

The Teaching Tips and Tales Podcast Transcript

Episode TTT:015 Why Reading is Crucial in the Rehabilitation of Prisoners with Lesley Graham

Show Notes www.mapyourlearning.com/2015/11/prisonliteracyshownotes

Adam: Welcome to episode 15 of the Teaching Tips and Tales podcast.

Female Speaker: Welcome to Teaching Tips and Tales the podcast dedicated to promoting the art of teaching the place where you can listen to stories from teachers around the world. Come and listen. Come and learn. Come and share with your host Adam Samuel.

Adam: Thank you so much for joining me on episode 15. I've got a fascinating interview for you today and it's with the inspirational Lesley Graham. It's about education in prisons or more importantly the power of reading and the role of literacy in rehabilitating prisoners. Lesley has worked as a teacher, lecturer and educational facilitator and gets huge satisfaction from helping people grow and improve. Everyone goes through tough periods in their life but Lesley has used her adversities to create a positive change. While serving a prison sentence Lesley lead a reading group for female prisoners.

I came across an article in the Financial Times entitled *How Reading can Change Prisoners Lives* which reference Lesley's work in prison and I decided to get in contact with her for this interview. The article mentioned how many of the women Lesley taught could not recognize the alphabet, yet were reading a whole book by the end of five months. A 2014 literacy trust research study states "Low literacy exacerbates risk factors by narrowing employment and attainment opportunities and contributing to a negative experience at school. While the casual outcomes of these factors in relation to crime are unreliable as risks suggests, it is reasonable to assume the increasing literacy levels could be a protective measure against the risk involvement in crime. According to statistics I found around 70% of female inmates have no qualifications at all, suggesting that literacy levels are likely to be extremely low." So here is Lesley sharing her own personal experience of having worked as a reading group leader and as a peer mentor on the Toe-by-Toe reading scheme in prison. She starts by talking about how she first heard about reading group.

Lesley: I just heard about it and it seemed to be quite an exclusive group. I had a few friends who were older ladies who were educated older ladies. I used to see them meeting in this room on a Monday night and they said "Oh well we can only have 12 people and there's a waiting list" and blah, blah, blah so of course that really attracted me to it [laughs]. There was a professor of English from Roehampton University who... she still goes into prisons, who comes in once a month on a Monday night. I gate crashed and went to see her and she said, "Join" and that's how it happened. And then I thought "Well this is a really

good idea because I was so busy and so involved in so many things that I wasn't reading anymore and I thought "This will give me a really good opportunity to read" particularly to read things that I probably wouldn't have read through choice.

The way it ran was at the end of every discussion group on a Monday this lady like Mary Poppins would bring all these books out of this big bag she brought with her and a lot of them came from the world reading something or other and so they're freebies a lot of freebies. We would then choose one. I've got the reading. I wrote a list of all the books that we'd read because I did a lecture Roehampton University when I was still in prison a couple years ago and it was about reading in prison. I looked back at all my notes and it was amazing some of the books we'd read and everyone in the room was getting quite excited and it was so varied, so that's how I got involved. Then the secretary who fundamentally organizes the thing puts out flyers and invites people she left so I became a secretary and made it my little campaign to get more members and to do away with this silly exclusivity it appeared because there's only 12 people but in reality because even though we were up to 30 at one point.

Adam: Wow.

Lesley: Yeah and that was simply by going out and spreading the word. I got the business admin department where girls were studying IT and editing and stuff like that. I got them to produce flyers and we used to put them around the dining hall on a Friday because the group was meeting on a Monday and go around different wings, just word of mouth just try and excite people by selling the benefits of coming to our reading group.

Adam: Was there quite a lot of excitement then from other prisoners?

