

**Chapter: Breaking Free: the Power of Experiential Learning as it Impacts the  
Development of Self-efficacy in Incarcerated Female Adult Learners**

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## **Breaking Free: the Power of Experiential Learning as it Impacts the Development of Self-efficacy in Incarcerated Female Adult Learners**

*The world is round and the place which may seem like the end may also be only the beginning* Ivy Baker Priest (1958).

Skillful teachers and practitioners of experiential learning believe that learning is achieved by reflection upon “education that occurs as a direct participation in the events of life” (Houle, 1980, 221). Experiential learning is a creative and practical path to knowledge-building filled with simple discoveries waiting to be revealed in the small reflective moments. Experiential learning techniques have been used by the Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP) since it was developed by the American Society of Friends in cooperation with inmates at Green Haven men’s facility in 1975. Designed for use by both male and female learners, AVP is based on the simple assumption that everyone has knowledge and experience to share and can learn from the experiences of others. Over years of assessment and continuous improvement the exercises have been adjusted to meet specific learner needs of various groups across gender, race, age and status (free or incarcerated). These programs have a lasting effect that continues beyond when participants leave the training site. Through a series of fast paced educational experiential exercises participants: think through behavioral issues, build community, and develop self-efficacy. Experiential learning helps participants internalize concepts and principles and lays the foundation for other learning experiences.

For the purpose of this chapter I chose to examine how experiential learning techniques in AVP address the special literacy and learning needs of incarcerated women. A high percentage of female prisoners have been victims of violent acts and sexual abuse

prior to incarceration. In AVP workshops women are given the opportunity to use concrete examples of violent and abusive acts: through role plays, story telling, picture sharing and a wide variety of other techniques, they test ideas and utilize group feedback with the intent to change practices and outcomes (Kolb, 1984, pp. 21-22).

### ***Women in Prison***

The special needs of women in prison extend far beyond the obvious physical issues of women's health or maternity care. Women are far more likely to have been victims of violence, sexual abuse or ill treatment prior to entering prison. According to the Correctional Association of New York, Women in Prison Fact Sheet (2008):

- About 47% of women in state or federal prisons or local jails were white, almost 37% are African American, and just under 16% are Latina. White women, however, have significantly lower incarceration rates among their own racial group than African-American women (3.8 times the rate for white women) and Latina women (1.6 times the rate for white women).
- As of 2003, more than 70% of female inmates were incarcerated for non-violent drug, property or public order offenses.
- Nationally, more than 65% of women in state prisons and 55% of men in state prisons report being parents of children under 18. About 64% of mothers in state prisons lived with their children before prison, compared to 44% of men.
- Female inmates are more likely than male inmates to have histories of serious physical or sexual abuse.

- A 2004 study found that 73% of women in state prisons nationwide either had symptoms of a clinical diagnosis of mental illness and/or had received treatment from a mental health professional in the past year, compared to 55% of men.
- Nearly 30% were receiving public assistance before arrest, compared to 8% of men. About 37% had incomes of less than \$600 per month prior to arrest compared to 28% of men.

Prior to incarceration women are often the low-income or no-income family care givers. Many come from broken homes, lack appropriate role models, have poor educations and are generally socially maladjusted (Sloane, 2003). Upon entering incarceration, these women must find other family members or friends to care for their children. At worst those “others” may be the person(s) who abused them prior to incarceration. In a recent report (2008) by the European Parliament, it recognized this need stating: “Member States are urged to provide psychological support, especially to women prisoners who have suffered such violence, to mothers with family responsibilities and to minors” (Panayotopoulos-Cassiotou, 2008, p. 13). This report discovered that unskilled and low literacy levels upon re-entry produced poor labor-market integration. The UK reported only 3% of women in prison had been working prior to incarceration and over half of them had been living on state welfare benefits. Although most studies on recidivism have been fairly inconclusive most have posited that a correlation exists between increased literacy, increased job marketability, and decreased recidivism rates (Hull, 2000; Thorpe, 1984; Schumaker, 1990; O’Neill, 1990; Pasco County School Board, 1993; Stiles and Siegel, 1994; Wilson, 1994; Saylor and Gaes, 1995; Jancic, 1998; Nochols, 1998; Kelso, 2000; Ryan and Desuta, 2000).

