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Connecting Incarcerated College Students to Digital Learning Resources

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*Connecting Incarcerated College Students to
Digital Learning Resources*

April 1, 2022

ACRL-CARL Conference

Ethan Annis

Land Acknowledgement Statement

Mount Tamalpais College is located on land originally occupied by the Coast Miwok people.

"If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?" Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*

Overview of Presentation

Part Zero

Major challenges to using technology by incarcerated people in California

Part 1

The chronology of the project to bring technology into a college inside San Quentin

Part 2

Ways to address some of the major challenges

Part 3

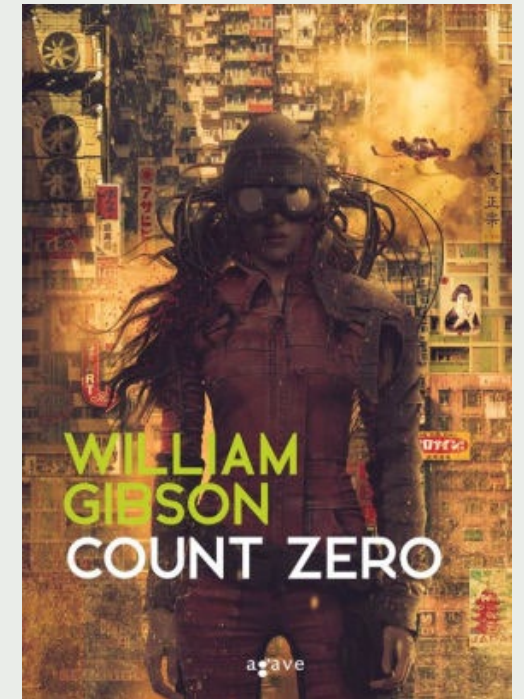
Ways participants can get involved

Note on Interludes

This presentation contains three interludes. The purpose of the interludes is to show how the challenges faced by education in prisons are also faced beyond prisons.

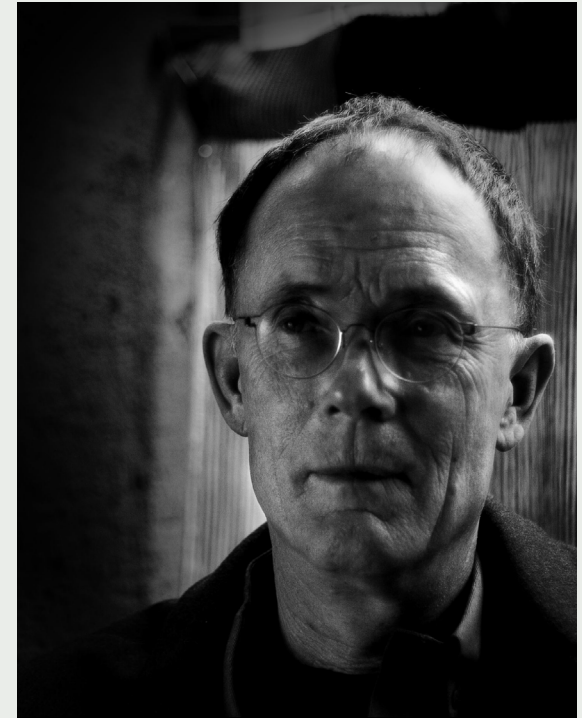
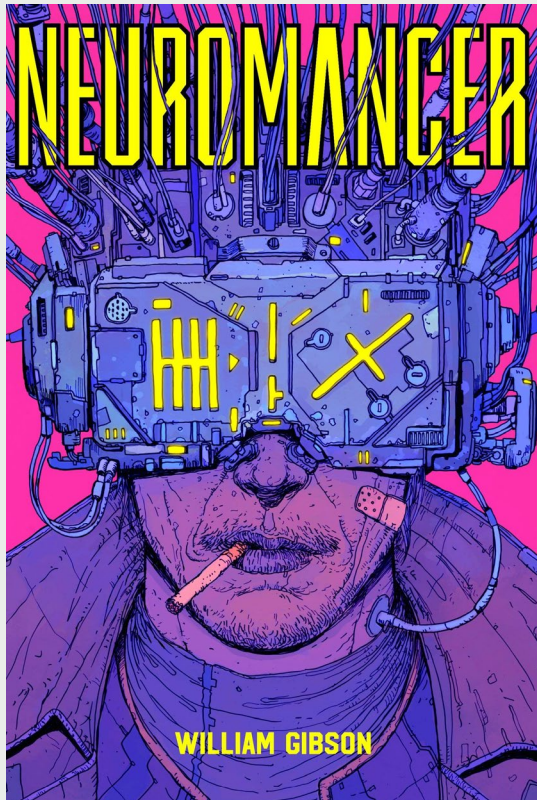
Part Zero

Major challenges to using technology by incarcerated people in California



"The future is already here – it's just not evenly distributed." —William Gibson, *The Economist*, December 4, 2003

My work with technology in prisons has brought me to appreciate Gibson's comment in a whole new light.