Lesley: Yes. Yes there was. I mean it went through highs and lows in terms of membership, comfortably fluid because of people coming and going but there were some really exciting meetings and we just all enjoyed it because some of the books it would invariably lead to a discussion about politics, or what we thought about murder or pedophiles because of the content in the book. It was amazing because it was a real opportunity. You could think that you weren't in prison, you could have been in a book club anywhere and it was lovely. But it did have highs and lows. Dare I say it, I think it does depend on who's in it and it needs someone like me to drive it and there is someone like me who took over for me. I heard recently that she is struggling but that's because of the prison politics I think rather than people being entrusted. It goes like that you know?

Adam: How easy is it for prisoners to get into education then? Is it something that's not forced upon them but they have to do as part of their rehabilitation?

Lesley: I'm actually going to the Prison Education Trust tonight. We're having an open forum session discussing just that. How education needs to change and how people with experience good and bad can suggest ways to improve how all aspects of learning, training skills should be run in prisons. That's what we're debating tonight because yeah one of my

big gripes was that the education system in prison was targeted towards the lowest common denominator. I love learning and I wanted to make full use of everything that was on offer but I'm also a trainer facilitator by profession and a lot of the courses were courses I would have run [laughs] and I thought "This is a great opportunity to be on the other side and be a participant" and also I could nick all the notes and stuff.

Adam: Take all the ideas

Lesley: That was how it started. So I got loads in level one and two. I had a degree when I went to prison I already got a degree in Law Criminology and Social Science so having all these certificates at level one and two I thought was a scream. But yes I did everything and often times people would say "Oh Lesley will go on that course" because the people who really should be there are anger management and self-esteem and assertiveness. The people who should have gone were just saying "No I don't want anything to do it".

I'm hoping – one of my suggestions is that you put it on peoples' sentence plans. Sometimes it is on someone's especially anger management things like Maths and English a lot of girls they didn't go to school very much and were abused. They were in care. They were in inappropriate relationships and they definitely need to learn to read and write for a start. I don't care what the figures say my experience was about 65% of prisoners could not read and write very well. They would hide behind other things and that could well be why they'd say "no I'm not going to do that course" because of fear.

Adam: Motivation as well I suppose

Lesley: Yes motivation was the point but I think the root of the whole thing was fear, low self-esteem and fear so it was masked by aggression or that negative "I don't want to do that. What's the point?" I don't think that often we get to what's behind those comments and that was my experience. I believe that that's why a lot of prisoners reoffend because they go out and they still have no clue how to deal with life and go back into their comfort zone which is either going back to drinks and drugs, shoplifting, getting in with the wrong crowd and so on.

So whilst I think of course it's really important that people can read and write and do basic Maths and English I think we need to be far more open minded and aware of this complex complex issue. I can only talk about women's prisons but I know it's the same for men's, complex issues that needs to be addressed and the current style of education I believe doesn't address that, life skills for example using things like Maths and English. So you still study it but in a way that you don't feel like you're going to be doing an exam and be sitting at a desk like learning I don't know, how to run a business and of course you need Maths and English. So you'll be learning how to run a business and at the same time you'll be learning your Maths and English.

Adam: Yeah totally. Unfortunately unless these underlying issues are addressed there will always be kids that are not interested in school and learning for a number of reasons and

therefore misbehave. I suppose it's the same with prisoners who don't have fun memories of school and when they're told they have to sit in the classroom would rather play up.

Lesley: Absolutely I'm going to be naughty as I say because of their experiences which I still think as I say are all fear based and lack of self-confidence and self-worth. And also yourself as a teacher, that learning styles the ones I found most common is bodily physical learning style, you know 'let me get up and do it'. I think it's getting better because we run a lot of courses here at the education center for teachers and teaching assistants in how to teach in different ways and that's what part of my training used to be to facilitate courses in how to look at the box in particularly training and facilitation. I think the way it's driven in prison is City and Guild and stuff like that and you might get some good tutors and you might get some bad tutors but it's all about how it's done it's not so much about what you cover. I know you know this already but it's about how you do it and you can make it and it has to be made fun. It has to be made interactive and engaging.

