and learner case studies, please visit: <https://ccpathways.co.uk/practitioner-research/otla-7/cluster-8/7-16a/>



Novus: using action research to develop prison learners' digital literacies, building on recommendations from the Coates Review

Example from practice

As well as identifying issues with assessment practices, the Coates Review (2016) highlighted that ICT was not being taught effectively in many UK prisons. In response to this and building on the work of a 'through the gate' project, where ex-prisoners had commented on how much they valued learning about the 'ordinary' digital skills of setting up an e-mail, finding a cheap train fare on an app and being able to use such tools as 'WhatsApp', the team at Novus started working on a project where they could make simulations of digital tools for learners to be able to take part in Essential Digital Skills (EDS) qualifications. The action research team included digital champions from different prisons and many learners who planned, built and tested the simulations.

You can read about these projects, including examples of the simulation activities the teams designed and built here:

<https://ccpathways.co.uk/practitioner-research/otla8/2a/>

<https://ccpathways.co.uk/practitioner-research/otla8/2b/>

<https://ccpathways.co.uk/practitioner-research/otla8/2c/>

Part 1b: Doing action research as part of your everyday teaching practice

The primary goal of action research is to improve practice, so your action research in your classroom or workshop is likely to be closely interwoven with your everyday teaching practices. For example, you might be working on a project that seeks to understand how best to identify learner goals and motivations for learning, which is something that you would likely be doing anyway as a teacher. In these cases, you might articulate what you are doing as ‘teacher investigation’ or something similar, as it is already part of the teaching role to explore your own practice and this does not usually require official approval. Similarly, action research encourages what is sometimes referred to as a ‘ground up’ approach to problem solving and practice development, which is responsive to the specific contexts of your own setting. For example, instead of applying a blanket initiative that has been generated by people outside of your organisation, action research enables you to start from exactly where you and your learners are at, supporting you to focus on and address the issues that are particularly important to you right now. In this sense, action research enables you to work collaboratively with your colleagues and learners to trial fresh teaching and training approaches and work out together what constitutes effective teaching and training practices within your specific setting.

Action researchers are constantly tweaking and adapting their research plans and approaches as they reflect on the effect of the actions they have taken so they can decide what to do next. This is not dissimilar to how you might naturally engage in reflexive practices within your classroom (e.g., how you carefully adjust and adapt your teaching approaches and resources to accommodate the specific needs of learners you are working with at any given moment). Where action research takes this process slightly further is in the opportunity it provides to think deeply about not only what you are doing, but to be able to articulate why (McNiff, 2022).



HMPYOI Lancaster Farms: drawing on everyday teaching and learning practices to respond to the needs of SEND learners. *Example from practice*

The teaching team at HMPYOI Lancaster Farms recognised that some of the SEND learners they were working with were becoming stressed and distracted during lessons. After speaking with learners about the problems they were facing, the team identified and trialled some resources that would help SEND learners to ‘take a breath’ and re-engage with their education. Following the success of these resources within their own setting, the team then worked as part of a prison-wide project with the support of PD North to develop what became known as the mindfulness toolkit. Through the process of creating the toolkit, the team were not only able to share promising practice with other prison teams, they were also able to gain a deeper understanding in relation to prisoner’s mental health and wellbeing, and how this affected learner engagement and progress in the classroom.

To read more about this project and to access the mindfulness toolkit, please visit: <https://ccpathways.co.uk/projects/send-mindfulness-toolkit/>

Part 1c: What happens if my plans are interrupted or if changes happen within the prison that are beyond my control?

The nature of prison education means that, often, decisions or changes that are made to the prison regime can have repercussions for those educators working in this multi-disciplinary environment. These may mean a slight ‘tweaking’ to your project, such as working with different groups of prison learners, or making subject specific changes. Sometimes, however, there may be more complex changes that teachers have to navigate, which require a changed plan and direction. In action research, all of these are quite acceptable and may well increase the quality, validity and interest of your project both for yourself, your team and for anyone else involved in the project.

“The restrictions in place due to a covid outbreak at HMP Liverpool have continued to prevent access to learners. Despite this, telephone contact has been maintained with the case studies who continue to give feedback on English tasks and activities.”

- OTLA 8 Project Report (2022)

An example of a complex ‘change in direction/ planning’ is given here in an extract from Project Lead feedback in OTLA 8 reporting. In this example, the project team had to quickly shift their research approach from face-to-face work with learners to telephone conversations and in-cell work packs.

The key here was that the project sought “to improve target setting by encouraging learners to reflect on their learning and feel confident in independently identifying strengths and weaknesses.” The change in *how* the teachers were able to communicate and work with the learners (and the subsequent changes to the action research process), did not detract from this overall goal.

One of the real benefits of action research is that it encourages researchers to reflect on outcomes as they arise in real time and to adapt their plans accordingly. In some instances, this might mean a slight alteration to a process, resource or initiative based on learner feedback or input from your colleagues. At other times, project teams may need to alter their focus entirely, as more pressing and important issues arise. This is perfectly acceptable in action research; the learning that has gone before remains valid, as it helps teachers to pinpoint the most important aspects of their practice to develop in relation to the circumstances they are facing. This way of working marks a key and critical difference between traditional forms of social science and action research; the goals can and probably will change over time, as your research is rooted in reflection on action within the real world. In prison education, change can happen rapidly (and sometimes unexpectedly). Action research supports teachers to adapt and respond to these changes, as you continue to explore and develop your practice, and find fresh ways to engage and support the learners you are working with.

To read more about how the team at HMP Liverpool adapted their research plans in response to unforeseen changes within their prison, please visit: <https://ccpathways.co.uk/practitioner-research/otla-7/otla-7-cluster-12/24-novus-hmp-liverpool/>



We also draw on HMP Liverpool’s action research in case study 2. Which you can find in [part 4](#), ‘Resources and further reading’.

PART 2:

**Working as part of an action
research team within secure
settings**

PART 2: WORKING AS PART OF AN ACTION RESEARCH TEAM WITHIN SECURE SETTINGS

Part 2a: How do I gain the interest of my colleagues?

Sometimes, you may find that your colleagues are not always as initially enthusiastic about engaging in action research as you are. Teachers are busy people, and teaching within a prison environment brings with it a unique set of challenges that have to be carefully managed every day. With action research, whilst it is good to have some colleagues on board at the earliest opportunity so that you can support one another and share your insights, starting small (for example, making some small changes to your practice within your own classroom, and discussing with learners how these changes have influenced their learning), can also be a valid starting point. Our experience working on action research projects over many years suggests that your enthusiasm will be catching, people cannot help but become interested and want to get involved as your project progresses, as they will see you making changes to your practice that have real benefit to learners.



Teachers from the OTLA 8 programme share how they encouraged their colleagues to become involved in action research within their settings.
Example from practice

The suggestions below on how to gain the interest of your colleagues were shared by teachers on the OTLA 8 programme who were attending a CPD session entitled 'Investigating Teaching, Learning and Assessment'

- Always lead by example;
- Welcome all and harness their creativity;
- Not everyone will be the same or work at the same pace. Work with who you can, allowing them to follow their own paths (with the same goal);
- Avoid fragmentation;
- Use regular meetings and weave items together creating community and a sense of belonging;
- Accept that challenges exist;
- Provide cake (reward and encourage);
- Accept that not everyone will be interested in, or join in your enthusiasm, but remember that enthusiasm may be catching to many that are observing;
- Push at open doors, some people will feel more 'research ready' than others, and this is ok. Once people see what you are doing, they often end up becoming involved anyway;
- The word 'research' can sound a little bit intimidating to some people, you may want to describe what you are doing as practice development or improvement first, before bringing in the word 'research';
- Think outside the box, you may like to partner up with people who are outside of your subject specialism, and who have different roles and responsibilities.

