Learning Behind Bars: Exploring Prison Educators' Facilitation of Inmates' Self-directed Learning through Garrison's Model

Renu Batra, Tom Jasso, and Yvette Stevens
Florida International University, USA

Abstract: Formal education programs in prisons have had success in reducing recidivism, but the introduction of informal learning can have additional benefits and longer lasting effects. This paper addresses recidivism and its effects on inmates and society at large and how prison educators can facilitate self-directed learning in prisons through Garrison's model.

On any given day more than 2 million people are incarcerated in the United States. Within three years of their release, 67% of them are rearrested among which 52% are re-incarcerated (Bureau of Statistics, 2011). This re-offensive behavior is known as recidivism. Recidivism costs taxpayers almost $60 billion a year (Bureau of Statistics, 2011). Internal violence, overcrowding, poor medical and mental health care, and numerous other failings plague America's 5,000 prisons and jails. Ninety-five percent of inmates are eventually released back into society, ill-equipped to lead productive lives (Bureau of Statistics, 2011). The effect of prison or jail sentences on recidivism concerns public safety and the cost-effectiveness of putting convicted offenders back in prisons. Opinions are divided between those advocating longer sentences in the interest of public safety and those advocating shorter sentences with the assumption that incarceration, or longer prison terms, will not reduce recidivism rates (Song & Lieb, 1993).

Formal education programs have been successful in preparing inmates to find employment and be self-sufficient when they are released from prison (Boucouvalas & Pearse, 1985). However, not much has been written about informal learning programs that are also helpful in reducing recidivism (Day, 1998). The concept of self-directed learning, wherein an individual takes the initiative and responsibility for their own learning (Knowles, 1975), can be a potentially important factor in reducing recidivism. Inmates as a group of adult learners can benefit greatly from the incorporation of self-directed learning in prisons. Self-directed learning can be a great tool for prison administrators. It involves inmates in selecting, managing, and assessing their own learning activities, which can be pursued at any time, in any place, through any means, at any age (Brookefield, 1984). Self-directed learning is a central concept in the practice of adult learning. Garrison (1997) proposed a three-part interrelated self-directed learning model: self-management, self-monitoring, and motivation. These concepts focus on resource use, learning strategies, and motivation. Helping learners take responsibility for their own learning by proactively using resources available to them and collaborating with other individuals will greatly encourage inmates to improve their lives. After they are released from prison, they will feel confident about making an honest life for themselves which, in turn, will potentially help reduce recidivism (Warren, 2007).

Correctional educators have worked for years, based on the belief that learning not only provides hope and an avenue for change, but that it also reduces the likelihood of future crime. The purpose of this paper is to explore how prison educators' facilitation of self-directed learning, using Garrison's model to help inmates take control of their own learning, potentially

helps reduce recidivism rates. The paper addresses recidivism, discusses formal learning programs in prisons, and introduces informal learning in informal learning programs in prisons. Also, it describes self-directed learning, reviews Garrison's model of self- directed learning, and presents what changes can be brought about by incorporating Garrison's model in prisons.

Recidivism

Recidivism is "the likelihood of re-offending" or repeating a crime (Berman, et al., 2005). Once an inmate is released from prison, subsequent criminal convictions or supervision revocations by an inmate is considered recidivism. Each state judicial system considers a defendant's likelihood to recidivate (Hofer & Allenbaugh, 2003) prior to the actual sentencing of a defendant. Prior recidivism offenses and aggravated types of offenses committed by a defendant are likely to lead to longer incarceration periods (Hofer & Allenbaugh, 2003). A criminal history score based on prior offenses is developed and used as a predictability factor to determine likelihood of recidivism by a defendant (Hofer & Allenbaugh, 2003). A research study completed in Connecticut indicates that inmates most likely to recidivate are involved with property crimes, substance abuse, violence related crimes, sexually related crimes, and are mentally unstable (Austin, 2010).

Inmates become repeat offenders for various reasons since they are commonly released from incarceration with minimal resources and scarce employment opportunities (McKean & Ransford, 2004). The National Institute for Literacy revealed that 70% of inmates "function at the two lowest levels of both prose and numeric literacy . . . are unable to fill out a Social Security or job application, write a business letter, calculate a price discount, or read a bus schedule" (Petersilia, 2001, p. 366). Performing simple daily tasks becomes a challenge for most inmates, resulting in low self-esteem and a severe lack of self-worth. They go on to believe the only life they are worth is one of crime (Petersilia, 2001).