Also acknowledged in the EU report was the reality of budget reductions as they affect minority interests. “Due to lack of resources for prisons, women in prison are a minority whose special needs are not sufficiently taken into account in EU countries” (Panayotopoulos-Cassiotou). In the EU women account for about 5% and in the U.S., just under 10% of the total prison and jail population (however this is still over 2 million) making them a minority. In its final analysis, the EU report calls for more literacy, lifelong learning and vocational education training programs for women. Approximately 94% of the money spent on prisons is ear-marked for construction and maintenance. The remaining 6% goes to prison-based education programs (Boulard, 2005). Results from the 1995 Florida Correction Report supports these findings, noting that few women leave prison with job skills, and many with no drug abuse training. “The result of this lack of care and direction from the prison staff is that almost a quarter of the women re-offended.” Most women in prison are not given proper information while in prison on how to make plans to better themselves (Morris & Wilkinson, 1995).

Issues of victimization for female offenders, the isolation and low self-esteem, become exacerbated by the prison environment. “Prison is, to a greater or lesser degree, a concentration of debasement symptomatic of the system itself rather than the system’s victims. In any system where the operational needs of the institution take priority over the needs of the users, the potential is great for direct and indirect abuse to flourish unregulated” (Hearn & Parken, 1983, p. 239).

### ***Adult Education in Prison***

Advocates stress that, inmates have better re-entry success then they return to society with adequate educational and vocational skills to earn a living, enough to support

themselves and their families. However, as government funding has been reduced, many of these prison education programs have been eliminated. When available, prison education usually takes one of four forms: 1. basic literacy and general education programs (e.g.. GED or college level courses); 2. substance abuse education; 3. vocational education or job skills training; and 4. social skills training. Most prison education programs for women (In Florida and in many other states across the U.S.) fall into the first two categories, targeting basic literacy, substance abuse and possibly some job skills training if they are lucky. These classes are typically taught by prison educators or psychological staff.

*Social skills* usually refers to interpersonal skills such as communication, conflict resolution, development of self-esteem, and possibly dealing with stress, managing emotions, prejudice reduction, relationships, anger management and violence reduction such as Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP). There are some social skills programs available in some of the facilities but there is an “inconsistency of practices” (Addy and Gomez, 2007, p. 3) across the institutions and these social skills programs are most frequently facilitated by *outside* volunteers who often lack any official standing. This lack of consistency and official standing may explain why there has been so little research on the effectiveness of these programs. It has been difficult to locate research on the effectiveness of social skills training, especially by volunteers, in the prisons (Sloane, 2003). The obvious lack of focus and importance on the social skills area by the prison systems (especially the State of Florida which I am most familiar with), is difficult to understand since most prisoners were incarcerated for some type of aggressive and anti-social behavior. As Frey observed children’s behavior (2002), she discovered that

aggressive behavior in childhood could predict high-risk behaviors later in life. It seems reasonable to assume that if new social skills can be learned in prison and there are noticeable behavioral changes while in prison, that those same skills can be transferred to effect behavior in post-release.

### *Alternatives to Violence Project*

The Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP) is a non-sectarian, non-political, non-profit organization. The project began in 1975 and is based on the belief that there is a power in everyone that can transform hostility and destructiveness into cooperation and community. The program uses experiential learning methodology and techniques offering people the opportunity to create change. One speculation about why the Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP) is often successful in producing noticeable lasting behavioral change is attributed to the “volunteer” aspects structured within the program. Facilitators, as well as inmates, must volunteer to participate in the program. Facilitators are drawn from both the *free world* (outside prison walls) and *inside* (inmate) facilitators, who have completed rigorous facilitator and training and apprenticeship programs. However, the *inside* facilitators do not go home to the *free world* at night. Inside facilitators are often viewed as role-models, mentors, and serve as daily reminders of AVP principles.

The following participant comments about the AVP facilitation team are typical evaluation responses and are identified by the use of fictitious *adjective names*. The *adjective names* of participants were changed to insure anonymity. Part of the AVP process requires each of the facilitators and participants to select an *adjective name* at the beginning of the workshop. The adjective must represent a positive characteristic that the

person believes she has or aspires to obtain. All participants use adjective names throughout the weekend workshop which reinforce the positive environment of the workshop. There have been numerous accounts of times when one AVP participant used another's adjective name to alert and support the other person during a potentially violent incident, helping them to remember the AVP principles and to "think before reacting."