To read more about the OTLA 8 programme and the range of projects involved, please visit:
<https://ccpathways.co.uk/practitioner-research/otla8/>

Part 2b: How do I gain the interest or support of my multi-disciplinary peers in my action research activities?

Gaining the interest and/ or support of your co-workers and multi-disciplinary peers within the secure estate may not be quite as straightforward as gaining the interest and support of your teaching colleagues in your action research activities. The amount of time or opportunity that teachers have available to interact with their co-workers varies enormously between each prison/ probation team. Each secure estate will have their own strategic priorities and will prioritise and arrange meetings accordingly, with relevant staff members allocated to specific meetings and expected to attend. This can make arranging cross-disciplinary action research meetings more challenging within secure estates than within other Further Education settings, due to the many different roles that different people hold and, sometimes, competing priorities.

In the Young People's estate there would likely be many more opportunities for multi-disciplinary teams to work together and an expectation that more staff would be involved in and attend meetings, as all under-18 young people will be expected to attend full time education. For education colleagues working in the adult estate, these naturally occurring opportunities may not be as varied or frequent.

Another challenge within secure estates lies in the geographical layout of the prison itself, which may also reduce the opportunities you have to interact on a day-to-day basis with your co-workers to share learning and engage in multi-disciplinary action research activity.

Despite these challenges, the benefits of sharing your action research with your co-workers (and where possible actively involving them) can be well worth the effort, helping to raise the profile of education departments within the secure estate; grow collaborative working practices across different staff teams¹; support the sharing of research findings and recommendations with policy makers; share your insights with teachers working in other secure estate settings.

One way to secure multi-disciplinary support for your work can be to align your research with one of your secure estate's strategic priorities. Individual secure estates each have their own meeting schedules that will include high priority topics such as Safety and Security, Safeguarding, Equality and Quality Improvement Groups ((QIG), which will include training, HMIP and Ofsted planning). Once approval has been given for your action research project to go ahead, you may find that your secure estate's QIG meeting is the most relevant meeting to attend, as it will offer you the opportunity to raise the profile and awareness of your action research project, and encourage staff in other roles to become involved with your work and/ or consider your research findings in relation to their role. Attending meetings such as the QIG can also help open doors to influence decision making in relation to policy making and procedural issues, including the nature and structure of education provision within your individual prison, or broader recommendations for educational practices within the secure estate.

¹ This is sometimes referred to as a 'practice architectures' approach (Kemmis, McTaggart and Nixon 2014), which we discuss in detail later on in this section.



HMP Liverpool and Novus: How sharing action research plans and findings with colleagues in multi-disciplinary roles can support policy development and effect change.

Example from practice

Following on from their research as part of the OTLA 7 programme, the team at HMP Liverpool and Novus extended their work during OTLA 8 to consider the role of blended learning (a mixture of face-to-face teaching and in-cell learning using pre-prepared work packs). The team had been surprised to discover that some of the men they were working with had stated that they preferred to engage in learning in their cells as opposed to in the classroom, particularly as the in-cell learning had been designed as an interim measure in response to restrictions being placed upon classroom teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic. Because the research team at HMP Liverpool had actively involved their heads of learning and senior managers at both the prison site and with Novus, the project lead was subsequently invited to share her findings on the potential benefits of blended learning in prison environments with both HMIP and Ofsted, helping shape future recommendations in relation to promising, learner-centred practices within the secure estate.

“The research project provided key evidence at a recent Novus (Ofsted) monitoring visit to justify our blended learning approach and show that we were meeting learners' needs in regard to support for English learning. Information was shared with the prison Learning and Skills Manager who is supportive of the drop in sessions”.

- Project Lead, HMP Liverpool.

To learn more about this project please visit: <https://ccpathways.co.uk/practitioner-research/otla8/8b/>

Part 2c: Thinking beyond the classroom; using action research within secure estates to help develop sustainable, prison-wide educative practices

For educational action research initiatives to be most successful within the secure estate, it is important to consider the different aspects of prison life and how this affects or impacts upon the changes you are hoping to make within your teaching or learning support practices. In this section, we share some highly successful examples of action research that have been driven by partnership working; between those working in educative roles, those supporting other aspects of prisoner's lives, and those working in other pertinent roles.



HMP Low Newton: Using partnership working to develop holistic family learning practices for women and their children.

Example from practice

In a project at HMP Low Newton, the education team found that prisoners, many of whom were also mothers, grandmothers, aunts, sisters and carers, felt unable to support their children's learning and development on family days. One of the biggest blockers for the women was that they did not understand the language and terminology associated with statutory education, e.g., the Key Stages, SATs or the new GCSE curricula. Similarly, the team identified that some schools found it difficult to connect children's learning and development with that of their family members in prison. The project team knew that addressing this issue through action research would only be possible if they worked closely with their prison officer colleagues. This is because family visits were the responsibility of the HMPPS-employed prison staff, not the Education team.

You can read more about this project in Case Study 3 and also here: <https://ccpathways.co.uk/practitioner-research/otla-3/offender-learning/>

Certainly, as with the example above, action research within the secure estate presents you with unique challenges and opportunities. It is worth reflecting on how 'illuminating' these challenges and opportunities, by sharing your experiences with others, might also help other teachers (including those working within *and* outside secure estate provisions). A great example of this is the work that has taken place for the past 5 years on developing prison teachers' and learners' digital skills, which has included a number of action research projects, as described in the example from practice below.



Novus: How illuminating the challenges you face as a teacher working within the secure estate can initiate shared practice development across prisons.

Example from practice

In response to her learners feeling 'isolated' from the outside world, especially around social media, a teacher working in HMP Low Newton in 2017 decided to make a change to her feedback practices. At the end of each session, instead of asking learners to write their feedback on their Individual Learning Plans (ILPs), the teacher gave learners a small, laminated slip of paper with a blue bird in the corner and asked them to 'write a tweet' about what they had learnt during the lesson. These tweets were 'posted' outside the classroom on a noticeboard and, reflecting on them, the group were able to identify what was 'trending' and create some 'hashtags' for each week.

Not only was this a very clever and effective way to engage learners in the feedback process (previously, feedback had included responses about the lessons such as 'ok' and 'not good'), it was so creative that other teachers based with the same education provider (Novus) but working in different prisons were inspired to initiate their own action research activities to build on her approach. For example, one teacher working at HMP Buckley Hall created a whole digital media course that enabled learners to experience a range of 'digital practices', including topics such as

'fake news' and 'online shopping', with no screen in sight.

Fast forward to 2021-2022, and three further Novus teams have continued their work to support learners within the secure estate to develop their digital literacies and social media practices. The work of these teams, as part of the OTLA 8 programme and within the LTE Group, has included using action research to develop digital simulations and approaches that can help to narrow the



The Twitter board produced to support digital learning in the secure estate.

'Twitter' feedback board...

What's trending today?

Should we have a # for this?

What would your handle be?

digital divide, which prisoners often find themselves on the wrong side of. Novus' work, which sprung from one teacher at HMP Low Newton sharing the challenge her learners faced in relation to their digital skills development, has now influenced digital literacy work across FE, with teachers from different parts of the sector pinching and personalising techniques developed in the secure estate to integrate Essential Digital Skills and online safety into their own curricula.

You can read about Novus' work to develop prisoners' digital literacy skills here:

<https://ccpathways.co.uk/practitioner-research/otla8/2a/>

<https://ccpathways.co.uk/practitioner-research/otla8/2b/>

<https://ccpathways.co.uk/practitioner-research/otla8/2c/>



One of the Novus digital literacy action research projects is also expanded further within this guide through [case study 1](#).

