

## Chapter 7

# Prison Blogs, a Place of Freedom Behind Bars: Notes From a Workshop at the Barcelona Youth Detention Centre

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This chapter reports on the cultural workshop which, from 2006 to 2008, encouraged a group of inmates at the Barcelona Youth Detention Centre to produce and publish blogs as a joint project between the Òmnia on-site internet access point, the prison library, and the Faculty of Library and Information Science of the University of Barcelona. The objectives of the project were to promote inmate education, improve their level of information, encourage them to read and write more, instill some ICT skills in them or strengthen those they already had, and broaden their contact with the outside world. Prison libraries are presented as an agent that supports the intellectual, social, and cultural development of inmates and thus can help them on the road to personal betterment. The prisoners' responses are critically assessed; the experience was considered positive, although the insufficient technological infrastructure and the prisoners' rejection of certain social conventions represent obstacles.*

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## INTRODUCTION

In the Internet and in the library, prisoners have two useful tools for their cultural enhancement and personal development, as both can improve the conditions under which they move towards social reinsertion and integration. The mission of the library, despite the limitation of being a prison library, can expand almost infinitely. Through the Internet, and through the possibility of having a presence on the web which stretches beyond the necessary limits of the prison confines—and especially, a voice and a role to play in dialogue—prisoners can find a space of free and creative expression that is universal, and where they have equal rights. This space offers them the chance of personal enrichment and of improving their prison surroundings. Contact with and through the web can help dispel the dangers of isolation as, for much of the time, prison life is all the inmates experience, and so the Internet can improve their day to day existence while at the same time guaranteeing them a right.

Providing prisoners with access to the Internet is one of the *Guidelines for Library Services to Prisoners* of the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA): «Where prison network security permits, prisoners shall be given supervised Internet access for education and treatment purposes, as well as pre-release planning.» (Lehman & Locke, 2006; Sulé, 2006). The Spanish Constitution expressly grants the right to access culture (art. 44.1) through, among other resources, a network of public libraries, and it extends this right (art. 25.2) to people who have been condemned to sentences which deprive them of their freedom. Declarations of a universal nature, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, also express the right of prisoners to access information as an instrument of personal betterment (art. 19 and others). After all, the most general overall objective of imprisonment is to provide the educational tools and means of rehabilitation necessary to facilitate the reinsertion of prisoners into society. The library is precisely one of the institutions that can work efficiently as a framework and as a tool for personal improvement.

However, the reality of prison life seems to be quite different: we need to provide more space for the Internet in prisons to ensure that it is not reduced to insignificance. Both documented evidence and personal experience teach us that providing prisoners with access to what a library represents in general, and the Internet in particular, throws up important, but not insurmountable, challenges. The difficulties stem from weaknesses that tend to be firmly entrenched when we consider low levels of basic schooling; difficulties that result from cultural inequalities, particularly in terms of language and of social prejudices; difficulties brought about by practices that in one way or another govern the lives of people at risk of social exclusion. Moreover, there are difficulties in achieving the motivation necessary to carry out any task, even that of improving one's own condition. The fact of having suffered from one failure after another makes it difficult for prisoners to want to embark on a

project; but initial success, even though it may be minimal, is a powerful motivator to continue. This is where the library acquires its greatest importance and also where a workshop to promote culture can set in action what is in fact very much alive, even though it is dormant.

This chapter presents the experience of the cultural workshop that took place from 2006 to 2008 in the then Barcelona Youth Detention Centre (at present located at La Roca del Vallès). It also gives credit to a previous similar experience that was without a doubt an important precedent (Castell, Pallisé, Pedrola, Tomàs, & Burgos, 2006). The workshop encouraged a group of inmates to create and publish personal blogs, and it was brought about as a collaborative effort between the prison library, the Xarxa Òmnia and the University of Barcelona. The objectives were to promote prisoner education, encourage inmates to read and write more, awaken or strengthen their technological skills, improve their IT competences and their digital literacy, and broaden their contact with the outside world. Through the development of these skills, the workshop aimed to promote attitudes and habits that would favour the personal growth necessary for the prisoners to be able to participate in society as citizens, even though they did so from a detention centre.

