

Brain Based Instruction in Correctional Settings: Strategies for Teachers

BY TONI HILL BECKTOLD

Abstract

The latest revolution in education is brain based learning. Brain based learning/instruction takes what is now known about the brain from neuroscientific discoveries and applies that knowledge to the classroom. Most of the literature focuses on the traditional education setting, and correctional educators are left to sift through the information to find what is useful in the correctional setting. This article suggests some practical strategies that can be implemented in the correctional classroom. It addresses the use of movement, music, small groups, and feedback. It includes discussion of problems often encountered in the correctional classroom: Attention Deficit Disorder, learned helplessness, creating a safe, non-threatening environment, and dealing with security issues.

Correctional educators struggle with a problem that often goes unrecognized by public educators, educational vendors, and authors of educational publications. As we approach the threshold of applying neuroscience discoveries to classroom practice in the form of "Brain-Based Learning," correctional educators seem to have been left out of the picture. Many of the strategies offered by brain compatible instruction simply do not fit in the correctional environment.

Security procedures often limit the range of activities that can occur in correctional classrooms. When one considers the composition of the student body, however, these procedures become an obvious priority. So how do correctional educators provide the best possible education to students who may pose a realistic threat to security?

Brain compatible instruction is the new generation in the evolution of instructional practice that began with individualized instruction (Dunn and Dunn, 1972) and learning styles (Carbo, 1994). Educators did not "dump" individualized instruction in favor of learning styles. One built on the other. Brain based learning adds to the evolution of good instructional practice. Critics of brain based learning warn that misapplication of neurological discoveries could cause harm to the student (Bruer, 1999; Shore, 1997). Of course, educators should never engage in activities that could prove harmful for students. Upon careful inspection, however, one finds that most of the principles of brain based learning are just good instructional practices. Correctional educators need not be left out of the potential benefits of the principles of brain compatible instruction. Whether the setting is for adults or juveniles, with some creativity and modifications, the correctional educator can use brain compatible strategies.

The affective nature of music makes it ideal for changing the learner's state (Jensen, 1997). Music can serve to calm the hyperactive or angry student, or engage the tired, listless student. Putting content in the form of

song makes the music the actual carrier for the learning. Correctional educators must comply with facility policy, which does not always allow the instructor to bring music to the classroom. An alternative is to have the students hum the music. Choose tunes that almost all students know (like the theme from *Rocky*), or teach a new one.

Movement is a bit trickier, since it might prove to be a security risk. One must always be aware of having too many students out of their seats at any given moment. Facility policies may even dictate how many students can be up at a time. One might consider using cross lateral activities, which help to engage both sides of the brain. When students experience frustration with a problem, Jensen suggests patting oneself on the back with the opposite hand, swimming in the air, or writing words or numbers in the air (Jensen, 1997). All of those activities allow students to stay in their seats while incorporating movement. One might also consider having students get up one at a time to move around. Try to provide stretch breaks at least every half hour. The individual teacher must only allow what he/she is comfortable with, considering the makeup of the student body, the facility, and the environment.

Much of the brain based literature emphasizes the value of learner choice. This presents some problems for the correctional educator. First, if incarcerated students were good at making choices, they probably would not be incarcerated. Second, many fear making decisions. This author has been asked many times by her students: "Which one do you want me to choose?" "Do I really have a choice?" Perhaps providing students with some good choices in the classroom will help offset some of the effect of institutionalized living. Be careful, however, to initially limit the choices to only two options. More than two options could be overwhelming to the student who has endured a lifetime of making bad choices or no choices (depending on his/her experience with incarceration).

Putting learners into small groups creates a synergistic effect and provides an alternate source for the learning.

Putting offenders in small groups, however, could prove to be dangerous. One must consider the student body, the states of the learners, and the facility's policies and security questions. To keep students on task, set a challenging, but realistic, time limit to all group work. The teacher should assign students to groups to avoid problems. Give each group a different assignment, and have it report the learning to the rest of the class.

Design themes and learning experiences that are age appropriate. Adults could benefit from thematic instruction in the areas of consumer economics, finding/keeping a job, parenting/family, community resources, etc. Allow the students to create bulletin boards. Use games and puzzles that reinforce learning experiences.

Create an enriched environment to the greatest extent possible. According to Jensen (1998), the five keys to enrichment are "challenge, novelty, feedback, coherence, and time." If the learning is not challenging, essentially it is not learning. Novelty engages the learner's attention and prevents boredom, but it should be balanced with some ritual; rituals (like class start and end) help provide security. Immediate feedback is essential to the learning process, and does not always have to come from the teacher. Flip charts, peer-editing, visibly displaying performance criteria, self-checking, and displays of group work are all examples of feedback methods that are not teacher generated. Coherence refers to meaning. The learning content must be relevant to the learner. Students must have time to absorb the learning. Trying to learn too many things at once often results in less learning (Jensen, 1998). Teach students how to mind-map, and keep mind-maps posted for reviews.

