

Digital literacies in the female prison context: reflections from the EPRIS project's journey

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At a time when traditional reading and writing skills are no longer sufficient and the need to extend them to the field of digital literacy (DL) is recognised, it is important to help people living in prison develop this competence. It was with this idea in mind that the EPRIS project – e-learning in a prison context – was developed, which has been ongoing since 2015 at the Female Santa Cruz do Bispo Prison (EP). The project, conceived in the b-learning modality, results from a partnership between the Piaget Institute, the General Direction of Re-insertion and Prison Services, and Santa Casa da Misericórdia do Porto. In its development, the team assumes an DL concept that encompasses the “awareness, attitude and ability of individuals to appropriately use digital tools and facilities to identify, access, manage, integrate, evaluate, analyse and synthesize digital resources, construct new knowledge, create media expressions, and communicate with others, in the context of specific life situations, in order to

enable constructive social action; and to reflect upon this process” (Martin & Grudziecki, 2006, p. 255). This is why EPRIS aims to contribute to the full social reintegration of the prison population through the creation of an integrated, structured and innovative intervention model, based on the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) as a tool for digital and social inclusion. In parallel, the project articulates this intervention in the field of training with research, in order to find pedagogical models, methodologies and learning tools suitable for this population. It also intends, through the knowledge produced, to influence public education policies in contexts and populations with similar characteristics.

In the research component, EPRIS was the *locus* of a post-doctoral study at the Centre for Educational Research and Intervention (CIIE) of the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences of the University of Porto, developed between 2014 and 2017, supported by FCT, and currently includes another post-doctoral and a PhD research in the same institution, being in its 3rd phase of implementation. For the training component, DL is considered to comprise three levels (Martin & Grudziecki, 2006): digital competence (prerequisite); use of digital technologies; and digital transformation (innovation, creativity). These different levels are not sequential, nor can they be generalised, but have been developed and worked on through the training promoted within the EPRIS project, as explained below.

In the pilot phase of implementation (2014 to 2016), the project focused on digital skills, following Lifelong Learning logic. The choice of b-learning was due to the recognition of the potential of this medium, as a device capable of respecting processes of pedagogical differentiation and of promoting the development of skills necessary for the challenges of the globalised world. The principle of flexibility of this training modality, in terms of availability, content, evaluation and time management, was complemented by opportunities for participation in digital cultural environments and contexts. Participation was extended to other actors, namely prison guards, with whom the implications of using laptops in cells and access to the Moodle platform were discussed. A technical solution to ensure the security of the platform's use was built by a telecommunications operator. The training (216 hours) took place over 12 months (March 2015 to April 2016) and consisted of three modules: the “being an online student” setting; Microsoft Office; entrepreneurship. On the Moodle platform learning tasks and teaching resources were made available (videos, images, texts, articles, electronic presentations, newspaper reports, music,

song lyrics, etc.). Some of these resources were built by the students themselves, who developed different technological and social skills. The evaluation of this phase, formative in nature, focused on the processes (context, input, work modes – platform, training) and the products (results in terms of satisfaction with the training, with the learning and possible future impacts) and was carried out through the collection of quantitative data (questionnaires) and qualitative data (focus group).

Considering the results, a second phase has been implemented (2016- 2019). The investment in the diversification of the training modules has resulted in the introduction of Expression and Communication modules in Portuguese Language, Parenting and Educational Practices. Given the specific characteristics of the prison population, which may condition the training process, namely low tolerance to frustration and discouragement (Hawley et al., 2013), in this second phase, the research component focused on learning self-concept in this particular context, including the dimensions of motivation, task orientation, confidence in skills, and relationship with colleagues.

The satisfactory results of these two phases were based on the quality of the tasks carried out, the products of the training, the perception of the competences developed and the recognition of the potential benefits of b-learning in personal and professional terms. These results led to the conclusion that the virtual learning environment has contributed to the satisfaction of the trainees about the training, and to the development of transversal and specific competences of each module.

The need for professional certification led to a partnership with Modatex in the third phase (started in September 2019), which articulates a technological component – Certified Modular Training in the area of sewing/confection of clothing, composed of units of short-term training (UFDC) of the National Catalogue of Qualifications (CNQ) – and components of DL and entrepreneurship applied to this professional area.

The process of continuous learning, sharing, construction and reflection, in the different phases of the project, allows some considerations to be made about DL in its relationship with the education/training of women prisoners who participated in the training.

Regarding digital skills, a prerequisite for DL, since the initial module – the “being an online student” setting, ways of using the computer and utility software, appropriate to the trainees’ life situations, have been worked on, taking into account the context, personal characteristics and the level of skills at the

beginning of the training. As Martin and Grudziecki (2006) state, this process ranges from basic skills, such as using a keyboard, to more critical, evaluative and conceptual approaches, including attitudes and self-awareness as learners, the learning undertaken, the relationship with peers and the role of the digital for living in society.

The use, application of digital skills in different contexts, has been and is stimulated by the accomplishment of significant, diversified tasks mediated by the online training environment, respecting the different learning rhythms and styles and recognizing different pathways to achieve the same end. The trainees participated in the planning and evaluation processes of the tasks.

We believe that *transformation* at personal, collective or institutional level is a process that is being built along the different phases of the project, and there are already some indicators of success in terms of innovation – changing the rules of access to the Internet in the EP – and creativity demonstrated through the digital resources developed by the trainees. We hope that all the formative process will have long-term effects, in terms of sustainability of the project and through significant changes at personal level and in the acquisition of relevant and useful knowledge that contributes to the processes of social reinsertion and future inclusion in the labour market. For the project's team trainers and researchers the transformation is already visible at a personal and professional level, since in the face of the difficulties encountered, alternative solutions have been created and new resources and learning situations have been produced that have contributed to counteract the discouragement and demotivation resulting, among other factors, from the incarceration situation.

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References

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