The theory of practice architectures

The examples from practice above describe how multi-disciplinary action research teams have used the theory of practice architectures (Kemmis et al, 2014) to engage in joined up thinking, reflection and action in relation to prison education practices within their setting.

Put simply, practice architectures is an action research framework that encourages researchers to think beyond the immediate spaces of their own practice, to consider the different 'sayings, doings and relatings' that happen within an organisation and how they affect and influence the decisions that are made and how things are done. Kemmis and colleagues argue that if action researchers

want to effect change, they must investigate how their specific areas of practice connect and intersect with the practices that occur within other areas of the organisation, so that any conflicts or areas of disharmony across different roles and departments can be identified, discussed and rectified.



Using a practice architectures approach to engage in joined up thinking about prison education within a category C prison

Example from practice

In a piece of work carried out in a category C prison in England, a practice architectures approach was applied to understanding how all the different 'sites of practice' interrelated and what this meant for prison education. In the context of prisons, the researchers found that there were six key 'sites of practice', including:



'prisoners' learning; teacher's teaching, leading, managing and administrative practices; professional learning; researching and evaluating practices; supporting prisoners' learning and wellbeing' (Butterby, Collins and Powell, 2017, p.13).

Following on from this research, a guide (aimed predominantly at senior leaders but also freely available to anyone working within the secure estate) was produced (Butterby, Collins and Powell, 2017). The guide sought to encourage leaders to bring together people working in different departments, e.g., Education, Psychology, Safer Custody, Health Care, etc. to plan meaningful and sustainable changes to education practices within their settings (e.g., how Education is positioned and perceived by prison staff and learners in different parts of the prison). In order to do this, the action research team at the Category C prison worked collaboratively across their departments to map out how education was discussed and/ or facilitated across the different sites of practice, helping them to identify aspects of practice that supported and nurtured prison-based learning within their setting, and address aspects of practice that detracted from it.

To read more about this project, and to access the guide, please visit: <https://ccpathways.co.uk/projects/an-interactive-thinking-tool-for-prison-teams/>

The example above might be described as a 'gold standard' account of collaborative working, which we are aware is not always feasible for individual teachers, especially if you do not hold a senior position within your workplace. Nevertheless, the key point here is that, wherever possible, it is extremely beneficial to try and find ways to engage with others working in your prison, so that you can understand the issues you are researching from different perspectives and understand how the changes you make to your educative practices will fit with wider prison life. Working in such a way will likely help you to: see the bigger picture of learners' experiences; appreciate how the changes you are making might make a difference beyond the classroom and; identify where there may be tensions that need to be resolved.

PART 3:

**Ethical and safeguarding
considerations for prison-based
action research**

PART 3: ETHICAL AND SAFEGUARDING CONSIDERATIONS FOR PRISON-BASED ACTION RESEARCH

Part 3a: Educational risk taking within the secure estate

The 2016 Coates review emphasised the importance of building aspirational educational provision within the secure estate that fully prepares learners for life beyond the prison walls. To achieve this aim, teachers need the freedom to reflect upon and develop their practices, including through trying new strategies that help bring learning to life. The Education and Training Foundation's Professional

“Education should be aspirational. It must offer a learning journey that is truly transformational and enables progression to higher levels. These include industry standard vocational qualifications at Level 3 and above as well as university degrees. There should be arrangements in place in prisons to support prospective learners in making applications for such courses, and with the practicalities of studying via distance learning.”

- Coates, 2016 p.38

Standards (ETF, 2022), emphasise the importance of researching your practice, drawing upon the work of others and sharing your learning with colleagues to develop 'evidence-informed' teaching and learning approaches. To do this, teachers will need to be prepared at times to 'think outside of the box', moving away from practices that stagnate learning to take a risk and try something new in their classrooms.

But how can teachers working in the secure estate take meaningful risks within their practice? Do the restraints and barriers of the secure estate prevent innovative and creative teaching? Are teachers in danger of 'holding back'

because they fear the complexities of additional security or safeguarding rules? Is there a nervousness about handing over the responsibility for learning to the learner? The evidence (Coates, 2016) may point to this within the secure estate, but we have also been privileged to observe many positive examples of excellent practice over the years in both individual prisons and through multi-site collaborative action research projects. Just as the teacher from HMP Low Newton did when she resisted the prevailing discourse that 'prisons can't teach digital' and engaged learners in creating paper-based tweets as a way to learn social media skills and etiquette, many teachers working within the secure estate are highly skilled at creatively adapting traditional teaching practices to meet the immediate needs of learners working within the unique contexts of their classroom settings. Indeed, action research can provide a useful structure through which you can explore and challenge 'established' or 'taken for granted' teaching practices that may need refining, improving or reworking so that they better meet the needs of learners within the secure estate.

Some of the action research projects that have been particularly successful in generating meaningful and lasting change for learners within the secure estate have centred around teachers' openness to taking educational risks and their willingness to hand over the responsibility for learning to learners themselves. This can be seen as an important aspect of the expectancy theory of learning (Vroom, 1964), which suggests that when learners are given responsibility for their learning, they become more invested in learning and more motivated to learn. The example from practice shared below is an extract taken from a collaborative OTLA 3 (North East and Cumbria) project that was carried out by education staff at HMP Frankland. Previous quality checks had highlighted that

staff were inclined to 'play safe', being reluctant to experiment with new activities within their teaching practices, especially when being observed. There was also a sense of teachers 'keeping control' of lessons, which prevented more open involvement and discussion with learners about their work. The project aimed, therefore, to encourage creativity by increasing the involvement of learners in starter activities, including learners undertaking a review of previous practice, planning new activities and trailing and recording which activities were successful and why.



HMP Frankland: Using action research to explore and develop outstanding starter activities with learners.

Example from practice

The starting point for the project was a general misunderstanding of the role of starter activities in functional English and maths classes and a reluctance from the learners to fully engage in these. There was an expectation that writing and reviewing starter activities was the responsibility of the teacher. To review the role of starter activities, the English lead worked with both staff and learners to develop an evaluation sheet that met the needs of learners on a variety of ability levels and evaluated how the existing starter activities (devised by staff) were received by the learners.

Activity 5 - Asking about work



Example of a visual indicator

The project aimed to develop a more collaborative way of working with the learners and to give them a deeper understanding of what staff were trying to achieve. Priority was given to ensuring all learners were involved with the trailing and design of the evaluation sheet. To meet all levels, learners felt that the evaluation form should be given a simple visual indicator as well as space for writing details of their experience.

What was learned:

In follow up discussions with learners and staff it was discovered that 'one size does not fit all' and that different types and levels of starters were required. It was also apparent that learners had to fully understand the point of the starter activity and its possible relationship with the whole learning session; to be motivated and fully engaged. The purpose of the starter had to be fully explained to the learners, so they had a clear understanding of not only *what* they were required to do but *why*. Findings reinforced earlier beliefs that, although learners were generally happy to participate in the starter activities, they had little understanding of their objective and were less than enthusiastic about the particular starters used. The learners' involvement in designing and the opportunity to review the starter activities gave them a role in the decision-making process and encouraged ownership of their own learning, increasing motivation and engagement in both the starter activity and the following extended session.

You can read more about this project, and access the resources mentioned at: <https://ccpathways.co.uk/practitioner-research/otla-3/offender-learning/>

Part 3b: Ensuring learner confidentiality and anonymity

An area that requires careful thought and planning is around safeguarding and ethics in prison settings. We have already noted in part 2 of this guide that many of the action research activities you might carry out during your project are not separate to your teaching role but deeply embedded in this. As such, asking prison learners how they feel about, e.g., their target setting approaches should not present you with particular ethical challenges. However, some projects do necessitate careful ethical consideration, as the example from practice below demonstrates.