Lord (2000) reported a study that claims that 25% of incarcerated adult men suffer from Attention Deficit Disorder/Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADD/ADHD). This finding has serious implications for the correctional educator. Conservatively, one-fourth of incarcerated students suffer from a disorder that limits their ability to regulate their attention. They may be impulsive and hyperactive. Consequently, there is a high chance that they have suffered failure in many areas of life and have low levels of self-esteem (Kelly and Ramundo, 1993). Correctional educators should teach non-medicinal coping strategies: time management, color coding, structure, exercise, meditation, proper sleep habits, etc. Students may apply the concepts of 12 step programs to the recovery of ADD, as well as substance abuse (Friends in Recovery, 1996). Instruction in the areas listed above would be beneficial for all students, whether or not they carry an ADD diagnosis.

Learned helplessness on the part of the incarcerated learner is another barrier that the correctional educator must combat. Learned helplessness has many causes and results in the learner's belief that he/she "can't" do something, extreme frustration with learning new things, and giving up early in the learning process. The instructor usually shares the learner's frustration. This learner requires amply opportunity to experience

success. Teach time management, stress management, goal setting, visualization, positive self talk, and test taking strategies. Create a safe, non-threatening environment (Jensen, 1998).

Creating a safe, non-threatening environment is often difficult in a correctional facility, but quite necessary for optimal learning. This is true not only for the student suffering from learned helplessness or ADD, but for every student. DePorter, Reardon, and Singer-Nourie (1999) recommend establishing a foundation for a safe class climate by implementing the eight keys of excellence. These eight keys not only create a safe environment, but they set a standard expectation for behavior, and create a class climate that is conducive to learning. Excellence becomes the standard for behavior, learning, and attitude. If teachers expect or accept anything less than excellence from their students or themselves, they will get less. These eight keys must be practiced by the teacher, taught to the students, and integrated into the curriculum:

- Integrity – Aligning one's behavior with one's values, acting with sincerity.
- Failure leads to success – Learning from mistakes. Failure reveals methods that don't work. Focus on outcomes.
- Speak with good purpose – Be positive, honest, and direct. Avoid gossip and saying things that could harm others.
- This is it – Make the most of the present moment, and give your best effort.
- Commitment – Keep promises and take care of business.
- Ownership – Be responsible and accountable for own actions.
- Flexibility – Keep an open mind about change and suggestions of alternate methods to achieve goals.
- Balance – Daily align the mind, body, and spirit (DePorter, Reardon, Singer-Nourie, 1999, p. 48).

In *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Covey (1989) elaborates on the balance issue, but identifies four dimensions of life: physical (body), mental (mind), social-emotional, and spiritual (spirit). Teaching the "8 keys" or the "7 habits" requires instructors to veer off of the traditional path of reading, writing, and math. It requires teachers to teach more than the standardized test by which they are being measured. That does not mean that one ignores reading, writing, and math. When teaching reading, have students read about self-improvement, excellence, and personal growth. Use guest speakers. Have students journal (writing) or mind-map what they have learned. Teach math in a real context: how geometry is used on the job, how to create a budget, how to use coupons, etc. These applications help the learner create meaning from the content.

Incorporating brain compatible instruction in the correctional classroom costs little in terms of money. It does require creativity and planning time. Although early childhood is the critical time for brain development (Newberger, 1997), one should never give

up (Diamond and Hopson, 1998; Shore, 1997). Many of the proposed suggestions confirm what teachers are already doing in their classrooms. Brain based learning provides some suggestions on how to do that. It is more than a blueprint for instruction, or a bag of tricks. Correctional educators work in unique, non-traditional environments with unique, non-traditional students. Consequently, they must use unique, non-traditional methods of instruction.

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Biographical Sketch

Toni Hill Bechtold is a literacy instructor for the Windham School District. She has taught at the Texas Youth Commission and at a residential treatment center for emotionally disturbed children.

Notice

The Region VI CEA Conference will be held this fall, November 4-6, 2001, in Boise, Idaho, at the Doubletree Hotel, Riverside. The theme for the conference is "Putting the Pieces Together," and will include these educational topics: literacy, academic, vocational, life skills, treatment services, distance learning, pre-release/transitional programming, special education, security concerns, and therapeutic communities. For further information, please contact:

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Historical Vignette

Trace Your Lineage Back to Colonial Days?

In 1597 the English Parliament assigned magistrates authority to exile "rogues and vagabonds 'beyond the seas,'" and in 1615 James I approved pardons for felons banished to the New World. By 1718 this procedure was systematized in the Transportation Act, establishing widespread foreign exile "as a punishment for serious crime." During the 18th century "some 50,000 convicts were transported, including over two-thirds of all felons convicted at... Old Bailey, London's chief criminal court." (Ekirch, A.R., 1987, *Bound for America*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, p. 1). Colonial sentiment against this practice contributed to the American Revolution, as shown when Benjamin Franklin "instructed Americans to send Mother England rattlesnakes in return for convicted felons" (preface).