William Gibson, Photo by Gonzo Bonzo

Challenges:

- Censorship: Incarcerated people are not allowed access to the open Internet
 - To have a site whitelisted, every page must be vetted and approved
- Unreliable network access in housing
- Vast range of experience with technology: Some incarcerated people were incarcerated decades ago and have no experience using modern technology
- It's challenging to move hardware into and out of prisons, even USB drives
- Access to prisons by educators is often abruptly temporarily curtailed
- Students are often moved to other prisons in the middle of their programs
- Telecommunication companies monetize access to communication and content
 - This effect is amplified by the prison population literally being a captive audience and the market is often a monopoly.
 - Sometimes DOCs are given kickbacks

Part 1

The chronology of the project to bring technology into a college inside San Quentin



San Quentin, Jesstess87 CC BY-SA 4.0
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Overview:

“For over 20 years, the Prison University Project (now Mount Tamalpais College) was the only on-site degree-granting program in a California prison.” (College’s website) About 300 students are enrolled each semester.

In December 2019, I was hired to develop a scalable plan to bring 35 to 350 laptops into San Quentin for students to use. In mid 2020, with 28 incarcerated people in San Quentin dead from COVID and the program largely shut down, I was asked to lead the effort to implement the plan I developed.

Before the plan was rolled out, until November of 2021, there no computers onsite for use by all ~300 students. Instruction was done using paper and pencils. We now have 35 laptops loaded with useful software being used by students and 25 more laptops ordered, every student has a Canvas account, we have an MOU with the California Department of Corrections & Rehabilitation, about half the students have taken a computer literacy assessment test on a laptop, we have funds to expand the program, plus an MOU with the Marin County Free Library is in the works and on Monday, April 4, 2022, a FT Director of IT and Library Services will start. Soon students will have access to a large EBSCO database. We have plans to develop a library of open-source materials and to be able to pivot seamlessly between in person, hybrid and remote instruction.

Summer of 2020: changing instruction for a changed world

(The summer when the daytime skies turned dark orange and black in much of California, COVID was raging and there was no vaccine in site.)

MTC was mostly shut down due to COVID. A little correspondence instruction was all that is possible.

No computers inside for about 300 students. There was no network infrastructure available to the college.

United States, Coast to Coast, Sept 9, 2020-Sept 16 2020



San Francisco, Sept 9, 2020, Christopher Michel CC BY-SA 4.0
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Portland, Sept 9, 2020, Tedder, CC BY-SA 4.0
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Seattle, Sept 11, 2020, SounderBruce CC BY-SA 4.0
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NYC, Sept 16, 2020, King of Hearts, CC BY-SA 4.0
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Interlude 1, Climate Change

I do not know much about gods; but I think that the river
Is a strong brown god - sullen, untamed and intractable,
Patient to some degree, at first recognized as a frontier;
Useful, untrustworthy, as a conveyor of commerce;
Then only a problem confronting the builder of bridges.
The problem once solved, the brown god is almost forgotten
By the dwellers in the cities - ever, however, implacable,
Keeping his seasons and rages, destroyer, reminder
Of what man choose to forget. Unhonoured, unpropitiated
By worshippers of the machine, but waiting, watching, and waiting.

--T.S. Elliot, Dry Salvages from The Four Quartets

"One word more. I thought, on the train, how utterly we have forsaken the Earth, in the sense of excluding it from our thoughts. There are but few who consider its physical hugeness, its rough enormity. It is still a disparate monstrosity, full of solitudes + barrens + wilds. It still dwarfs + terrifies + crushes. The rivers still roar, the mountains still crash, the winds still shatter. Man is an affair of cities. His gardens + orchards + fields are mere scrapings. Somehow, however, he has managed to shut out the face of the giant from his windows. But the giant is there, nevertheless... There was a girl on the train with a face like the under-side of a moonfish. Her talk was of dances + men. For her, Sahara had no sand; Brazil, no mud." Journal Entry Wallace Stevens made on April 18, 1904