Therefore, the workshop was designed in compliance with a basic cultural right and in accordance with the principles of the *UNESCO public library manifesto* and the *IFLA Internet manifesto*. Within this double framework, this activity was intended as a step towards eliminating the barriers that impede the circulation of information, particularly those that foster inequality, poverty and both social and technological exclusion. It was conceived within the universal right to freedom of expression and ideas, and the right to seek, receive and impart information through any media, regardless of frontiers. It was founded on the *Spanish Constitution* and current prison legislation in Spain, where it is considered that prison is an instrument of rehabilitation, and not merely punitive (Pérez Pulido, 2011). It benefited from the regional Catalan prison policy which, despite legal grey areas as far as the use of ICT in correctional centres is concerned,<sup>1</sup> already considered the Internet as a new tool for the education and rehabilitation of inmates (Catalonia General Subdirectorate for Rehabilitation and Health Programs, 2011). In fact, in recognition of the advances towards social inclusion of prisoners that this work with ICT represents, it received the City of Knowledge 2007 award from the Internet Global Congress, and the Barcelona Municipal Social Welfare Council Media Award 2007 from Barcelona City Council. Several studies of this project confirm previous findings concerning reading and writing in prison, while at the same time they acknowledge how the availability of Internet access in a prison context can be a powerful tool for learning and readjusting to society (Pérez Pulido, 2010; Rocha & da Silva, 2016).

The workshop reported here was later followed by similar initiatives within Catalonia developed at La Modelo Men's Detention Centre, the Quatre Camins

Detention Centre and the Brians 2 Detention Centre. These experiences have demonstrated how the conjunction of ICT, digital narratives, and social and intercultural education can be highly motivating and enriching (Boó, Sancenón, & Zino, 2014). Among other factors, this is because the development of digital narratives in the prison environment is accessible to people with different levels of ICT knowledge, it allows for a wide range of meaningful learning experiences, and it can produce an end product that is attractive and can be transmitted to others (Zino & Martín, 2012; Elvira-Valdés, 2014). It therefore comes as no surprise that writing an electronic diary has become one of the most popular uses of electronic resources in Spanish prisons (Pérez Pulido, 2010).

## **DIGITAL LITERACY AND THE PRISON LIBRARY**

In Catalan prisons, the library is conceived as a cultural centre: a meeting point for inmates and professionals. In this paradigm of the prison library, we can see the traditional function of informing, educating or entertaining as part of a broader concept in which the library would not be merely a cultural agent, but also an element of integration and a promoter of the personal and sociocultural development of the inmates.

For many years, prison libraries have focused on fostering and motivating inmates' interest in reading and on contributing to their education by bringing the resources of the library, however scarce they may be, within their reach. These institutions offer a wide range of cultural activities and they are rather more than the place where the prisoners go to read the paper, to study or to borrow a book. Several factors have favoured the fact that the objective of Catalan prison libraries is to foster the educational and sociocultural process that enables prisoners to acquire or consolidate skills, attitudes and competences that go far beyond reading and writing. These factors include the fact that the libraries are run by qualified librarians, their activities are user centred, they are modelled on the working of public libraries, and they have adjusted their collections and services to the *Guidelines for Prison Libraries in Catalonia* (Comalat & Sulé, 2007).

Within its cultural programme, the library at the Barcelona Youth Detention Centre included activities to encourage reading and writing (reading clubs, poetry and creative writing workshops, book presentations, etc.) and to introduce inmates to the library collection (bibliographic and commemorative exhibitions, dramatised readings, etc.). It also contemplated other activities that aid the process of resocialising inmates: workshops on sensitisation and information on health, basic social skills, leisure alternatives, conferences and discussions around the events that characterise the daily reality of the outside world (International AIDS Day, International Women's

Day, international conflicts, etc.), and proposals specifically aimed at a young adult audience (urban art, manga, music, video forums, etc.). Together with all this, it also promoted competences and capacities related to the computing environment.