Recidivism significantly impacts the government financially with high costs of recidivism incurred for law enforcement agencies to arrest, process, prosecute, and incarcerate former inmates (Stravinskas, 2009). It costs approximately $30,000 per year to incarcerate an adult male convicted of a felony in the United States (McKean & Ransford, 2004). This sum does not include public funding to build and maintain new prisons, feed the inmates, provide medical care, and hire personnel, which could be potentially used on rehabilitation programs (Merlo & Benekos, 2005). Research indicates that strong ties with family and with significant others helps offenders reduce recidivism once they are released from incarceration (Bing, 1989). Inmates that did not have family visits while in prison were six times more likely to recidivate during the first year than those inmates who had at least three or more consistent family visitors while they were incarcerated.

Recidivists can be a potential threat to public safety since most return to their former neighborhoods, causing people to move away from high crime level neighborhoods, which become rundown and deprived (Petersilia, 2001). Recidivists may also slowly influence younger people in the neighborhood towards a life of crime (Petersilia, 2001), increasing potential offenses committed in their respective neighborhoods.

Statistics indicate that approximately 45% of recidivism is due to probation violations, 33% to new arrests, and 22% to new convictions (Maxfield, 2005). Inmates who have committed fewer criminal offenses in the past will be less likely to recidivate than those inmates who have previously committed more criminal offenses. Treatment of offenders is more effective than punishment.

Formal Learning in Prisons

Formal learning programs introduced in the California Men's Colony, a medium-security correctional institution, allowed inmates to avail themselves to structured higher education courses, helping them earn an associate's and/or a bachelor's degree (Thomas, 1984). Programs included answers to a weekly set of study guide questions in preparation for a weekly essay quiz, discussion of test items immediately following the quiz, and completion of projects that required the application of newly learned concepts in analyzing current social conditions (Thomas, 1984). This structured-learning approach is based on the belief that almost all students can achieve learning goals at a high level of performance if given a fair chance to learn. Taking college courses in prison is a privilege not a right; therefore, self-motivated inmates do well in their studies and receive intellectual stimulation, knowledge, skills, and reduction in their sentences instead of serving mundane time in prison (Thomas, 1984). Inmates motivated to participate in the prison college courses tend to come from a higher socioeconomic background than non-attending inmates; however, there is an increased attendance of lower social class inmates in college prison than in regular colleges.

Informal Learning

Informal learning is defined as a life-long learning process that assists individuals to acquire and accumulate knowledge, skills, attitudes, and insights from daily life experiences in their respective home, work, and social environments. Attitudes of family and friends and access to electronic and print media (Manzoor & Coombs, 1974) can be important components of the informal learning process. Formal and informal learning are interrelated (Malcolm, Hodkinson, & Colley, 2003). Formal learning consists of structured context (formal education, in-company training), which may lead to a formal recognition (diploma, certificate). Informal learning is often referred to as experiential learning and can, to a certain degree, be understood as accidental learning that occurs outside of the syllabus and learning materials used for the lesson. Research indicates that 70% of learning takes place outside of formal classrooms and may include honing practical skills through personal reflection, socializing, and networking (Day, 1998). Creating an informal learning culture in the workplace helps motivate employees and foster their skill development. Formal learning programs have been successful in preparing inmates to find employment and lead independent lives upon their release; however, informal learning programs could potentially contribute to the learning process of dealing with situations in their work and home environments.

Informal Learning in Prisons

Group learning programs have been an important component of rehabilitation for inmates in correctional settings, establishing important goals for group work with inmates (Winterowd, Morgan, & Ferrell, 2001). It has been argued that specific, well-defined and realistic goals to be achieved and evaluated fairly should be developed to guide group work with inmates (Rizvi, Hyland, & Blackstock, 1983). Participating in learning activities in a group setting helps inmates learn more about themselves, their values, and opinions (Kahnweiler, 1978). They also assist in improving their relationships with other members in the group, family members, friends, inmates, and prison staff by teaching effective communication skills and altruistic behavior (Kahnweiler, 1978) and by emphasizing the importance of relationships. Motivational factors and group dynamics as well as specific topics of discussion can serve as catalysts for self-understanding and empathy for others. A goal clearly related to rehabilitation is modifying delinquent behavior (Wardrop, 1976). Group learning activities provide inmates with opportunities to develop other ways of achieving their goals in life without breaking the rules or