Safeguarding prison-based learners from public facing action research activities within a Category C prison.

Example from practice

In a project focusing on induction, the proposal was made that prisoners would be best placed to tell other prisoners about the benefits of engaging positively with Education during their sentences. Some willing prisoners were found, and permissions granted, for them to speak on video. However, the research team were worried that these prison learners may not always be happy that their videos would be played to new prisoners in the longer term and their identity revealed. Although not the case in this particular example, there was also a concern that some prisoners might agree to publicly share their views about prison education because it might earn them good favour, without considering the potential long-term impacts of their decision to become the 'face of the prison'.

In the end, it was decided that some ex-prisoners would draw upon the research findings to create the induction video (taking into consideration an anonymised version of the current prisoners' views as well as their own experiences as former secure estate learners). The ex-prisoners each had careers on the outside that drew openly on their experiences as prisoners, so were able to share their expertise with a fully informed understanding of what the videos would be used for and that their identities would be public.

You can read more about this project and access the induction video that was developed as a result of the project's findings here: <https://ccpathways.co.uk/projects/an-inside-job/>.

Action research enables teachers to work together to think carefully and deeply about their practices, which in itself can help support safeguarding practices. Imagine for a moment that the research team had not taken the time to discuss and reflect upon the potential impact of revealing current prisoners' identities through the development of the induction video; not only would prisoners' right to anonymity as research participants be breached within their own prison, their identity and even their location could become unintentionally revealed to those within other prisons too. Prisoners may have been carefully placed within particular locations for their own protection, or the protection of others, especially those on remand, prisoners who are deemed to be vulnerable, young people or those involved in joint enterprise offences. Unintentionally revealing the location of these prisoners could have extremely dangerous and damaging ramifications for their safety and wellbeing. Another special consideration in relation to protecting the identity of participating learners within the secure estate is in relation to their release and their future lives. Whilst a prisoner may be happy to have their identity revealed in an induction video whilst they are in prison, they may not be so keen to discover that the video they have starred in as a prisoner appears on an internet search done by a prospective employer several years later.

Another consideration when working collaboratively with learners on action research projects is that of ownership (e.g., of learner work and/ or of any creative pieces produced as part of the research). How to ensure that recognition is given to learners' contributions to knowledge within your research findings in ways that do not breach confidentiality is also important. One useful way to achieve this balance is to encourage learners to choose their own pseudonym so that they can then make the decision who they wish and who they do not wish to reveal their identity to.

You may find that your colleagues would prefer to also use a pseudonym if you are directly quoting them within your work or if you are reflecting on areas of practice that would benefit from improvement. In some instances, your secure setting may also need to be protected, for example when discussing your research findings with a wider audience you may prefer to simply state that you are a teacher working in the secure estate, or you are a teacher working with men in a Category C prison etc.



HMP Buckley Hall: Using learner-designed Bitmojis instead of photographs to protect learner anonymity

Example from practice

During the social media course at HMP Buckley Hall, described in Part 2 above, the teacher created a series of bitmojis, cartoon-like representations of the learners in her group. The bitmojis were not always an exact likeness for the prisoners they represented but everyone in the group knew who each was, so that they could recognise and celebrate each-others' work without compromising their identities outside the classroom they were studying in.



A photo of the classroom wall, celebrating the safe exploration of digital technology within the secure estate.

Part 3c: Safeguarding learners during action research activities

It's not only considerations around permissions and writing up projects while maintaining anonymity that you will need to be mindful of when undertaking action research in a prison setting. You also need to be aware of what other support each prisoner might be accessing and which types of activity or questioning could potentially trigger an emotion or memory that the person involved may not be currently able or ready to deal with. For example, asking learners to suddenly share personal memories about their education with little preparation could trigger feelings of shame and worthlessness, or even cause an incident at the time or later on that day that results in the prisoner getting into trouble. As such, we recommend the following to action research teams working within secure estates:

- Work collaboratively wherever you can with your colleagues and managers as part of an action research team so that you can run your ideas past one another and check your safeguarding practices.
- Centre your research on developing and improving *your* teaching practice, rather than trying to change how learners learn.
- Ensure you have developed an awareness of trauma informed approaches, which will support you to research with learners in secure settings in ways that safeguard and protect them. We have provided some reading recommendations on trauma informed approaches in the resources and further reading section in part 4 of this guide.
- Avoid asking learners direct questions about their lives and experiences that may trigger difficult or painful memories (particularly in relation to sensitive topics) – wherever possible, keep the focus instead on teaching and learning and on learners' experience of their current teaching and learning activities.
- Take time to develop and build trust with learners before expecting them to participate. Adopting a pro-social approach (Trotter, 2009/ 2019) as part of your research and teaching practices can help support this aim (a definition of pro-social modelling is provided in the coloured box below).
- Ensure that learners have an opt out or an alternative task if they decide that they do not want to participate in the action research activity-
- Consider *where* your action research activity should take place so learners are able to become fully engaged. For example, is it easier for learners to become an active participant in a research team within the classroom environment, or in an alternative space, such as the prison library? Is 1:1 work more effective for eliciting responses from learners than group work?

With the above cautionary tales in mind, it is worth stressing here that action research in prison settings can have some wonderful outcomes and benefits. It can create a strong sense of trust between teachers and learners, and it can help reveal beneficial (as well as problematic) practices that had previously been hidden.



Pro-social modelling to support ethical action research practices *A brief explanation*



“Pro-social modelling is increasingly becoming recognised as a key skill in the supervision of offenders.”

- Trotter, 2019/ 2009

Forming successful teacher/ learner relationships and role modelling positive behaviour is key to creating trust and supporting learners with navigating their own successful relationships that are friendly yet remain professional. Sensitive topics or asking learners direct questions about their lives and experiences that may trigger difficult or painful memories may be better avoided. Learners may choose to disclose sensitive information themselves if they are in a relationship based on trust and teachers need to then ensure that appropriate referrals are made on sensitive information shared.



“I have seen pro-social modelling transform the behaviour of staff and prisoners. Prison officers who learn to work pro-socially develop more rewarding and less tense relationships with prisoners. The prisoners who are treated pro-socially respond by behaving better, so everybody wins.”

- Prison Manager, in Cherry, 2005.

It may be useful here to share a concrete example of what pro-social modelling can look like in practice. For example, a maths teacher working in a Secure Training College (STC) wanted to discover how they could support learners to overcome some of their anxieties in relation to trying new maths activities. At first the teacher tried talking to the learners to ascertain the barriers they were experiencing, however they quickly discovered that direct conversation only created further anxiety for the learners. The teacher then decided to try a different approach, introducing the learners to a set of origami animals and encouraging them to have a go and try making one if they would like to do so. The teacher found that the introduction of low stakes activities such as these was a far better way of creating conditions that were conducive to relaxed discussion, including how the learners were feeling about maths.

