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GUEST COMMENTARY

Missouri prison education program proves that everyone has the ability to learn | Opinion

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Saint Louis University helps the incarcerated get an education much like they would on the outside. *Bigstock*

National Education Month this November offers all of us an opportunity to reflect on the importance of education in our lives and our communities. The term education has, in many ways, become such a monolith that we fail to recognize its immense importance. For many, education is simply a means to an end. We go to school to learn a skill or master a subject. But such a narrow view inherently misses the transformative potential of education.

To me, the purpose of education lies not in the mastery of a skill set, but in its power to transform our worldview. Education puts us in conversation with the world. It connects us to something bigger, opening doors to a variety of knowledge, experiences and perspectives from those around us, and teaches us how to situate our experiences based on that broader frame of reference. In many ways, education allows us to craft bigger, brighter pictures of the world, and to better understand our place in it. This idea of education as world building means even more, however, in the context of prisons.

I currently direct the Prison Education Program at Saint Louis University. The program works with incarcerated men at Eastern Reception, Diagnostic and Correctional Center, a maximum-security prison in Bonne Terre. We provide an Associate of Arts degree from SLU as well as college preparatory coursework and arts and educational opportunities to individuals at the facility. Many of the students we work with have been told throughout their lives that they lack the potential of their peers. We work with our students to build a worldview that disproves that narrative.

When new students come to our program, they typically struggle with self-doubt and low self-esteem. During the first few months of programming, learners often express concerns about their competency or ability to complete the program. But slowly, class by class, I have the privilege of bearing witness to the transformation

Through their classes and their interactions with SLU faculty and staff, students are reminded (or possibly told for the first time) that their knowledge, experience and ideas add value to the world around them. This understanding shapes their interactions with their families on the outside, with correctional staff and with other incarcerated individuals. It also shapes their dreams for the future. As the program progresses, my conversations with students typically evolve from “Can I do it?” to “What’s next?” and “What else can I achieve?”

Our program is lucky enough to offer in-person classes to students, supplemented by tablet technology from Securus Technologies, which creates educational access through Lantern, its learning management system. This means that program participants receive high-quality educational opportunities, as similar as possible to what they would receive on the outside. Our students’ ability to access educational technology adds depth to our program by offering more opportunities for engagement.

Professors can utilize the learning management app to provide supplemental research and resources for students to explore. Further, the tablets provide the opportunity for students to communicate with faculty members outside of class, to continue conversations and pose questions that may have been cut short in their weekly in-person meetings.

Access to academic technology means that student learning doesn’t stop when class is over. Students can dig deeper, and push themselves further in their work, to develop a worldview in which they are just as much a SLU student as the individuals on our St. Louis campus.

More than [60% of people in state prisons](#) in 2016 had not received their high school diploma before being incarcerated. Recent studies on the correlation between education and recidivism indicate that incarcerated individuals who participated in correctional education programs had [43% lower odds of returning to prison](#). Across the board, both before and after incarceration, education is the key indicator to help keep folks out of prisons and jails. As we reflect on the importance of education this November, I hope we keep in mind the transformative potential of education anywhere, but specifically in prisons and jails in this country.