When asked how this program differed from others she had been involved with, Humorous Hana remarked, "I think it was very innovative, hands-on, interactive, very effective. It was far more interesting than just lectures. It really allows you to work on yourself from the root of the problem to the present." Creative Cynthia seemed surprised that, "the facilitators are equal with the participants. There was a lot more openness and trust and everyone seemed to give their all instead of holding back as other groups do." Dynamic Diane deducted, "The program works if you want it to. I liked having a safe space to open up and learn about how to deal with issues that have led to violence in my past. I learned I can still trust and care for others."

All inmate quotes were gathered from written workshop evaluation responses following two, 3 day workshops at a women's State correctional institution in Florida during July, 2008. Every AVP workshop includes these evaluation and verbal feedback sessions to gather information for the purpose of continuous improvement in future workshops. Evaluations were conducted in English and Spanish (responses were later translated into English.)

Mutual sharing by the facilitators increases the level of trust exhibited by these women, who have often experienced victimization and abuse, and tend to be particularly suspicious of others. The goal of AVP is to reduce the level of violence by introducing

people to new ways of resolving conflict that reduce their need to resort to violent solutions. Learning to trust is essential to the success of this process. The experiential learning process uses life experiences of participants as a knowledge base, building on those experiences to help them reflect, and then deal constructively with the violence in themselves and in their lives. When the women were asked how AVP is different from other educational experiences they have had, Exotic Erika responded, “I like the creative ways that I was able to learn so much about myself. I will take so much away with me from this weekend. Its organization, unity, and the gentleness of the program and how it gave us positive ways to solve problems. It has helped me deal with my daily problems and with the anger and frustration.” Fantastic Flor agreed, “It’s so simple and childlike. It allows you to be a child, to relax and let go, be honest, shed your masks and just *be*. I have a better ability to communicate my experiences without feeling self conscious. I still need to deal with many things.” Joyful Julie responded, “I liked doing the exercises. (Julie cannot read or write well and needed assistance from a facilitator to complete the evaluation) I learned a lot through everything – about meditation and to listen so that we could do the exercises. During the discussions I saw things from others points of view. Other exercises allowed me to act out situations in more ways than one. This program makes you think.”

Participants learn to see value in the process of valuing others even though they may not be able to articulate that process. “It showed me that people here in prison really do care about the next one. There is always something good in someone else” (Lovable Luz). “...that each and every person I cross paths with in life- that we learn from each other. It made me see who and what we are as women” (Mellow Mary). They learn that

others are not necessarily a threat, a shift which becomes operative in changing attitudes to enable the development of social skills that include communicating and community building. “People have been in my shoes. We all share a common bond. It made me really think about who the person is beside me as an inmate in this place. As a woman I could interact with other women who have been there like me” (Nice Nancy).

When asked, “How did this program meet your learning objectives as a woman?” responses were overwhelmingly positive. Outstanding Olga remarked, “I haven’t been interested in becoming friends or joining groups of women (prior to participating in AVP). We learned to tolerate and how to say things in our own words, using our own examples. I have a different view now. It showed me we can all lean on each other.” “It made me take a look at myself and realize the things I would like to change. Also I realized the good qualities that I want to continue to develop. I want to motivate other Hispanics to be a part of this program. It made me see who and what we are as women” (Terrific Teresa).

Many prison participants did not have good experiences with traditional K-12 educational models: learning from text books and lectures. Participants often have trouble applying the things they read to their own lives. Experiential learning allows participants to embrace lessons learned from experience; what we learn from our emotions and sometimes from what we learn by making mistakes. Concepts alone, without experience, often seem like so much dull theory or dry lecture. Experiences alone, without concepts, often appear as confusing or meaningless events. The AVP process brings concepts and experiences together with a general result of reflective insight or *Ahaah* feelings. When asked to describe ways they will change or ways they

have already incorporated AVP principles into daily life, the women responded: “There is no wrong way of answering questions, only options of learning. There is always a different way to handle things” (Awesome Angela). “I realize anger is an issue that comes from other issues. So to deal with one you have to deal with many more. And I learned that instead of reacting to anger, I can write about it!” (Respectful Regina).

A conceptual framework model for AVP (Figure 1.) was developed by Stan Sloane in 2003. It depicts how the AVP *process* begins with inmates, who come to AVP with their individual background experiences and characteristics. Most group members lack normal social development so AVP must establish a sense of dignity and self-worth among participants. As facilitators open up and express personal experiences it instills a willingness to share and motivates participants to communicate. (As stated by Powerful Paola,) “There is a better way to handle things and I can make the choice to do it a better way- as the facilitators (*inmate facilitators*) have done. I have the power to choose who I want to become.” Sincere Sarah recognized, “Things in the past no longer exist so they should not control my life today. Dealing with violence and self reflection helped me to deal with my self-esteem. It made me realize what a wonderful woman I really am.”