I think we can make much more use in education of people like myself and I was not by any means the only person there with a degree and some social skills who buddy up with the younger people. I think that people take it much better from a peer than they do from someone who is like a teacher as long as you got the right style. It had been know that some people when I was a peer mentor would be like "Who do you think you are officer No keys?" and I'd say "No I don't think I'm that at all. What makes you say that?" "Well you act like a bloody officer." "Really then how does an officer act?" start breaking down behaviours right okay!

Adam: Yes I was going to say that. I was thinking about that as well that mentor schemes would probably work better than a teacher from outside who hasn't had much experience of being inside a prison.

Lesley: Yeah or a mix of both. But I think it's a real win-win, because one of the objections to what I'm proposing is that the fact that officers have got enough to do. My come back to that is well we're actually not asking officers to do anything except perhaps identify women like me and men like me who could go forward to a peer mentor scheme, a buddy system and that's all that I've got to do. They haven't got to fill in any paper work because that would all be done by the mentor or the buddy. I know some prisons are doing this but it's the minority and I think it should be just blown in by NOMS National Offender Management System otherwise it's not going to happen.

Adam: I've heard of Toe-by-Toe and I've read a lot.

Lesley: Yes I was a Toe-by-Toe mentor and that is a brilliant, brilliant system. I taught five girls to read who couldn't even read the alphabet.

Adam: Could you describe how they felt afterwards? I guess they were...

Lesley: Amazing. The self-esteem shot up the “I can do this attitude” shot up. One of the difficulties again is the high turnover in prison unless someone’s a lifer you know. I think again I’ve been working with Toe by Toe outside. It needs follow up because Toe by Toe, The Shannon Trust are only funded to provide all this stuff in prison and now another charity called User Voice, are trying to go into probation officers for example and say “We’re doing some reading stuff here just to continue what you did with Toe by Toe” because all I could say to girls if they said to me “Well how can I follow this up outside” “Well go and enroll at your local college?” but that wasn’t what they wanted. They wanted the informality of that system and the one to one. I love that reading system because it works.

Adam: Okay interesting, is it a Phonics course?

Lesley: It is phonetic. It is phonetic so they would have to – They still needed to know ABC but you start by teaching with pictures of A is for Apple and so on. It’s 256 pages long, the book and the way it’s designed is to spend 15 minutes a day working through the book. So you might just do one page a day and you give girls dots where they get things right and a little dash where they don’t get things right, you just repeat, repeat, repeat and move at their pace. It works because you know the subconscious working when they’re not actually with you and also the sessions are short enough to maintain peoples’ attention because nine times out of ten those kinds of people who can’t read haven’t got a high attention span and there’s a lot of people being labelled dyslexic. I know it originated 25 years ago by dyslexic prisoner who didn’t know he was dyslexic and it really grew by him finding other people who couldn’t read. Then I think some people came in from education and over the years that system has been designed develop, design develop and it works.

Adam: These women that you managed to get up to a reasonably good literacy level were they then able to participate in the reading groups and come and discuss?

Lesley: They’re never there long enough you see. They would then leave prison. We tried to get a reading group - but I can’t remember Fresh Blood or something we called it - where someone with a Toe by Toe mentor was learning to read and of course everyone’s at different levels where they would come with the mentor to a group and we’d say “take an article out of the newspaper” but that would never work. It would never work. One of my girls for example she was reading a Kerry Katona book that was because she got fed up with the Toe by Toe book because her concentration span was that of a gnat but she loved the Kerry Katona book which is a short read, you can get short read books in the library for people who find reading challenging and she loved that because it was her life story. It was her life story to a T but put her in a group where we’re reading article from a newspaper. There’s no way she could read that whole Kerry Katona book and she got very tired and quite stressed because she hadn’t gone through the whole Toe by Toe. So I’d say okay “I’ll read paragraph, you read paragraph” and then of course I’d have to explain what a paragraph was and then it was great because she didn’t understand commas and full stops and semicolons and I’d talk about breathing and why they were there and we just had fun

and of course the story engaged her. She kept saying “Oh my God that’s my life”. But the idea is great you can see why it won’t work can’t you if people are not there long enough.