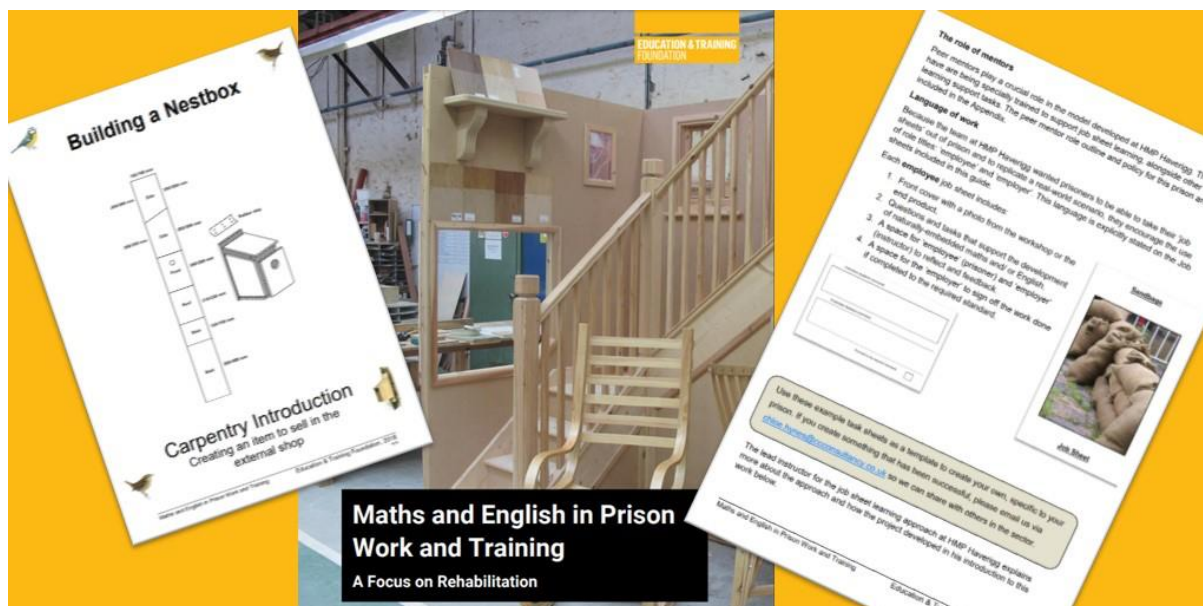
Part 3d: ‘Doing with’ not ‘doing to’: engaging learners’ help with action research projects

The examples from practice shared below each demonstrate how learners can become actively involved in action research, without compromising safeguarding requirements.



Engaging learners as co-researchers in action research projects. *Example from practice*

During a resource development action research project at HMP Kirklevington Grange, HMP Haverigg and HMP Liverpool, prisoners acted as co-researchers, reviewing and critiquing materials in terms of their suitability for developing maths and English in the content of prison work and training. The resource development was inspired by the innovative work carried out by HMP Kirklevington Grange and HMP Haverigg in their exploration of developing prisoners’ English and maths alongside learning vocational skills/ working practices in prison workshops and industries and included the development of the bird box project, which, in turn, inspired other prisons to design their own projects and ‘job sheets’, specific to the departments and workshops within their prisons. In this example, prison learners knew they were part of a research project and gave their consent for their views/ bird box designs to be included.



Examples of job sheets produced by learners working as co-researchers.

You can access the resources and find out more about this project here: <https://ccpathways.co.uk/projects/tbl/se/>

Part 3e: Developing ethical action research activities within the secure estate

Because action research is inherently tied to your teaching practices, it is likely that there are activities you are already doing with learners that will also help you with your research. Wherever possible, it is important to let learners know that you are doing research (and that their input is helping you to develop your teaching practice). By involving learners from the start (as the examples above demonstrate), you are not only emphasising that you value their ideas and input, you are also giving them the opportunity *not* to contribute. In secure environments, there are a lot of things that prisoners *have* to do. Through action research, you are offering learners an opportunity to make an informed choice about how and whether they participate. This does not mean that learners who do not wish to participate should not complete their classwork, only that you would not include samples of their work or their feedback when you write up your research findings. What you can always do however, is write from your own perspective as a teacher. If learners decide not to participate in the research, and are able to share why, this may become useful learning in and of itself and something to reflect upon in relation to your role.

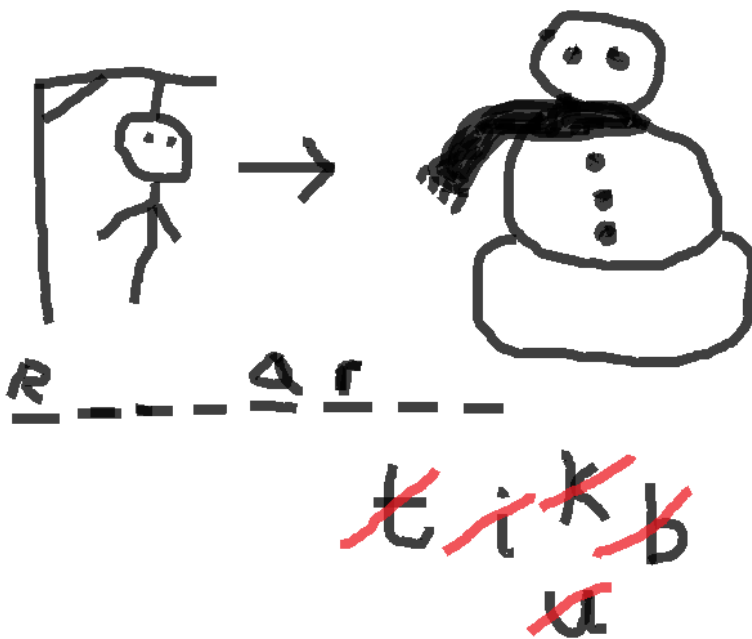
Ethical practices in action research should be woven in from start to finish. As well as enabling learners to decide the nature and extent of their participation in your research, the research activities you decide to embed should seek to 'do no harm'. This is especially important in the secure estate, where people's prior experiences and life histories may leave them particularly vulnerable (for further information please see the resources we have shared in part 4 on trauma informed practices). The example from practice below demonstrates how a traditional teaching game can be easily modified to become more appropriate for all learners, and especially those learning within the secure estate.



Developing ethical activities for action research: from hangman to snowman

Example from practice

Hangman is a spelling game that has been traditionally played in classrooms throughout the UK. The aim of the game is to take it in turns to pick letters that spell out a hidden word, with dashes drawn for each letter. If the letter that has been chosen is in the word, it is added above the correct dash. If the letter is not in the word, a part of the hangman is drawn. If the full drawing is completed before the word is guessed, the hangman has won.



Teachers working within the secure estate recognised that this was an extremely problematic activity that would not be appropriate to try out with learners in their settings. However, they appreciated the usefulness of a competitive spelling activity and were keen to explore how learners would respond. The teachers worked together to modify the hangman activity, using the same principles of the game but this time with a snowman.

Using a snowman rather than a hangman to play a simple spelling game.

Learners were able to engage in the same competitive spelling activity using the snowman, but without the potentially harmful impacts of introducing a hangman's noose into the classroom. This safeguarding measure in relation to activity design and use (e.g., carefully considering the activities you are using and whether they contain any overt or hidden harms) has since been applied within other areas of FE, including in some community youth justice settings and within some adult and community learning provision too.

The example above shows how simple activities can be modified and used for a dual purpose; as a teaching activity and as an action research activity (in this case, the teachers were interested in understanding learner engagement and motivation through the introduction of games-based starter and plenary activities).

You can find further examples of action research activities that have been used successfully and ethically within the secure estate in the next section of this guide. You will also find a link to a video that was produced for teachers working on the OTLA 7 programme, which outlines some further ethical considerations for action researchers working in the FE sector.

PART 4:

Resources and further reading

PART 4: RESOURCES AND FURTHER READING

This section contains resources and further reading that you may find helpful as you plan, carry out and write up your action research.

Part 4a: Action Research case studies

Here we share 5 case studies that illustrate how action research has been used in diverse ways and to explore a range of different teaching issues and challenges within the secure estate. You may like to read through all of the case studies, or select the ones that interest you the most.

