

The Role of Online College Courses in Rehabilitating Offenders

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Abstract

Research and testimonial evidence indicate the importance of postsecondary education in the rehabilitating inmates and in decreasing reoffending. Limited research exists on improving critical thinking skills and cognitive processing among inmates. Results indicated that critical thinking skills improved for all students; there was no significant difference based on incarceration status.

Problem

McKinney and Cotronea (2011) and the U.S. Department of Justice (2007) stated that social policies now focus on **correctional education** to provide rehabilitation and reintegration by offering classes in adult basic education, vocational education, and **postsecondary education**. These classes assist inmates because without training and marketable skills, the inmate will continue to use the **revolving door** to come in and out of prison (Owens, 2009).

Critical thinking skills are an essential element of the postsecondary education experience (Gabr & Mohamed, 2011), and evidence of improved critical thinking skills among inmates is important in order to support additional funding for inmate postsecondary education opportunities.

These programs are needed because there is a positive relationship between postsecondary education and decreased rates of inmate recidivism (Boulard, 2010; Unruh, Povenmire-Kirk, & Yamamoto, 2009). However, there is very little **quantitative data on why postsecondary education courses improves inmates' critical thinking skills**.

Purpose

The purpose of this quantitative study was to examine the influence of a psychology course on the critical thinking scores for individuals who took an online psychology course and how the scores of inmates and other students in the course differed.

Relevant Literature

Critical Thinking & Postsecondary Education

- Elder and Paul (2013). *Stage Theory*
- Batchelder and Koski (2002). *Barriers to inmate education*.
- Meyer (2011). *Factors effecting students success in postsecondary education*.

Online Courses & Critical Thinking

- Prasad (2009). *Critical Thinking & Discussions*.
- Harrell (n.d.). *Critical Thinking*.
- Sendag and Odabasi (2009). *Online Problem Based Learning*

Motivation & Online Learning

- Simpson (2008). *Motivation and distance learning*.
- Lundahl and Burke (2009). *Effects of motivational interviewing*.
- Miller and Rose (2009). *Theory of motivational interviewing*.

The RAND Corporation (2013) indicated that educating and equipping offenders with a postsecondary education degree is so important along with continuing research studies such as this because:

- Inmates are 43 percent less likely to recidivate
- It's a **400 percent return on investment** after 3 years
- Taxpayers save \$5 for every \$1 spent on an inmate
- 13% increase on employment post-release for participants in postsecondary education programs.

Research Questions

Q1. Is there a significant improvement in adult students' critical thinking skills after participating in an online cognitive psychology course as measured by pretest and posttest scores on a community college critical thinking skills assessment?

Q2. Is there a significant difference in levels of improvement in critical thinking skills between inmates and students, as measured by pretest and posttest scores on a community college critical thinking assessment?

Procedures

Analyzed archival data:

- Inmates and students of Midwestern college
- Of 25 students (10 inmates and 15 students)
- Inmates enrolled in a 4 week online psychology course

Secondary Analysis of archival data:

- Of **pretest** and **posttest** scores of inmates critical thinking assessment
- 20 item critical thinking assessment **modified** from Critical Thinking Skills: Success in 20 minutes A Day
- Of inmates pretest and posttest scores using *t test*
- Of inmates and students pretest and posttest scores using ANOVA

Data Analysis

An ANOVA and *t test* were used to analyze the data

Findings

Results indicated that a significant difference did exist between test periods (pretest and posttest), $F(1, 48) = 35.853, p < .001, (\eta p^2) = .428$.

Students' critical thinking posttest scores ($M = 78.30, SD = 10.72$) were significantly higher than pretest scores ($M = 57.20, SD = 13.98$).

Critical Thinking		n	Min	Max	M	SD
Pretest	Inmates	10	30.0	72.5	54.00	12.81
	Students	15	35.0	82.5	59.33	14.74
	Overall	25	30.0	82.5	57.20	13.98
Posttest	Inmates	10	62.5	97.5	79.75	13.56
	Students	15	65.0	100.0	77.33	8.74
	Overall	25	62.5	100.0	78.30	10.72
Change	Inmates	10	7.5	55.0	25.75	17.44
	Students	15	0	35.0	18.00	11.31

Limitations

Inmates had to self-identify, without the willingness to self-identify, there would be no knowledge of which students enrolled in the course had a criminal record.

There were also methodological limitations in this study such as the small sample size of 15 students per section and lack of controlled conditions.

Therefore, there was lack of control of the conditions of the study including how many sections would be offered as well as who the instructors were.

Conclusions

Critical thinking skills improved for all students in this study; yet there was no significant difference based on incarceration status. The null hypothesis, that there are no significant difference in change scores across students and incarceration status, was retained for Research Question 2 and rejected for Research Question 1 that there are no significant changes in critical thinking scores.

The outcomes of this study, as well as future data on graduation and recidivism rates, need to be integrated into policy and programs developed for correctional facilities, collegiate classrooms, and for other professionals.

Correctional facilities, colleges, legislators, and other organizations with direct impact on inmates should collect and analyze these specific variables in a longitudinal study. These actions would provide more research on how online postsecondary education courses improve critical thinking improves for inmates.

Social Change Implications

The results can be used to encourage delivery of online courses offered to inmates, thereby improving opportunities for inmates, easing reentry into society at large, and resulting in positive social change.

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