Adam: Unless their lifers

Lesley: unless there lifers

Adams: Or they’re in for a long time yes. This all goes back to what you said earlier about the need for a targeted invention plan that continues to support prisoners build up their literacy skills once they’ve been released and serve sentences.

Lesley: Yes that would be amazing. I don’t believe that there’s even a list. When it first started it was so taboo. It was almost a secret “Don’t tell anyone that I’m doing Toe by Toe” and I think the attitude is changing today because I know that I had a big thing going with the governor responsible saying you should put this on peoples’ sentence plans. This was two years ago and she said “Oh no you can’t because people find embarrassing” and I said “Nonsense they’re not going to be able to get a job” and that’s the most important thing when you leave prison. They’re not going to be able to get back into society, you can’t do anything without being able to read and low and behold last year numbs dictated to prison that it should go on girls sentence plans.

Adam: Well that’s great news then yes.

Lesley: Because if you don’t force them to - I’m sorry. I really feel strongly about this. If you don’t force them you do it they won’t do it.

Adam: Or you might get some prisoners who might from the beginning think “Well what’s the point in this because it’s not going to help me in the end. I’m not going to get a job anyway”

Lesley: Absolutely which is why for me where I’m campaigning the most is that period of time when they leave prison and what’s happening next because I saw girls being literally dumped outside the gates with their black bin liners and that was it “off you go” but there are a lot of charities who are providing support now ‘meet at the gate’ services. I’m hoping Michael Gove is going to recognize that needs to happen because he’s very, very good at advocating that if we keep focusing on education or if we start focusing more on education in prison then we’re going to reduce the 45% of people who reoffend in the first year of release. I was at a talk with him recently where I didn’t say it was rubbish but I didn’t make the point that education – How can education totally change that? It’s got to be when they’re released what happens in society as well. He bought that but he’s coming from education isn’t he? So he knows about education.

Adam: We know all about him [laughs].

Lesley: Yes exactly and education knows all about him so yes he talks a good talk.

Adam: Let's hope he walks the walk. So go on back again to the reading groups that you spoke about earlier that had the 12 participants. How are the books decided? You said that somebody came in like Mary Poppins and produced these books.

Lesley: Yes she was the professor from Roehampton University, the English professor. Her name's Jenny I really want to promote here. She's an amazing lady. She should get an OBE or something. There's a lot of these groups throughout the country and the books are provided by charities but a lot of them are new books in terms of new authors. We were reading **Hunger Games** when it first came out. We were reading – oh my God my minds gone blank. We were reading all sorts of books that were current books but Jenny was getting from these places free and so we probably have a choice of about 15 books.

Adam: What were some of the most popular ones that you remember, **Hunger Games** that's quite popular?

Lesley: Oh yes Hunger Games people loved Hunger Games. The Shack provoked lots of good arguments. Gone Girl was another one and that other one written by that author the same author as Gone Girl. There was one where we couldn't read it. We were advised not to read it because it was all about self-harm. We had quite a few girls in my reading group at that time. It was deemed that it was going to be too upsetting and the group decided that because Jenny brought that book in and the group decided that. Honestly I wish I had my little notebook with me so I could go through all the books we'd read.

Adam: Oh that's all right I can put a list later when I write about it. That was actually going to be my previous question whether there were any books that were off limit but then the democratic thing where everybody decided which I think is quite good.

Lesley: Yes Jenny would bring everything and she would not discriminate because she wanted us to read as widely as possible. She was going into Pentonville as well – and what's the other man's prison in London - because she comes from London Roehampton University.