The educational tradition of libraries has evolved and adapted to the new social reality; and it is now, in the context of the information society more than at any other time, that a new approach that opens the way towards a new model of literacy is necessary. So it should not surprise us to find a workshop on digital literacy among the cultural activities offered by a prison library. It is a way to add on-line information to the printed word; and to add computing skills to traditional literacy. The objective should be to move beyond simply improving instrumental capacities: the aim is to develop IT skills as part of a broader literacy, in which the information dimension goes hand in hand with the personal and social dimensions.

## **A BLOG WORKSHOP IN PRISON**

Prison libraries frequently organise a range of different cultural activities that aim to develop and promote the cultural competences and skills of the inmates, especially those related to reading and writing. The involvement of the library is necessary in these tasks, particularly because the value that reading and writing have for the treatment and resocialisation of inmates has been demonstrated (Pérez Pulido, 1997).

Within this rehabilitative context, under the management of the librarian Lola Burgos, the library at the Detention Centre organised a workshop on publishing blogs in collaboration with the University of Barcelona and the Òmnia project, which promotes access to new technologies. Through Aída García, the Òmnia on-site Internet access point at the Detention Centre offered specialised personnel, spaces and the resources necessary to use the new technologies as a valuable educational and socialising instrument, and effectively to develop the activity described herein. Similarly, the cooperation with the University of Barcelona offered teaching and advice via the voluntary participation of the author of this chapter: lecturer in digital communication at the Faculty of Library and Information Science; and also of Cristina Tomàs, a student of the same faculty.

### **Programming**

As soon as we first considered the workshop, we agreed that it should be a tool to foster digital literacy. We were also very aware of the difficulties that typically show themselves in the users of prison libraries, and which may be intensified in young inmates. These can be psychological, educational, cultural, affective and personal problems. We had to try to explain to the inmates the importance of information in

the development of any project, even in personal development, given that they would find it extremely difficult to participate in a society that they did not understand or they did not feel they were part of. So, the blog workshop had to be a meeting point for information, technologies and people; it had to be a space where the inmates were not passive receivers, but active participants in the whole process.

The format chosen was the blog: a website that is easy to update where an author or a group of authors publish texts, generally written in a personal and informal style. A blog is an interactive diary in which information appears in chronological order, and where any reader can add comments, always reserving the role of moderator for the author of the blog. In this way, blogs represent a space for both creation and communication, where people express themselves and establish relationships; they share experiences, learn from them together and bring meaning to them.

## **Setting and Participants**

The Barcelona Youth Detention Centre was home to a heterogeneous community, with significant differences between the young offenders who formed part of it: cultural and linguistic differences, and also in their degree of basic literacy and schooling. The majority of them were aged between 18 and 25, and came from disadvantaged backgrounds in which reading is not encouraged as either entertainment or as a system of personal education. Neither is the use of IT as a means of learning new skills or as a tool to earn a living common among such youngsters. Many of the inmates had suffered from affective deficiencies while growing up and later had severely limited education and employment skills, as well as difficulties interacting with other people and with their surroundings. The majority had a certain digital illiteracy, associated with their lack of knowledge of the use of ICT applications (Sulé, 2005; Franganillo & Burgos, 2007).

However, there were signs of change: many of the inmates commonly visited the Centre's library. The prison population uses libraries ten times more than people in the outside world (Pérez Pulido, 2002). A prison library is thus an ideal space to encourage reading; it offers the chance to support the intellectual, social and cultural growth of the inmates, and it can actively contribute to promoting digital literacy and favouring the personal improvement they need. The *Guidelines for Prison Libraries in Catalonia* recognise these capacities and identify the prison library as an effective tool to motivate the habit of reading among the inmates, to stimulate their intellectual and sociocultural development, and to act as an important link with the outside world (Comalat & Sulé, 2007).