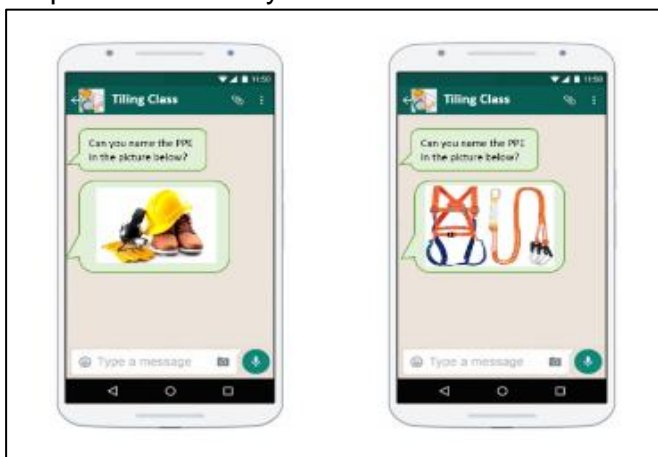


HMP Hewell and HMPYOI Stoke Heath: Using action research to support the development of digital literacies and the embedding of essential digital skills within the secure estate

Case Study 1

Although steadily improving, lack of access to digital devices can be a substantial barrier to the development of essential digital skills within the secure estate. This is not just an issue affecting prison-based learners, as teachers and workshop facilitators may also be starved of the opportunity to develop their own digital pedagogies, creating a digital divide between those based in the secure estate and other facets of Further Education.

Using the Education and Training Foundation's 'Digital Starters and Enders Cards' (ETF, 2018) as a starting point, practitioners from HMP Hewell and HMPYOI Stoke Heath investigated how the cards might be adapted for vocational learning. The aim of giving the starter and ender cards a 'vocational twist' was that the activities would become more meaningful for learners and also more relevant for vocational teaching teams, thus easier to embed within their sessions:



Learners complete vocational work using a WhatsApp template.



"We have adapted this format to focus specifically on vocational subject scenarios, for example, a chef creating a recipe database in a working kitchen or a builder creating a social media presence for their business."

Vocational specialists and digital champions worked together to create a range of contextualised starter and ender cards, using templates of common digital platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook and Webpages to support learners to consider (for example) how they would market their business on a website or identify key aspects of personal protective equipment. The cards were collated and sent out to other vocational specialists to trial with their learners, who provided valuable feedback about how activities could be tweaked or how the cards could be further developed.

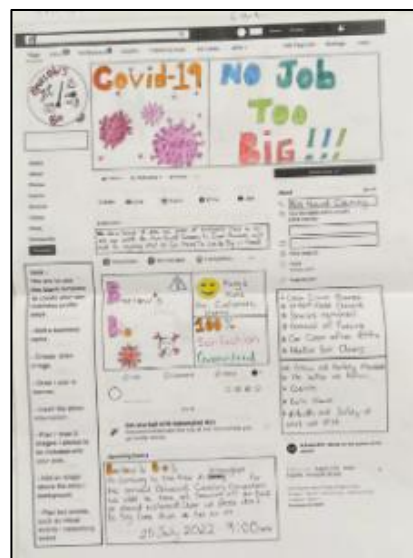


“The resources produced empowered learners to develop digital, writing and communication skills as they drafted business Facebook pages, recipe website content and online review site content... the research activity opened up an opportunity for the production of learner-led, co-designed digital skills development strategies and resources, which can be incorporated into future schemes of work as learners suggest the platforms and digital tasks they would like to explore next.”

Through their action research project, the team were able to work together to overcome some of the barriers to embedding essential digital skills that had been present before. The project also helped the digital champions appreciate that vocational specialists were not resistant to engaging in digital literacy work, they just needed some tangible examples to draw from:



“Once engaging resources, such as realistic templates for online tasks using authentic colours and layouts, were modelled by the project team, tutors ‘ran with them’ to design engaging paper-based activities.”



Example of learner work produced during the action research project.

To learn more about this project, and to access the templates and resources mentioned above, please visit: <https://ccpathways.co.uk/practitioner-research/otla8/2c/>



HMP Liverpool. Using action research to develop opportunities for learner reflection as a way to improve target setting in maths and English.

Example Case Study 2

Responding to feedback from Ofsted in relation to target setting as a specific area for improvement, the project team set out to investigate how target setting could be repurposed from something that had to be done, to something that was meaningful, purposeful and motivational for learners.

In order to address this challenge, the team decided to embed a series of reflective activities into everyday maths and English work, to see whether increased opportunities for learners to reflect on their progress and areas for development resulted in targets that were both more relevant, and more ambitious, than they had previously been:



“Plans were made to introduce a range of reflective activities to English and maths lessons to allow learners to openly identify the learning they could remember as well as areas that needed more practice. It was hoped that learners would be able to set their own targets based on the topics they had decided they needed to improve on. This would lead to targets that would be more likely to inspire and motivate learners and spark a sense of interest and ownership.”

Despite some significant challenges imposed on the team as a result of Covid-19 and a move from class-based to in-cell learning, the research team were able to support learners to reflect on their learning through the use of exit slips, telephone interviews and embedded reflective activities within work packs. As the project progressed, the research team were able to tweak the wording of questions in order to elicit a more detailed and thoughtful reflection for learners, for example from closed questions such as ‘was it easy’ to open questions such as ‘what do you know now that you didn’t know before?’, which encouraged a deeper response:



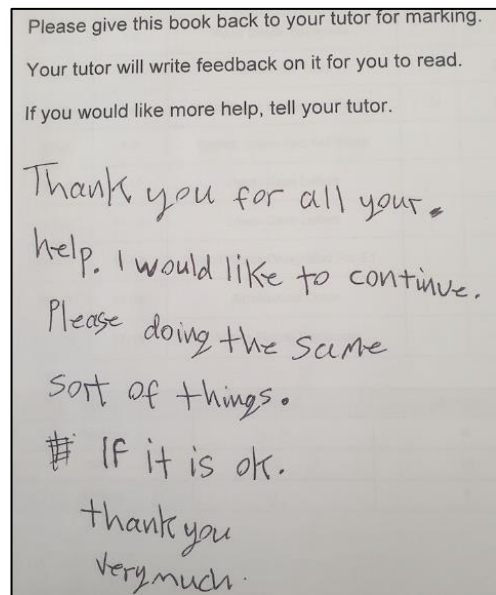
“The main learning from the exit slips was that detailed and relevant reflections were provided when prompted by more specific and detailed questions... This suggests that tutors should be careful in their choice of language and deploy strong coaching skills when questioning learners to get the most useful responses from their learners.”

In addition to their work with learners, the research team surveyed staff to explore their attitudes to target setting, which, when themed, were found to be more orientated towards results than towards more holistic goals that encouraged people to view themselves as life-long learners.



“The tutors’ group discussions allowed for development in professional practice, especially the evaluation of practice and to build positive and collaborative relationships. Some of the information from the project exposed areas for improvement which certainly challenged established models of practice and beliefs about target setting.”

Although HMP Liverpool’s project began primarily with target setting in mind, their research findings helped them to challenge their thinking, share learning and initiate changes in relation to several areas of practice. Action research provided an opportunity for teaching teams to problematise their ‘taken for granted’ assumptions about effective learning practices within the secure estate, drawing on feedback from learners to reconsider the importance of relationship building, the potential for blended learning as a way for men to feel safe to fully engage with education (some men reported that in-cell education enabled them to ask questions, worry less about getting things wrong and reflect on their learning in ways that would have been difficult to do in front of their peers), and the importance of connecting target



Changes to feedback practices encouraged deeper and more reflective responses from learners.

setting to men's wider lives and aspirations.

To learn more about this project, please visit: <https://ccpathways.co.uk/practitioner-research/otla-7/otla-7-cluster-12/24-novus-hmp-liverpool/>



HMP Low Newton. Using action research to explore ways of promoting parental engagement in children's learning.