New Orleans,
aftermath of
Katrina, Sept
11, 2005,
Public
Domain



Toowoomba,
Australia, Jan
10, 2011,
Kingbob86
CC BY-SA 4.0

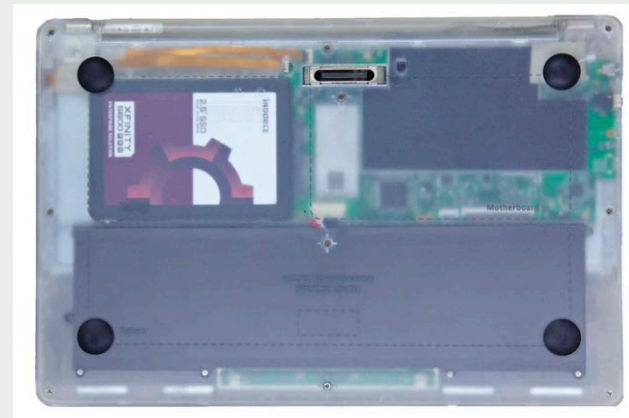
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Fall of 2020:

We submit a request to bring in standalone laptops (Securebooks) that use Ubuntu. These devices contain open-source software such as Libre Office and a wide variety of content for self study in Spanish and English, such as interactive math tutorials from the Kahn Academy, a version of Wikipedia, OER textbooks, computer literacy tutorials, typing training programs, and video games that can be modified by users.

The problem with this solution is that the laptops are difficult to update, and it is difficult to interact with students.

For various reasons, this request goes nowhere but parts of it may be used in the future because there is no reliable network connectivity in the cells. It would be ideal to have each individual device either be connected to a network or operate as a standalone device.



Winter & Spring of 2020-2021:

We submit a request to bring in Windows laptops to connect to an endpoint management solution (Workspace One) being developed by the CDCR. These devices will have a wide variety of licensed software such as Word, Excel, etc. We can also use Canvas accounts licensed by CDCR.

The major drawback is that we have no control over the software, the setup of Canvas, etc. We can request that sites are whitelisted and request that changes are made to Canvas.

Ultimately, we draft an MOU outlining everyone's responsibilities in this arrangement. The San Quentin warden, the CDCR and MTC all sign the MOU.

We begin a search for a full time IT & Library Services Director.

Summer & Fall 2021:

We purchase 35 laptops and charging carts. We get each student a Canvas account, add open-source content for digital literacy self study in Canvas, develop a literacy assessment, and assess about half of the students. We find a wide range of skills, ranging from no idea how to open a program to knowledge of how to use keyboard shortcuts.

We secure funding to expand the program.

Winter/Spring 2021-2022:

We're shut out of San Quentin again due to the Omicron surge.

We order 25 more laptops, order printers and begin the process of creating an MOU with Marin County Free Library.

We hire a FT Director of IT and Library Services. She starts Monday, April 4.



San Quentin, Frank Schulenburg, CC BY-SA 4.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>>, via Wikimedia Commons

Part 2

Ways to address some of the major challenges

External Censorship

- No access to the open Internet
 - All pages of a whitelisted site need to be approved
- Content needs to be approved
 - The process can take a very long time
- Lists of banned books

Solutions

Build trust with DOCs

Choose your battles

People have drawn a few lines in Sharpie on parts of a page on an image in a banned book and got the entire book approved.

Work the other side

For instance, get onto committees that decide what to ban

Internal Censorship

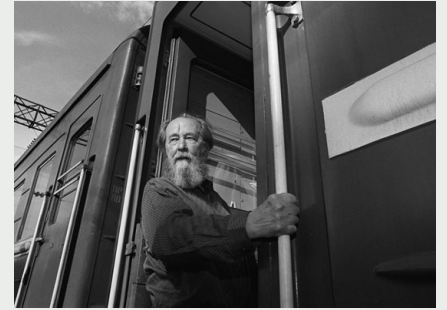
"So far, efforts to bring criminal charges against librarians and educators have largely faltered... Nonetheless, librarians say that just the threat of having to defend against charges is enough to get many educators to censor themselves by not stocking the books to begin with. Even just the public spectacle of an accusation can be enough." Elizabeth A. Harris and Alexandra Alter, NY Times, Jan 30, 2022

Solution:

Take a deep breath and submit material for approval

Interlude 2, Censorship:

(Something to think about regarding censorship as we watch world events unfold.)



Solzhenitsyn, by I, Evstafiev, CC BY-SA 3.0
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"People will ask what literature can do in the face of the pitiless assault of open violence? Well let us not forget that violence does not have its own separate existence and is, in fact, incapable of having it: it is invariably interwoven with THE LIE. They have the closest of kinship, the most powerful natural tie: violence has nothing with which to cover itself except the lie, and the lie has nothing to stand on other than violence. Once someone has proclaimed violence as his METHOD, he must inexorably select the lie as his PRINCIPLE. At its birth violence acts openly and even takes pride in itself. But as soon as it is reinforced and its position is strengthened, it begins to sense the rarefied atmosphere around it, and it can go further only when fogged about with lies, cloaked in the honeyed, hypocritical words. It does not always nor invariably choke its victims; more often it demands of them only the oath in the lie."