harming themselves or others. Inmates in a group setting may be able to relate better to others by realizing the common experiences shared, the value and importance of relationships, how they can help one another, and how they personally affect and assist group members (Winterowd, Morgan, & Ferrell, 2001). Focusing group work on issues of pro-social behavior and conformity is essential to reducing recidivism (Winterowd, Morgan, & Ferrell, 2001). Inmates can learn how to relate positively and meaningfully with others by learning pro-social skills and conventional rules in every context. By learning both the consequences of their actions on others and how to resolve conflicts in group, they can transfer this knowledge into their daily life (Winterowd, Morgan, & Ferrell, 2001). Group learning is a practice that prison educators are using to encourage positive behavior change in inmates since it facilitates communication with offenders about compliance and behavior change (Miller, 2007). People with low self-control are more likely to commit crimes; educators can help offenders improve self-control by encouraging natural talents and interests, talking about what things worked for them in the past, and identifying and role-playing difficult situations.

Traditional prison programs provide four areas of learning: educational/academic instruction, vocational training, prison industries, and employment/transitional training. Life skills training (e.g., obtaining housing, balancing checkbooks, and maintaining appropriate interpersonal relationships), mental health treatment, substance abuse treatment, faith-based programs, and other types of interventions are available to prisoners (Dubin, Lawrence, Mears, & Travis, 2002). Although programming available to inmates covers wide spread areas of adulthood, there continue to be challenges in effective programming that could ultimately reduce recidivism (Dubin, Lawrence, Mears, & Travis, 2002). Prisoner motivation, differentiating the type of programming to individual prisoners' ongoing interests and requirements, and availability of space in particular programs is a challenge for prison administrators. Allowing prisoners to take ownership of their learning could increase motivation and participation, alleviate lack of availability in formal and non-formal prison programs, and aid prison administrators in differentiating the type of program offerings (Day, 1998).

Self-directed Learning and Garrison's Model

Self-directed learning is an important concept of informal learning. Malcolm Knowles (1975) defines it as a process in which individuals take the initiative to diagnose their learning needs, formulating individualistic learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, and implementing appropriate learning strategies to evaluate successful outcomes (Knowles, 1975). Primarily a form of informal learning, self-directed learning has been vastly researched in the field of adult education from different scholars perspectives. Self-directed learning is described as a (a) process of organizing instruction, focused on the level of learner autonomy over the instructional process and (b) personal attribute with the goal of education as developing individuals who can assume moral, emotional, and intellectual autonomy (Candy, 1991).

Several models have been proposed to understand self-directed learning, including Garrison (1997), which suggests learners assume personal responsibility (motivation), collaborative control of the cognitive (self-monitoring), and contextual (self-management) processes in constructing and confirming meaningful and worthwhile learning outcomes. The motivational dimension is imperative in the learning process, calling for the learner to expect an outcome of their learning which will be beneficial to them. Not only do learners have to invest in their learning activities, but they have to persevere throughout the experience until the learning has been acquired (Garrison, 1997). Self-monitoring requires responsibility of the learner to acquire comprehension and understanding, ensuring that learning activities have value and learning objectives are being accomplished (Garrison, 1997). Self-management concentrates on the

external social and behavioral effects of learning transactions, goal setting, different types of learning approaches, and establishing learning results (Garrison, 1997).

Self-directed learning provides for opportunities of meaning during learning interactions and without it, one may question the value in acquiring knowledge. Nonetheless, self-directed learning does not take away the expectation of the teacher, but requires the teacher to provide the educational desires that facilitate a self-directed learner (Garrison, 1997). Adult learners usually identify themselves as independent beings, capable of self-direction even in a controlled environment (Boucouvalas & Pearse, 1985). They are usually shaped by their past experiences, which play a very important part in the growth of an individual, becoming an important catalyst conducive to learning. Self-directed learning helps individuals grow using acquired knowledge and skill to better their lives. Inmates make up an integral group of adults in need of skill and knowledge development to better their lives and, essentially, to make use of in an environment that they have to re-acquaint themselves with once they are released from prison. Adult inmates are a unique group of adult learners, who learn better when their adultness is respected and their learning is planned with them rather than for them (Boucouvalas & Pearse, 1985). Learning is unique to each individual and they learn best at their own pace and at their own time. Keeping this in mind, adult educators are shifting their focus to self-directed learning programs, keeping in mind individual learners' needs.