Case Study 3

The English team at HMP Low Newton had noticed that some of the women they were working with were finding it increasingly difficult to keep up to date with what their children were doing in school, which was causing tension during family visits. Having already engaged with research that emphasised the links between strong family ties and recidivism, the team sought to embed opportunities within their English provision to promote family learning and used action research to explore how their revised focus might strengthen parent/ child relationships and/ or improve learners' English skills.

The team began their research by holding a focus group with some of the women in their English classes, to ascertain whether they would be interested in taking part in the research and to better understand some of the current issues that were preventing them from taking a more active role in their child's education. The group also began to come up with ideas about how they could work collaboratively with their children to engage in learning:



"The idea was to work with mums and kids to create a joint story which would be turned into an e-book to be accessed through a website/ downloaded to a smart phone by the child at home. They created a prototype book which would then be turned into an e-book."

Building from the focus group, women in one of the English classes created a prototype storybook, which was then digitalised. The book was used to advertise the project and other women were invited to participate. Women and children were then able to spend time together during family visits to create and develop stories of their own, with a digital copy sent to the child, and a paper copy remaining 'in-house'. A key finding from the project was that prison visiting hours often clashed with children's schooling, which meant children were often unable to attend. Schools were also wary of encouraging visits during school hours, as they were 'not seen as having any educational value'. These findings emphasised the importance of developing a clear family learning strategy within the prison, which took into consideration the women's wider family lives and their underlying motivations for learning.

This project demonstrates how action research can not only encourage meaningful, subject-

specific changes in teaching and learning that have genuine value in learners' lives, but also how action research has the capacity to encourage deeper reflection and problem solving in relation to broader structural barriers and relational work within the secure estate. The storybook work encouraged participating women to simultaneously develop their English skills and connect with their children, which in turn led to a reconsideration of the nature and structure of child/ parent visits within the prison.



Example pages from the digital storybook.



“Evening visits have now been allocated to encourage more families to bring children to see their parents, so that it is not impacting on school attendance.”

This project also illustrates:

- the cyclical nature of action research, as problem solving in one area of the curriculum led to further reflection and action in relation to broader aspects of work within the prison.
- how educational developments within secure settings are part of a broader practice architecture (please see section 2c for further details about practice architectures).

To learn more about this project, please visit: [https:// repository.excellencegateway.org.uk/OTLA_Digital_North_East_and_Cumbria_Summary_Booklet_0.pdf](https://repository.excellencegateway.org.uk/OTLA_Digital_North_East_and_Cumbria_Summary_Booklet_0.pdf)



HMP Leeds: The Roald Dahl Project

Case Study 4

The Roald Dahl project at HMP Leeds was developed in response to a national collaborative competition - 'Making it real for Learners'. The project invited English and maths practitioners, in both the secure estate and the College, to work towards creating a project that worked in collaboration with others – employers, community groups, external partners, etc. The brief asked that the project should be specific to a particular cohort or learner group, be time specific and that it should record the measured impact, making it clear what difference the project had made.



The Roald Dahl project in action.

The main aim of the project was to support fathers in prison, through the charity 'Storybook Dads' helping them to better understand and appreciate the work of Roald Dahl when reading to their children at family visits. It was anticipated that the learners would also be able to develop their English and maths skills and increase their confidence, employability and communication skills. The wider aim of the Education team at HMP Leeds was to encourage learner motivation and engagement by handing responsibility for the project over to the learners to plan and manage, with support and guidance from staff and prison mentors as needed. The learner group met and decided on an inclusive decision-making process inviting all those participating to join their chosen working group that included:

Creating games inviting those attending to join in English and maths challenges;



Some of the games created through the project.

Creating display boards showing examples of English, maths and artwork produced;



Examples of displays created during the project.

Developing business enterprise/ employability ideas through cooking and baking for the event and selling produce to raise funds for the charity;



Delicious looking cakes for the charity bake sale formed part of the event.

What was the impact of the project? What difference did it make?

In evaluation and follow up discussions with learners, the practitioners discovered that giving the learners the autonomy and responsibility for all aspects of the project and their own learning, increased their motivation and engagement.

“Roald Dahl was fantastic – we need more of this kind of education.”

- English/Employability learner

“We all worked together and got on well. I enjoyed the Roald Dahl stories and activities.”

- English/Employability learner

“I love the active learning. It's so much better than sitting behind a desk and time just goes so quickly. Our group developed the English and maths activities and helped with the story boards.”

- English/Employability learner

Feedback from the staff:



“They don’t always get on so well but enthusiasm for the project along with a genuine interest in the books has definitely encouraged communication and group work skills.”



“The Employability group were very enthusiastic, and it was a great idea to encourage them to produce a Business Enterprise – real life skills used!”



“Concentration and engagement, and therefore behaviour, has seen a marked improvement.”



North Sea Camp: Making initial assessment meaningful.

Case Study 5

In 2011, the Education team at HMP North Sea Camp, then part of Lincoln College, identified a lack of success/ engagement with the maths and English initial assessment tasks they were asking new prison residents there to complete. The assessments being used were standard ‘levelling’ checks, designed to identify what national curriculum levels prison learners needed to work towards (if any) and what their gaps were to achieve qualifications at those levels. For many learners they spoke with, the contexts that questions were set in were not familiar and the purpose of the ‘tests’ (always seen as such, even if the word assessments was used) was not something they were motivated by.

The team went on to design and trial activities that prison learners could do on arrival in Education that were meaningful to their lives. For instance, some entry level maths needs could be identified through the use of a slightly adapted prison ‘canteen’, where costs for the various things you need for prison life are listed and from which all orders in the prison had to be made.

Another task trialled was a reading a short factual text about the prison’s history including such details as:

This example of a 'canteen sheet' has been created only as a learning resource and is not a true reflection of prices or goods available.

An adapted prison canteen sheet.

“It was reportedly a sunny morning on 31st May, 1935, when a farm worker looked up from hoeing a field near Boston, to see a surprising sight. A group of around thirty men and boys were marching vigorously along the road which led to Freiston, uniformly dressed in dark-blue shorts, grey, open-necked shirts and sturdy boots. They were led by a rather tall man of military appearance. His name was WW Llewellyn and he was to be the governor of the, as yet unbuilt, North Sea Camp. With him were his staff and around twenty lads in their teens. In just one week, they had marched the 110 miles from Stafford to The Wash, sleeping overnight at Uttoxeter, Derby, Nottingham, Bingham, Grantham, Sleaford and finally Boston. Staff are reported to have said that the march was a happy experience which welded the group together on their way to a new beginning. There is no record of the prisoners’ reaction!”



The boys building the North Sea Camp.

While these reading tasks were not about everyday life in prison, they often sparked debate about prison regimes in the past and present and were interesting to many people. They also provided a ‘way in’ to start talking about the land on which the prison had been built, which now included a working prison farm and an RSPB reserve. In turn, this led to conversations about work done in the prison, which included opportunities to learn about farming and conservation. The team at North Sea Camp found that prisoners engaged better with the new assessment tasks and that their learning needs were being better identified.



The boys marching.

This action research project influenced prison teams across the country. Although education teams could not change the mandatory, standardised initial assessments that were later introduced by the prison service (and are still part of the induction process to this day), they could use their own additional (more engaging) tasks on learners’ arrival in their classrooms. Beyond prison induction processes, other people also drew on research done at HMP North Sea Camp. For example, a British Council prison education project for ESOL learners used canteens and other ‘realia’ as the basis for

developing ‘survival resources’ for prisoners whose first language is not English.

Part 4b. Trauma informed practices within the secure estate

Below we share some key reading and resources relating to trauma informed practice that we have found helpful in our own teaching practices.

