

Digitally enhanced rehabilitation

by Victoria Knight and Jason Morris

I was lucky enough to have access to a fascinating project and carry out a small piece of research. Here I worked alongside Jason Morris, psychologist working in the Interventions Service in HMPPS in the UK. Together Jason and I wrote an article describing and reflecting on the novel work of co-producing digital content with service users in the criminal justice system (CJS). In the article we aim to offer some unique insights into the development of a digitally-enabled desistance-orientated approach, as well as a credible contribution to the broader knowledge-base around the intersection between technology, user experience and rehabilitation.

The project I observed was called the [“Timewise” service](#), and so the article examines the co-production of digital innovation in the CJS generally. Jason and I reflect on the use of technology to capture the stories and voices of service users and its potential to put these at the heart rehabilitation services. We argue that the explicit use of lived experiences in the content of services has the potential to promote engagement and desistance amongst people in the CJS. In the case of Timewise these service users live in prison.

A novel evidence base

The evidence-base for digital co-production in the justice system remains limited. We showcase a range of contemporaneous initiatives, which provide opportunities to combine rehabilitation and entertainment, much like the [Prison Radio Association](#) and [Way Out TV](#). These important organisations co-produce “edutainment” services, providing opportunities to inspire both audiences and the service users who provide the content. Our article also champions other technology providers who create platforms to channel rehabilitative content to prison and probation audiences. Our summary points to many more stories to be told about how services have been developed by providers such as the “HUB Team” at the HMPPS Digital Studio, Virtual Campus, Unilink, and the Probation Board of Northern Ireland, as well as companies looking to provide alternative platforming solutions. We highlight how these providers are involving service users to enhance the usability and functionality of their systems, which they hope will be at the centre of the rehabilitation and reintegration agenda in future years. Moreover Van De Steene and Knight (2017) recommend that digital innovation more broadly should in fact centre the stakeholders’ insights and needs in the design and development of services moving forward.

There is a growth in the use of “eHealth” services in forensic settings (and beyond), and Hanneke Kip and colleagues from the University of Twente have systematically reviewed some of these digital interventions. Kip’s review provides an important overview of the strengths and challenges associated with the use of technology to promote desistance. Of the applications reviewed by Kip, an initiative in England and Wales with a good evidence-base in terms of efficacy is the [Breaking Free Online computer-assisted therapy programme for substance misuse recovery](#). This system provides a flexible approach to delivery in both custody and community settings and thereby offers a viable through-the-gate solution to CJS providers.

Timewise is a flexible toolkit approach that uses in-cell technology to support rehabilitative conversations between staff (or peer supporters) and prison residents.

Each Complementary Digital Media (CDM) clip centres on a skill (e.g., “self-talk”) or rehabilitative idea (e.g., “goal-setting”) which is aligned to the theoretical underpinnings of Timewise. Co-creators provided their voices and stories about how these skills can be used in day-to-day life.

It is still early days and the Timewise model will be subject to more research and evaluation. What we can share is that Timewise helps us to explore how staff, service users and a digital provider (HMPPS Digital Studio, HUB Team) can work in collaboration to create and channel CDM to the frontline where it has the biggest chance of creating conversations to positively influence the day-to-day lives of participants. The ownership that Timewise co-creators had over the content was evident in the co-creators’ disclosures during a focus group with myself. There are strong indications that Timewise can help in the project of decent and safer custody.

Conclusions

We believe that in-cell technology has the potential to expand the reach of desistance-orientated services and engage existing accredited Offending Behaviour Programme (OBP) audiences in new ways. But not as a replacement! For example, CDM can offer a blended learning opportunity by delivering accredited OBP content within sessions and as a “wrap around” service that could assist preparatory and consolidation work with frontline staff and peer supporters. The identification of a zero-cost delivery platform could enable life-long access to this content. Whilst the HMPPS digital prisons project is on hold until further notice (limiting the number of Public Sector Prisons with in-cell computers to two), other digital platforms (such as the Virtual Campus) have the potential to create further reach for digital toolkit approaches as well as digitised components of accredited OBPs. The availability of approved platforms to host digital content in prisons is likely to be limited for many years, but there is a growing appetite for explicitly rehabilitative digitally-enabled solutions in the community where Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Probation in the UK have recently highlighted the need of CRCs to bolster their supply chains with robust, accessible, evidence-informed services. The digital revolution offers service providers opportunities to deliver meaningful support and rehabilitative services.

We believe that creating digital services with service users increases the chances that user needs can be understood and ultimately met. Importantly, centring digitally-enabled services around user stories and voices means that rehabilitative visions can be co-owned with co-creators who are given a genuine opportunity to “give something back” – an experience which may in turn be a meaningful step on their pathway to desistance.

Our article is also summarised in the CDM clip below:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-uBj00nDYg&feature=youtu.be>

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