Garrison's Model Applied to Prisons

Different prisons have unique physical features, depending on the year of build and the level of security. However, a few features are similar in every prison. The features most conducive for informal learning are a prisoner's cell, a service facilitated area such as a dining hall, or a recreational area (Dubin, Lawrence, Mears, & Travis, 2002). These areas allow for open space and the potential for prison educators to share knowledge and information skills with inmates in an appropriate learning environment. They would provide opportunities for prisoners to learn in a group setting. Learning acquired from non-formal settings could contribute significantly to informal learning practices that instilled value, ensure collaboration, and monitor meaning in inmates' learning experiences. Inmates acquire life skills in addition to vocational skills that could assist them once they are released.

Inmates released from prison are usually struggling to fit into an ever-changing society, enter into a workplace they generally have limited skills for, and trying to make a successful life without the necessary training or capabilities to succeed (Schweikert-Cattin & Taylor, 2000). Self-esteem and belief in them may be at an all-time low. Programs in prisons need to be designed to increase inmate morale, facilitate self-management, reduce friction, and improve prison environment. Participation of inmates in these programs occupies the inmate's time productively, reducing the negativity synonymous with their environment and encourages pro-social behaviors (Maggioncalda, 2007). Incorporation of Garrison's self-directed model would encourage inmates to partake in learning experiences in various settings in prison to become equipped with motivation and meaning, accountability, a desire to achieve their learning objectives, and provide self-meaning and personal accomplishment amongst other benefits.

In correctional settings, self-management involves inmates effectively learning; using resources available to them and applying them to learning within their individual contexts, taking control of the learning and reaching their learning objectives in collaboration with other individuals. Recreation areas in prisons can help encourage group discussions, helping inmates learn from similar experiences (Boucouvalas & Pearse, 1985). Individuals can learn to take control of their own learning, helping them gain control of acquired knowledge to better use in in

their respective environment. Prison educators could potentially help inmates structure their learning programs which can be most beneficial to them, once they are released. Self-monitoring is reviewing the learning strategies and planning and modifying your thinking according to your goal. Inmates can reflect about what they are learning and how it can be beneficial to them. Since self-monitoring is a cognitive thinking process, inmates could learn to think how the learning programs can best benefit them and also reflect upon why they were incarcerated and work toward bettering themselves. Motivation can help inmates continue their learning process successfully until they reach their goals (Garrison, 1997).

<div align="center">**Conclusion**</div>

Formal education programs in prisons have been available to inmates, but have been offered uniformly without considerations to the individual learning needs and preferences of the inmates (Taxman, 1998). Individual models of learning programs for the offender population, although frequently discussed, have not been implemented within the larger domain of the criminal justice system. The tendency is to implement programs to serve smaller populations rather than the masses of offenders that need interventions (Taxman, 1998). Learning, being an integral part in self-improvement, becomes a dynamic predictor of adult offender recidivism. The other predictors include criminal history, history of antisocial behavior, social achievement, age/gender/race, and family factors. Less robust predictors include intellectual functioning, personal distress factors, and socioeconomic status in the family of origin (Gendreau, Little, & Goggin, 2006).

The introduction of the Garrison's model of self-directed learning, which focuses on individual learning needs, can have a favorable effect on the learning of inmates. Prison educators help inmates shift focus of their learning to suit individual needs, requirements, and preferences. They can help inmates gain the knowledge that they need for self-improvement, self-realization, and self-motivation to help overcome the obstacles/reasons, which led them to be incarcerated. To be able to get to the root of a problem is one of the ways to eradicate the problem (Day, 1998). When inmates are able to take the responsibility of their own actions and also take control of their own learning, they can be well equipped to deal with society once they are released from prison. Garrison's model, if incorporated by prison educators within the prison system, will help inmates become self-directed learners. Learning is not limited to the confines of the prison, but it is something that inmates can integrate as part of their personality and reflect on and continue to learn once they are a part of society. Garrison's three-dimension integrated model can trigger a learning environment in the prison system by focusing on individual learning, developing preferential skills, and equipping inmates with knowledge and a mind open to new ideas so they cease to become repeat offenders, which can potentially reduce recidivism (see Fig. 1).

