

Toe by Toe (PSN 261, Oct/Nov 2008)

“The single best thing introduced into prisons in the last ten years.” That’s how Stephen Shaw, Prison and Probation Ombudsman describes the Shannon Trust’s Toe by Toe reading scheme. Now rolling out a new Reading Network in the West Midlands Young Offender estate, the charity is helping to reshape offenders’ prospects. PSN visited HMYOI Brinsford, the hub of the network, to find out more.

“If you can’t read it doesn’t mean you’re not intelligent, it just means no one has ever taught you,” says Susie O’Hagan, West Midlands Reading Network Project Manager. “And if you can’t read you can’t really access anything – whatever is on offer.”

The Shannon Trust was set up eight years ago specifically to work with people in custody, teaching prisoner mentors to teach fellow offenders to read. The Basic Skills Agency Initial Assessment shows that about 60% of prisoners score poorly on literacy, so it’s a major issue. “People who can’t read often have very low self-esteem and confidence. And they’ll go to great lengths to hide it. Prisoners often make up for this low self-esteem by being violent or aggressive, and find it difficult to communicate effectively. Learning to read transforms how they feel about themselves. They feel they are using their time constructively and have more opportunities open to them,” says Susie.

The trust enables prisons to deliver the Toe by Toe reading manual, developed and written by Keda Cowling after 20 years of working with children with dyslexia and reading difficulties. It breaks reading down into a series of small, simple sounds helping people to learn not just step by step, but Toe by Toe. It has also been designed so anyone with a moderate reading ability will be able to use it to teach others to read, which works well in prisons.

Susie says: “The scheme is delivered by prisoners, to prisoners in many establishments across the estate. We provide everything needed for the course – all the books, training packs, t-shirts and pencils – all for free. And it couldn’t be simpler; we train prison mentors in how to deliver the manual, and they then meet with a learner for 20 minutes, five days a week. The progress of the learners is then recorded so they can see how far and how quickly they are progressing.”

The Network

While this may sound simple, the scheme was not working well across the young offender estate. “There were specific issues for young offenders that needed to be addressed,” says Susie. “They tend to receive shorter sentences and have a high amount of churn with offenders moving around. And the peer delivery aspect – which is key to the project’s success in adult and young adult establishments – was not working well with 15-18 year olds. They didn’t like the idea that a peer was better at reading than them.”

The Shannon Trust is addressing these issues with the West Midlands Reading Network, funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation. It’s a three year project that aims to engage young offenders more effectively in the Toe by Toe reading plan. Already spreading beyond the boundaries of the West Midlands, the network will be rolled out firstly across the whole young offender estate, and then all adult establishments. “We are aiming to identify best practice here and to make it spread. The scheme itself won’t change, just the way it is facilitated,” says Susie.

The biggest issue to address is communication. A young offender might come to Brinsford and be identified as having the reading age of a six year old. They might start well on Toe by Toe, be moved to a different establishment, then not have the opportunity to continue – either because the scheme isn't running there or no one knows the offender's been doing it. Similarly, when they are released they may never encounter the scheme again.

“We are improving the communication between establishments in the network. So when an offender is moved their record of progress goes with them, and a mentor will be waiting for them to carry on from where they left off. We are also involving Youth Offender Teams (YOTs) to continue with and push the scheme on release, and are hoping to involve probation.”

The project also depends on facilitators, such as Learning and Skills Assistants (LSAs), volunteering their time to train the mentors and run the scheme. If facilitators leave an establishment the whole process can have to be restarted, so the network helps there. Susie adds: “We have also addressed the peer delivery aspect of the scheme, recruiting and training suitable mentors who are approachable and trustworthy. Only enhanced prisoners can be a mentor, and if they get in trouble they are off the project. We've standardised our training and are starting to provide mentor packs. We also want them to carry out reading tests and to promote the scheme to every prisoner as part of the induction process. We are also training LSAs to deliver the scheme to 15-18 year olds.”

Feel-good factor

One prisoner mentor at Brinsford says: “The biggest problem was finding the people who needed help in the first place, but that's all changing now as the scheme is promoted more. There's a feel-good factor for us, but it's more important for the person that's being taught because you know they're gaining an important skill. We are gaining important teaching skills that will help us when we leave, and maybe we'll be able to teach our own kids one day.”

Jo Stonely, LSA at Brinsford, says: “It's surprising how quickly the learners progress. When they see they've moved from the reading age of a five year old to an eleven year old in the space of a few months it massively boosts their self-confidence. And all it requires is a mentor, a book and a pencil.”

In addition to helping learners and mentors, the project also benefits the prison. As well as being free it fits into at least three of the resettlement pathways, goes towards purposeful activity hours and affects prisoner behaviour – both inside and on release. Susie explains: “It's very hard for us to categorically say that learning to read reduces re-offending, as prisoners receive a number of different interventions. But if you learn to read you have so many more options. There are very few jobs that require no basic skills, so they leave with more potential to succeed – a better chance.

“We've also had feedback from offenders on the course like, ‘For the first time I've been able to read a letter from my wife’. You have no privacy in prison, and if you have to get someone to read everything to you, you have even less. It means someone else is always going to know your business before you and that makes people angry and frustrated. Then all of a sudden you can read a letter from your own wife or kids for the first time. It's like suddenly they've got their own life and are in control. It opens up every door that has ever been closed to them, and can be the first step in them saying, ‘There are things I can do now. I don't have to come out of here and be a criminal again.’”

Source: Prison Service News 2008