



The Ballad of Reading in Gaol

Sue Lavery

"The ability to access books while in custody is a godsend. There is no dressing up the fact that deprivation of liberty is horrible, and it's supposed to be that way for a reason. However books provide an escape to faraway places, to be part of a bigger story, and to escape the reality that is our current predicament."

The above quote illustrates the importance of reading as seen through the eyes of a detainee at the Alexander Maconochie Centre. However, there is still debate on whether people like the clients I had should even have access to such "luxuries" as books and libraries. My story below may help in this debate.


Introduction

I set up the Alexander Maconochie Centre Library in 2009. There have been four Librarians since then. Each has loved it, but each would have a different perspective. I retired in 2015, but kept contact through some work at the Alexander Maconochie Centre Library, and I was also a member of the ALIA Prison Library guidelines working group.

My own background is as a Teacher Librarian, and the skills I learned there came in very handy, as I was still working with people in uniform who didn't want to be there.

The Clients

The types of people I encountered were intelligent and respectful, with a relative few intimidating or even rude, reinforcing the point that people don't lose their humanity on incarceration.




Most don't want to be there, so use the Library for a legal escape rather than a function of their work. The Library was envisaged as a place as close to a community Library as possible, so my emphasis at first was on its recreational value. I had originally envisaged a true community library, for both staff and detainees, but to ensure that books stayed within the Alexander Maconochie Centre, and to ensure an adequate circulation of resources, borrowing was restricted to detainees only, though staff were always welcome to browse, suggest titles, or just find a quiet lunchtime space. The best feedback that I had on the library as a normal space came from the detainee who came in, sat, sighed, and said "Wow – this is the first time I've sat on a couch in weeks!"

Working in a prison library means finding that narrow line between the trust and respect of the clients (detainees) and the ever-present demands of security. I found that having the respect of detainees was crucial to the functioning of the Library, as this underpinned all transactions. For example, I abandoned all formal dates due, and worked on incentives, rewards, and implementing a culture of "our" not "my" – a big step for many clients. However, I did implement overdue fines as Alexander Maconochie Centre grew – I never failed to be astounded by detainees who were quite thrown by such little pieces of paper! The Information needs of people incarcerated are remarkably similar to those of any community.

Even there, however, the environment intruded. I bought only full sets of series, as my clients did not have the ability to quickly procure the next book for themselves, and delayed gratification is not a highly common trait. There was probably more of an emphasis on access to law information, which became an increasing area of demand, handicapped by the amount of material online and therefore inaccessible except through requests to the Librarian. Education information was facilitated through the Education staff, but was still a difficult process.

Technology

It felt like returning to the Stone Age. It was a long time since I had used written borrower records! However, I was able to have set up KOHA, an open source Library system that works brilliantly. Using all modules (except the borrowing module) allowed remote access to the collection from an individual's cell or cellblock. Also, email access to the Librarian meant that books could be reserved and delivered on request, as all detainees with computers have access to catalogue and email access to the Librarian. The use of technology taken for granted on the outside is not easy in such a secure environment – the public are often against such access, and there are many security implications, but detainees actually benefit.



On Alexander Maconochie Centre computers in the Library and in cellblocks, detainees have email access, albeit with many caveats, including a limited number of approved addresses, and monitoring of their communications (as are phone calls and mail). However, family bonds are crucial to preventing recidivism, and email gives the detainee access to family that is less costly and more private than phone calls. Hopefully, the success of the Alexander Maconochie Centre allowing this access will encourage other jurisdictions to consider allowing their detainees similar access. Another retrograde step was returning to the time of the librarian being the portal for information, (supplying on request, rather than teaching how to use). I had many requests for all sorts of information, from pictures of fairies to high level research for university studies.

The Disproportionate importance of Library services

For many detainees, the Library takes on a disproportionate importance. Often there is no other recreation, depending on accommodation – sometimes there is not even a television, though this is rare.

For anyone who reads compulsively, it is unimaginable to not have the ability to access the latest title in a series or the next bestseller. While the Alexander Maconochie Centre also allowed detainees to buy books, this was a process of ordering and waiting up to a month – if they had the money in the first place. With all the necessary movement restrictions in place, my clients often could not even visit the Library when they needed to change what they were reading, but may have waited up to a week for my outreach visit.

When there is no other way of getting information, the rather old-fashioned idea of divining the actual needs of a client and then supplying them with that as a printed work is both challenging and satisfying. From artwork to poetry, the requests were continuous, challenging and often very time consuming.

Conclusion

This was the most rewarding and challenging library I have ever worked in. It left me absolutely convinced that all prisons should have libraries staffed by trained librarians. Further information on the Library today can be gained by emailing the present librarian, Belinda Lawson, belinda.lawson@act.gov.au, or on this paper by emailing slavery@grapevine.com.au



Further reading

<https://alia.org.au/about-alia/policies-and-guidelines/alia-policies/prison-guidelines>

<https://www.alia.org.au/about-alia/policies-standards-and-guidelines/statement-free-access-information>

<https://koha-community.org/>

<http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2014/books-behind-bars-a-volunteer-run-prison-library-service-in-winnipeg-manitoba/>

Blackburn, Fiona. and Sue Lavery. "The Ballad of Reading in Gaol." *Incite* 36, no. 6/7 June/July (2016): 28-29.

Marks, Russell. *Crime & Punishment: Offenders and Victims in a Broken Justice System*. Collingwood: Redback, 2015.