<div align="center">**References**</div>

Bureau of Statistics. (2011). Recedivism. Retrieved from
        http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/index.cfm?ty=tp&tid=17
Austin, B. (2010). *2010 Annual recidivism report*. Retrieved from
        http://www.ct.gov/opm/lib/opm/cjppd/cjresearch/recidivismstudy/2010_0215__recidivis
        mstudy.pdf
Berman, D. A., Bowman, F. O., Chanenson, S. L., Demleitner, N. V., Harris, M. D., Hofer, P., &
        O'Hear, M. (2005). Federal sentencing reporter. *University of California for the Vera
        Institute of Justice*, *24*(2), *166*-170.

Boucouvalas, M., & Pearse, P. (1985). Educating the protective custody inmate for self directedness: An adult learning contract approach. *Journal for Correctional Education*, *36*(3), 91-105.

Brookefield, S. (1984). Self-directed adult learning: A critical paradigm. *Adult Education Quarterly, 35*, 59-71.

Candy, P. (1991). *Self-direction for lifelong learning. A comprehensive guide to theory and practice.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Day, N. (1998). Informal learning creates results. *Workforce Management*, *77*(6), 31-36.

Dubin, G., Lawrence, S., Mears, D., & Travis, J. (2002). *The practice and promise of prison programming.* Retrieved from http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/410493_PrisonProgramming.pdf

English, L. (2002). Spiritual dimensions of informal learning. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, *85,* 29-38.

Garrison. (1997). Self-directed learning: Towards a comprehensive model. *Adult Education Quarterly*, *48*(1), 18-33.

Gendreau, P., Little, T., & Goggin, C. (2006). A meta-analysis of the predictors of adult offender recidivism: What works. *American Society of Criminology*, *34*(4), 575-608.

Hofer, P. J., & Allenbaugh, M. H. (2003). The reason behind the rules: Finding and using the philosophy of the federal sentencing guidelines. *American Criminal Law Review*, *40*(1), 4-16.

Kahnweiler, W. (1978). Group counseling in a correctional setting. *The Personnel and Guidance Journal*, *57*(3), 162-166.

Katkin, D. (1972). Habitual offender laws: A reconsideration. *Hein Online Journal*, *43*(1), 520 - 552.

Knowles, M. (1975). *Self-directed learning.* Cambridge, MA: Cambridge Adult Education.

Maggioncalda, E. (2007). *Inmate motivations to participate in pison programs: Are they actually related to participation?* Ann Arbor, MI: UMI.

Malcolm, J., Hodkinson, P., & Colley, H. (2003). The interrelationships between informal and formal learning. *Journal of Workplace Learning*, *15*(7/8), 313 - 318.

Manzoor, A., & Coombs, P. (1974). *Attacking rural poverty: How nonformal education can help.* Essex: International Council for Educational Development.

Maxfield, L. (2005). Measuring recidivism under federal state guidelines. *Federal Sentencing Reporter*, *17*(3), 166.

McKean, L., & Ransford, C. (2004, August). *Current strategies for reducing recidivism.* Chicago: Center for Impact Reserach.

Merlo, A., & Benekos, P. (2005). *Alternatives to prison: At issue series.* San Diego, CA: Greenhaven Press.

Miller, W. (2007, June). *A guide for probation and parole: Motivating offenders to change.* Retrieved from http://static.nicic.gov/Library/022253.pdf

Petersilia, J. (2001). Prisoner reentry: Public safety and re-integration challenges. *The Prison Journal*, 81(3), 360-375.

Rizvi, W., Hyland, E., & Blackstock, K. (1983). Some considerations for behavioral therapy in scottish penal institutions. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology,* 27(3), 205-210.

Schweikert-Cattin, D., & Taylor, R. (2000). Throw away kids:A successful self-directed learning approach. *Reclaiming Children and Youth*, *8*(4), 227-232.

Song, L., & Lieb, R. (1993). *Recidivism: The effect of incarceration and length of time served.*. Retrieved from http://www.wsipp.wa.gov

Stravinskas, S. (2009). *Lower crime rates and prisoner recidivism.* Retrieved from http://digitalcommons.pace.edu/honorscollege_theses/81/

Taxman, F. S. (1998, February 20). *Reducing recidivism through a seamless system of care:Components of effective treatment, supervision, and transition services in the community.* Greenbelt: Office of National Drug Control Policy.

Thomas, R. G. (1984). Mastery learning in a prison setting. *Federal Probation, 48*(3), 34-37.