He goes on to say that the ordinary person must not take the oath of the lie and the artist must expose the lie.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, 1970, Nobel Lecture on Literature, p. 37

**No reliable network access in housing
&
No reliable access to the prison**

Solution

Develop a digital library of OERs and tools that can work offline.
&
Develop a system where educators can seamlessly pivot between synchronous, asynchronous, in person, hybrid (hyflex), and remote instruction. This works when there is no access

Moving hardware into and out of prisons

Solution:

Learn what hardware is approved.

Start orders early, move approved hardware into prisons in bulk.



Public Domain

Students transferred to other prisons during a program

If we can do remote and asynchronous instruction, we can teach our transferred students. Making content available offline will also benefit students.

One potential problem is can laptops be transferred along with students who are transferred and how to get back laptops from students who are transferred? Theoretically, the student may be able to get a laptop wherever they are transferred.

Monetizing Access to Communication and Digital Content

The two major providers of filtered Internet to prisons are Securus/JPAY and GTL. Securus has charged incarcerated customers up to \$14 per minute to make phone calls. In 2019, GTL was in the news for charging incarcerated people by the minute for reading free books on Project Gutenberg.

There are much smaller, for-profit companies operating inside prisons. The ones I could get information on were charging incarcerated people or their families' high prices.

The only nonprofit providing telecommunications services I am aware of is Ameelio, which was founded by some Yale law students. It is a small company.

Educators providing content and communication offers another channel but that is often not permitted.

Solution:

Unknown

Interlude 3, Access to Communication & Digital Content Beyond Prisons

Susan Crawford points out in her excellent book, *Captive Audience*, that it costs Internet Service Providers less than a penny to transmit an additional gigabyte. I pay Verizon \$15 in overages per additional gigabyte.

In *Captive Audience* Crawford writes:

“Traditional wisdom dictated that competition would protect consumers from the cable companies' abuses and obviate the need for regulation, but things did not work out that way, and now America has the worst of both worlds: no competition and no regulation.”

Part 3

Get Involved

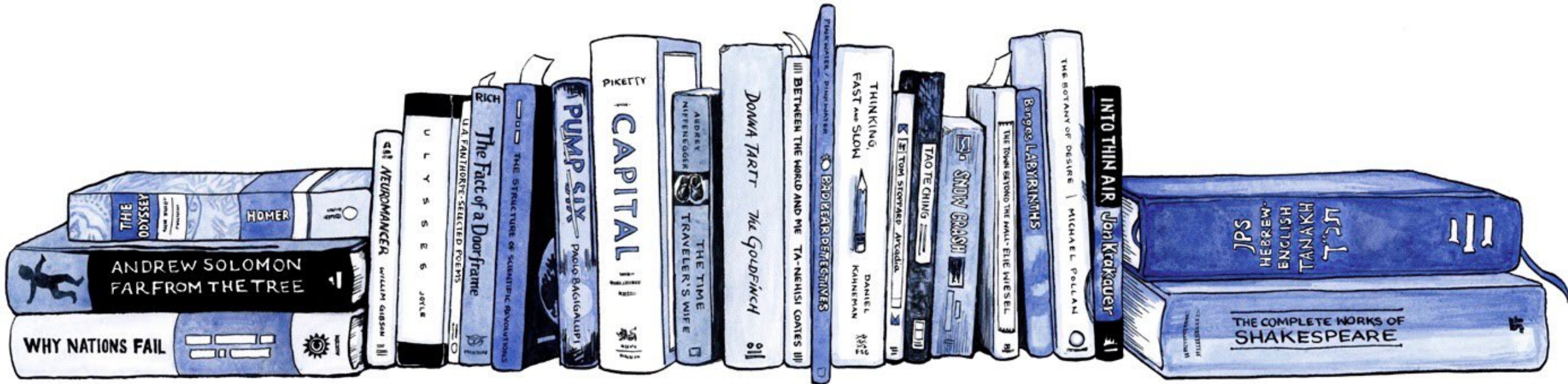


Volunteers cleaning after Hurricane Sandy, Jim.Henderson, CC 0

In California ~ 115,000-127,000 people are incarcerated. What can you do to help:

- Volunteer in a prison education program (if you want help finding one, ask me)
- Find nonprofits doing good work and donate to them
- Run for a position in local, state or federal government
- Get appointed to a board that compiles the list of censored materials
- Donate physical books to prison programs
- Find ways to connect your library to the prison or to a prison educational project





MAIA KOBABE 2016

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