Adam: Wandsworth maybe

Lesley: Wormwood Scrubs. She would be toting around the same books but the groups would obviously choose different books and in fact there was – I don't know if it's in Inside Time prison newspaper but there was always a column in there, a reading group so I think I wrote three of those about books that we'd read and there were book reviews. I've still got those somewhere in my folders.

Adam: From my own research of this interview I read quotes that have stated how important reading is because it builds up empathy in prisoners.

Lesley: Absolutely

Adam: It builds up self-esteem as well given a more in tuned sense of their own identity. Also helps then develop a network to a wider world that is bigger than the council State or deprived area that they may have grown up in.

Lesley: Yes absolutely, of course it's the ability to read. I personally I don't think it matters what someone reads as long as they read. I mean we know where our culture is today because myself and my ex-husband read our children read. They were surrounded by books but a lot of these men and women come from homes where what they've got is a great big television and all the technology that goes with it. So a book what do I want to read a book for I'd rather watch a film.

Adam: Short concentration span I suppose as well.

Lesley: Yes but I still think we've got to keep bashing at it.

Adam: Do you think that literacy and books were more accessible than numeracy because I for one am terrible at Maths so I would just be completely turned off by it.

Lesley: Yes it's a shame because I was trained. I had a belief I wasn't good at Maths. I got my O level Maths but all through my life even though I got my own business stuff. I always had a belief I wasn't good at Maths and by default I became a Maths assistant in the first prison I went to because there were a group of naughty girls. They were in the Maths class and the tutor just said to me – I hadn't been there that long and he said "Do you want to come and be an assistant teacher?" and I said "Oh Yeah" and he went in the Maths group because he was a Music teacher and I said "yes". He said "because you seem to get along really well with these rough girls" and I went "Yea but a bit worried about Maths because I'm not good at Maths" and I relied that it was a belief and that I actually am okay at Maths.

And then there was an organisation, a charity two years ago – I forgot what they were called but it was all about Maths and I wanted to go on a one day course with them and they train you to be a Maths tutor basically. It was some simple stuff. They gave you some books and a T-shirt but you had to go out and find your own mentees and it never took off. It never took off. It was a big load of government money wasted because it was impossible to go out and find your own mentees.

Adam: Yes how would you do that?

Lesley: Well exactly I go "Do any want to learn Maths and make it fun?" [laughs] "No thank you. Bye." A few people did take us up on it but it needed proper backing as these things do. It needed to be from the top.

Adam: Yes and if these mentor and mentee schemes can work I think they would be a great think. They're great for both aren't they the pupil and the teacher?

Lesley: Absolutely yes and you're right they're good for reading Maths anything. I like you would always want to focus on the fundamentals, which is reading and writing and basic numeracy.

Adam: Yes and I guess you must have felt really good as well that you managed to help all these people.

Lesley: It was an amazing feeling. It really was an amazing feeling yes and I'm doing a lot of that now because I'm a recovering alcoholic just to add fuel to the flames. I've got three sponsees who I take through the 12-step program and it's amazing watching them grow and develop. I love watching people grow and develop and it was just such joy.

Adam: Are there a lot of success stories because I read about some of the male inmate? I think it was France Harris who's probably there.

Lesley: Yes I met him the other week. I hope he's there tonight actually.

Adam: Yes I'd love the opportunity to interview him. But do you think you and he are in the minority or are there other success stories as well?

Lesley: It is the minority but we do exist. My view is that we all – and that's one of the things I'm going to say tonight, is that we ought to sift out people like myself and Frank.

Adam: Because you are the role models aren't you?

Lesley: Because we're the role models we should be promoting the success stories not the failures and there are a lot of success stories out there and I know the Prison Education Trust has cottoned onto this but for some reason they never kept records.

Adam: Going back to the topic of rehabilitation. It seems ironical that real in-depth study and having education is difficult to take up unless you have a long sentence and often it's the repeat offenders who are in desperate need of a long-term education program.