Wardrop, K. (1976). Group therapy with adult offenders in Scotland. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 20 (3), 236-241.

Warren, R. K. (2007, August). *Evidence-based practice to reducce recidivism: Implications for state judiciaries.* Retrieved from http://static.nicic.gov/Library/023358.pdf

Winterowd, C. L., Morgan, R. D., & Ferrell, S. W. (2001). Principal components analysis of Important goals for group work with male inmates. *The Journal for Specialists on Group Work*, *26*(4), 406 - 417.
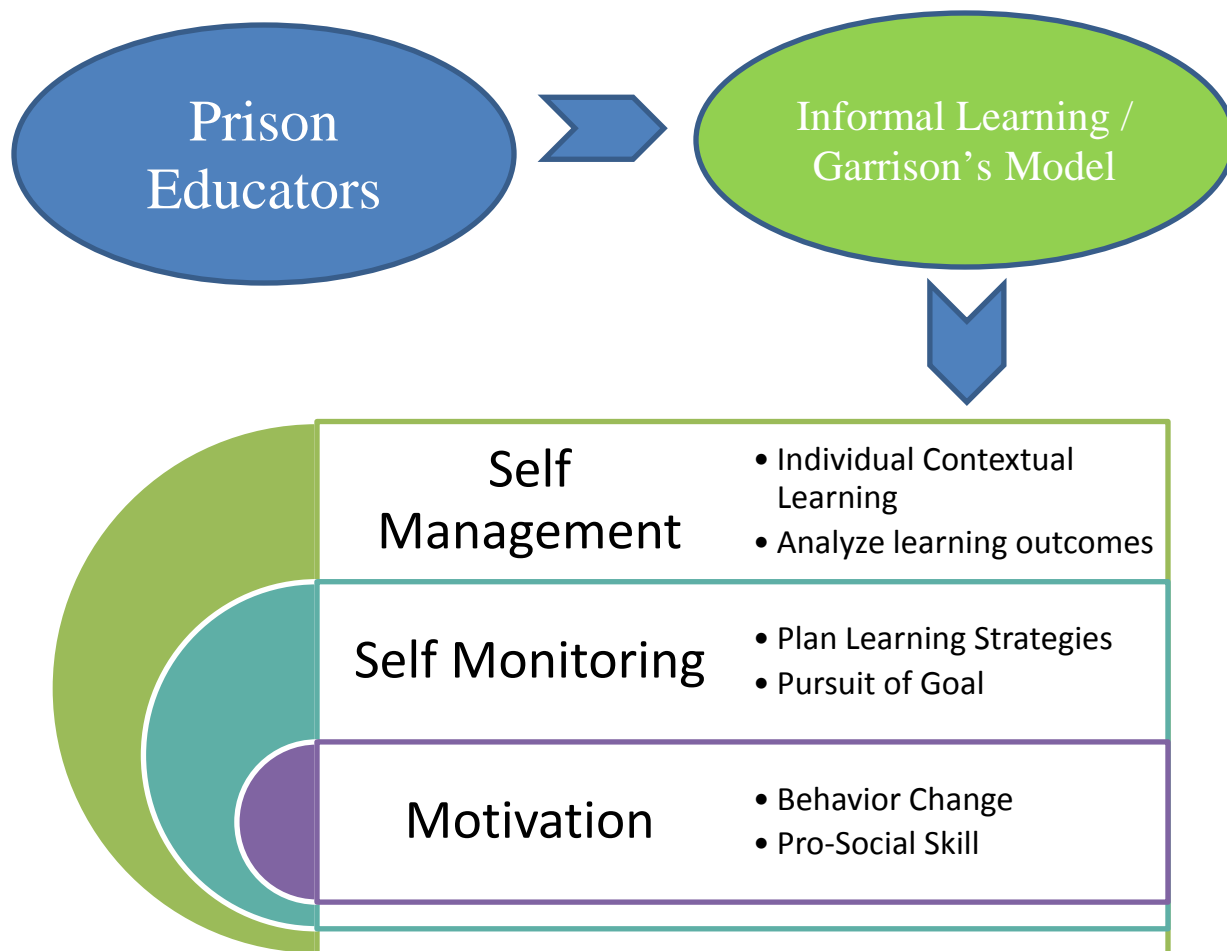
Figure 1: Incorporation of Garrison's three-dimensional model into prison informal learning programs.