[[[Figure 1 goes here]]]

Gradually the women open up to trust each other and value what each of them has to share. This process of increasing trust levels and recognizing the value of self and others helps to modify the input factors into output factors that are closer to normally accepted social behavior. The women often express a sense of community and altruism while building skills of negotiation, conflict resolution and communication. This process creates an emotionally supportive and non-judgmental environment that offers

participants the tools that provide the *how*, as well as exercises that provide them with opportunities to practice skills and concepts identified as desired outcomes.

Although AVP utilizes *here-and-now* experiential techniques, the process of facilitating and training requires a great deal of facilitator team planning and structural design prior to each workshop. Victorious Virginia has been putting these techniques to use, “With meditation I can calm down and think things through. I learned to communicate and be assertive about my feelings when a problem arises. We all worked together and found great positive solutions together.” Each team of facilitators works hard to set session objectives and develop agenda that will accommodate the accomplishment of desired outcomes. Typical goals for a basic level AVP workshop include: 1. Affirmation/Self-Esteem Building; 2. Community Building; 3. Communication; 4. Cooperation; 5. Creative Conflict Resolution; 6. Trust; 7. Life Values; 8. Closure. The workshop is not completed until all these goals have been achieved. The following comments demonstrate this goal attainment.

The AVP learning experience is a revelation to some female inmates. For many it is the first time they have been taught to communicate in a non-toxic manner, replacing socially dysfunctional paradigms with functional ones. Wise Wendy disclosed, “I learned to think before reacting- that others may not have control over themselves. I learned I am not alone. I wish I would have found this program before I got into trouble.” Joyous Jaqui discerned, “I need to expect the best from others because that’s what I want in return from others when I fall short. I realize now that I don’t have to feed into others negativity. I do have a brain and can make choices of my own.”

AVP specifically attempts to build interpersonal trust, empathy, and community. Once this environment is established, pro-social behavior develops quickly with the opportunity to practice new skills while being reinforced in a *safe* and supportive environment, as expressed by Youthful Yaite, “It helped me get in touch with my inner self and thoughts. I liked being able to express myself freely. I felt comfortable sharing and with smiles and encouragement everyone was helpful.”

Participants often express community building or other altruistic goals as having motivated them to attend the workshop. About 50% of the women who attend the workshops are eligible for release, but that leaves the other 50% who have very little chance of re-entry into *free* society. It is easy to understand how those who are planning to go home might want to acquire new tools and different ways to respond to conflict so that they will never return to prison. But why would those with little or no hope of ever leaving prison want to be involved in a program designed to promote change? The answer is simple. They want prison to be a better place for them to live, a new beginning for building a positive and productive life. “I want to make something of my life. This program really works for me. I’ve healed from everything that I’ve shared... I’m free!” (Interesting Ivette.)

[[[Figure 2 goes here]]]

### ***Summary***

Over the twelve years I have conducted these workshops in the prisons I have witnessed the growth of peaceful, supportive communities. Experiential learning, within the AVP format is a democratic and highly accessible form of education. For many women, it has reassured and supported them to take a risk and attempt other educational

opportunities such as GED, college courses, or to attend other *inside* programs.

Empowering themselves, female inmates increase self-esteem, gain some level of responsibility and a sense of control over their lives, and while in prison it also gives them a sense of direction. AVP has become a powerful tool for self-efficacy to the female participants in prison.

In closing, I want to share a true prison story from about five years ago. It began one very hot and sultry Florida night in July. The air conditioning system in the women's prison had broken down and all of the dormitory units were heating up. With many of the women in various stages of menopause, some were heating up faster than others. Tempers began to flare when, suddenly, in Dorm C several inmate facilitators began singing the silly AVP song, *Dum, Dum, Da, Da*. They sang it and taught it to everyone in their dorm. When the dorms on each side of them heard this, the AVP facilitators who resided in those dorms immediately began teaching it to their dorm-mates. It wasn't long before the entire compound was singing it and laughing. They laughed and laughed until, exhausted, all fell asleep. What most certainly would have turned into a night filled with violent incidents, became instead, a story of inspiration and power that lives on in the hearts and minds of the female AVP community. The moral of this story and of this exercise is that, *practice may not make perfect, but it makes better. Keep practicing, and you too have the power to make the changes you desire.*

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