The causes of trauma

The causes of trauma are understood to be deep rooted and often difficult to understand or address. Some root causes can be broken down in to 3 distinct causes:

Household - examples include - emotional or sexual abuse, domestic violence, physical or emotional neglect.

Community – examples include - poor housing, poverty or historical trauma, lack of clean air or water.

Environmental – examples include - natural disasters such as floods or fires or pandemics.

Examples of **risk factors** may include - poor mental health, school exclusion, peer pressure, gang membership, poverty, an institutionalised up-bringing, being a victim of violence or abuse and **protective factors** could include – educational achievement, supportive parents and networks, emotional well-being and an environment based on trust.



“It is well-known that the experience of trauma can have lasting implications on a person’s social, physical and emotional well-being.”

- Vaswani and Paul, 2019, p.1.

How do we prevent trauma?

Serious violence, trauma and adversity cannot be tackled in isolation, it needs to be a collaborative partnership between organisations and communities taking an all-round approach to embed prevention.

How can we make a difference?

- Accept that people who experience complex trauma are not broken or beyond repair.
- Promote positive mental and physical well-being to increase people’s capacity to deal with trauma and build strong relationships.
- Recognise that positive/ strong relationships can be seen as the key to overcoming trauma.
- Support financial stability that may include a curriculum that addresses the need for skills in budgeting and financial management.
- Offer employment advice and guidance, vocational training, relevant Personal, Social, Health and Economic Education (PSHEE) subjects and qualifications in English and maths.
- Avoid telling people to ‘move on’ and support their concerns about being re-traumatised or having their ‘triggers’ for trauma dismissed.

Below is information on the initial opening plans for the Rivendell Unit at HMP/ YOI New Hall. In working together to create an environment of safety and trust, the multi-disciplinary team involved aimed to recognise the need for trauma informed practices and embed these in their shared plans for the Unit.



The Rivendell Unit, HMP/ YOI New Hall: developing trauma informed approaches within the secure environment.

Example from practice

In 2008 The 26-bed Rivendell Unit at HMP/ YOI New Hall was one of a number of 26 and 19 bed units commissioned by the Youth Justice Board to house 15–17-year-old female offenders. The young people housed at the Rivendell were very likely to be vulnerable and have a number of trauma-related concerns and had likely suffered from one or many of the forms of abuse or neglect identified earlier.

In preparation for the opening of the Rivendell Unit a working party of multi-disciplinary staff (made up of Education/ IAG, Psychology, Youth Offending team (YOT), Advocacy, Discipline

staff, Health Care, Counselling Services) regularly met to plan how they would work with the young people in their care to create an environment of safety and trust and support them with gaining the skills required to have the confidence and resilience to better manage their own emotional well-being. The overall aim was that, in the absence of stable parents, the multi-disciplinary team would attempt to, as far as possible, simulate this responsibility.

It is worth noting that although this work was with young people (15–17-year-old), many of the aims are easy transferable to the adult prison population across the secure estate.

Some suggestions that were trialled:

- Uniform was abandoned and discipline staff all wore casual polo shirts and jogging bottoms. (For many young people uniforms can be a ‘trigger’ for recurring trauma).
- A carefully vetted team of discipline staff and teachers were chosen as role models to work with the young people. These staff were chosen for their enthusiasm in working with young people and their ability to support the young people in building resilience and emotional stability.
- First names were used for the young people and everyone working on the Unit to support an environment of trust and mutual respect.
- A Personal Officer team that went beyond just allocating roles and that offered a second and/or third officer should the Personal Officer not be available (it was noted that a change in hours was requested for the team to avoid the shift system when officers would be missing for up to 2 weeks for night shifts/ toil time).
- A Mentor/ Buddy scheme run by the young people that offered support and advice to each of the young people on Induction and for the remainder of their sentence.
- A strengthening of the safeguarding policies and procedures that ensured that all the multi-disciplinary team had full training and were competent in all aspects of safeguarding, child protection and related paperwork.
- On-site access that gave timely support and advice from Advocacy, Chaplaincy, Counselling and the Drug and Alcohol Dependency Team as needed.
- A curriculum that provided: access to Information; Advice and Guidance (IAG); Education that included vocational subjects; maths; English and Library access. PSHE subjects that were known to reduce recidivism were also included, such as: Healthy Living; Family Relationships; Budgeting and Financial Management.
- Access to Psychology based Offender Behaviour Programmes that included Drug and Alcohol Awareness and Managing Emotions that linked in with the young person’s Sentence Planning/ Detention Training Order.
- The young people on the Unit were invited to be involved in creating the Unit name (Rivendell – from ‘safe place’ in The Lord of the Rings), and later were invited to contribute to the ‘Learner/ Staff Agreement’ as well as various logo and classroom designs. This gave a sense of involvement and ownership designed to support self-confidence and resilience.

In 2011, Michael Spurr, Chief Executive Officer of The National Offender Management Service (NOMS) said:



“The Rivendell was a very well-run Unit and staff there support the very needy and challenging young people that it held.”

“Staff at the Rivendell Unit are rightly recognised for their hard work in creating a safe and secure environment with positive outcomes for the young people held there.”

Comments by Nick Hardwick, Chief Inspector of Prisons on the 2011 Inspection of the Rivendell Unit included:

- Improvements had been made in safeguarding and child protection.
- Levels of self-harming and violence on the Unit were low and the young people on the Unit felt safe.
- Relationships between the staff and young people were good and there was a respectful culture within the Unit.

The curriculum had been successfully adapted to meet the needs of most.

Further reading and resources on trauma-informed practices within the secure estate

- Work on trauma informed approaches is currently being piloted at HMP Leeds. For further information, please contact Alex Littlewood, Head of Safety, Segregation and Equalities.
- Vaswani, N. and Paul, S. (2019) ‘It’s Knowing the Right Things to Say and Do’: Challenges and Opportunities for Trauma-informed Practice in the Prison Context. *Howard journal of crime and justice*. [Online] 58 (4), 513–534.
- The [Youth Justice Resource Hub](#). Here you will find a wealth of information relating to the youth justice system, including access to research reports and evidence-based practice (including in relation to trauma informed approaches).
- Youth Justice Board (2017). ‘*Effective practice in youth justice. In brief: Trauma-informed youth justice.*’ This document is freely available to download from the YJB and provides useful guidance for anyone working with young people in the secure estate.
- McCartan, K (2020). [Trauma informed practice: HM Inspectorate of Probation academic insights 2020/ 05](#).

Part 4c. Ethical considerations for action researchers working in Further Education

This video was developed by the OTLA 7 programme team as part of a Research Round Table series for teachers participating in the OTLA 7 programme. The video acted as a pre-session stimulus, which was then explored collaboratively as part of the round table discussions. To watch, please follow this link:

<https://bit.ly/OTLA7-RRT-Ethics>

If you are leading an action research project, you might like to consider making a similar video, or using any parts of this video that are relevant to your work.



Screenshot of ethics stimulus video created for the OTLA 7 Action Research Programme

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Links to OTLA practitioner-facilitated research anthologies on the Education and Training Foundation's Practitioner Research and Evidence Portal (PREP)

Many of the examples from practice used within this guide have come from the Education and Training Foundation's [OTLA Action Research Programme](#). Individual project reports can be found on the Education and Training Foundation's [Practitioner Research and Evidence Portal](#) (PREP) as well as an anthology of practitioner-facilitated research from each programme. Below we share links to the programme anthologies, which contain many reports of action research within Further Education, as well as the secure estate examples mentioned in this guide.

[OTLA 3 \(North East and Cumbria\)](#).

[OTLA 4 \(digital\)](#).

[OTLA 6 \(English\)](#).

[OTLA 7 \(English, maths and Essential Digital Skills\)](#).

[OTLA 8 \(English, ESOL and EDS\)](#).

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