Lesley: Yes exactly and it doesn't work. It doesn't work because we're not really helping them but that's another issue as well isn't it, the fundamentals of society? But why are there so many people like that in the first place, that yo-yo in and out of prison and cost a fortune for the state? When prisons fundamental don't work there's a lot of evidence to prove that.

Adam: Yes I know what you mean. I've come across of arguments saying exactly that whilst researching this interview actually. The same way that rehabilitation needs to carry on once individuals are released from prison teachers both in primary and secondary can also play a crucial role in that. I'm sure that many prisoners would say that their backgrounds were also in part a result of their failed schooling. So if teachers in schools are unable to intervene then these young students that spend a large part of their schools being excluded or suspended may end up dear I say treading the path to prison.

Lesley: There are schemes for that as well, there's something called **Keep Out**. I don't know how common Keep Out is, obviously we're out of prisons but it happened in Send where groups of girls come in with a teacher or they might be in a special school or in a school for badly behaved. I don't know what you call that these days, a group of 12 come in and four or five inmates who are trained as *Keep Out* mentors I suppose would give some lectures, give some presentations, do some role play, and show the girls around the prison up to a certain point explain what life is like in prison. As a deterrent there's nothing wrong with that however again how many could we take in a year, 60 a 100?

Adam: This is not the funding I suppose.

Lesley: I don't even know if you need the funding actually, you just need the support. I'm sorry I know doing a lot of talking.

Adam: No this is what I want!

Lesley: Okay there was a scheme where – it was organized historically by the Chaplaincy where good prisoners, prisoners with good reputations who were allowed to go out to work like myself were asked to go and speak in schools and I did two talks to two six form groups, lower six forms. The schools are clearly quite middle class and lot of nice academics. One was an all-girl school private school and another one was mixed. But we would go in and we would tell our story to a group of 60 to 70 sixth formers and it was very powerful. It was very powerful and they would ask questions and they'd be with their career's teacher.

This year I was approached by the volunteer from the Chaplaincy, we'd become really good friends and she's saying that Send" are saying no and she's saying "Why are we doing this? We've got Keep Out" No this is another way of spreading to the public the fact that our perceptions are very distorted when it comes to what a prisoner's like and what goes on in prison. It should be an enabling system not a "No we don't want to do this" then we have another political discussion about it. It should be fundamental because it's really good for the prisoners in terms of confidence and stuff and it's really good for the schools.

Adam: Yes I'll tell you what, when I was at school I remember we had a recovered heroin addict come in. I still remember to this day.

Lesley: You still remember that

Adam: And also Tony Adams the Arsenal footballer player.

Lesley: Oh yes.

Adam: I'm a fan so I was pretty annoyed. I left the school by then but he was talking about his alcohol problem and his time that he spent in prison.

Lesley: Brilliant that's what we should be doing and I'm happy to give up my time and I would really like to be paid for this actually because I think it would be so worthwhile and I

know Frank would agree with that to go around prisons, go around wherever and give talks and promote the positivity of a lot of the things that – Well I know Frank embraced his time in prison too.

Adam: Well if I can help in anyway firstly by this podcast hopefully that will.

Lesley: Bless you. Brilliant.

Adam: Get a bit of coverage for it but keep on doing what you're doing.

Lesley: I will talk to Frank tonight and I will talk to Prison Education Trust about the fact that we had this conversation and see how far they're getting with these kinds of links.

Adam: Yes and I wish you the best of luck.

Lesley: Thank you

Adam: Thanks so much for your time. So that was my interview with Lesley Graham. If you'd like to get in touch with her please contact me at Adam at maplearning.com. Please don't forget to look at the show notes as well which include useful links to any of the names and organizations that Lesley mentioned in the interview. Thank you so much for listening today and I look forward to providing you with more useful content on our next episode.

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