Therefore, it was fortunate that the Centre's library and Òmnia point planned an activity that, in addition to stimulating reading and writing among the inmates and forming a connection with the outside world, would help counteract technological

exclusion. It must be remembered that the employment and social integration of the prisoners within the outside world of work depends, to an extent, on them mastering IT tools and having the capacity to search for information. So, the prison library can play a decisive role in preparing inmates, when the moment comes, to face their social and working integration successfully.

The Centre's library had personal computers for the inmates to use, but the Òmnia point installed on the premises was the resource that allowed them to use new technologies as a valuable educational and socialising tool, and to develop the activity described herein efficiently. The aim of the Òmnia network, a project run jointly by two regional authority departments —the Department of Welfare and Family; and the Department of Universities, Research and the Information Society— is to provide anybody with access to ICT, irrespective of their age, social and economic situation, where they come from or their level of education. To achieve this objective, three lines of action are adopted:

- **Community Use:** It promotes free access for all and offers spaces that should generate social cohesion, dynamics and exchange.
- **Employment and Social Integration:** It aims to bring information and resources that are useful for employment and social integration within the reach of users.
- **Training:** Users are taught how to use ICT, while aspects of public participation, self-esteem, societal values and personal skills are all worked on.

## **Foundations and Objectives**

In response to the need for new literacy in the digital era, the workshop was designed as an opportunity to develop abilities related to the new multimedia technologies, and not just as a means of practicing instrumental skills. Digital literacy must not be seen as the acquisition of skills and knowledge out of context, because it forms part of a broader literacy in which the information dimension goes hand in hand with the personal and social dimensions (Gutiérrez, 2003). Therefore, the workshop promoted the development of a set of literacies:

- **Literacy per se:** The workshop described herein attempted to improve the capacity to understand what is read, and not only through reading, but also through the practice of writing.
- **Information Literacy:** The workshop aimed to be the context in which to learn to recognise a need for information and to resolve it with the help of the right tools.

- **Library Literacy:** The requirements of the workshop and the role played by the library, which actively participated in it, justified, and indeed made necessary, the use of the library's resources.
- **Digital Literacy:** This ability, in which some of the workshop participants proved to be less than competent, is necessary to handle information deftly in a world that is dominated by digital technology.
- **Media Literacy.** Media culture teaches us ways to behave, gender roles, attitudes towards and visions of the world that are appropriate and inappropriate, and it often does so in subliminal and invisible ways. A person who is media savvy will know how to analyse and criticise the content these media transmit —codes, stereotypes, conventions, values and ideologies— and critically examine the forms they adopt (Kellner, 2004).

Ultimately, the new technologies on their own do not make us wise or freer, partly because real technological skill does not consist of learning to use computers and the Internet, but of making these two tools instruments of learning. With this conviction, the workshop set out four goals:

- To stimulate reading and writing;
- To strengthen creative skills;
- To develop information and technology skills; and
- To encourage individual and group work.

The Internet allows us access to a wide range of information and educational resources; it thus enables the creation of rich and varied learning contexts. But within a prison, the Internet can only realise this potential if, recognising the value of its content, there is no limit placed on access, beyond situations that may compromise security. Internet access without barriers can serve to guarantee the participation of the prisoners in the information society and allow them to maintain the vital points of reference they need with life on the outside.

In response to this argument, the librarian and the Òmnia point manager approved, for the start of the workshop described herein, to provide unlimited Internet access on a trial basis. It would have been a contradiction to plan an activity based on the Internet without real contact with the worldwide web. In keeping with the security protocols of the prison environment, those in charge of the activity took responsibility for controlling the use of the web. Throughout the duration of the workshop, the prisoners would have direct and open access to the Internet, and they could consult whatever they wished, but always under the supervision of those in charge of the

workshop. This control was initially established as a security measure, but also as part of the educational process, since education fosters the adoption of responsible attitudes.

## **Tools**

The workshop on creating and publishing blogs was programmed as a series of weekly 2-hour sessions. In accordance with the established objectives, the inmates should each write and publish their own blog. As a publication tool, *Blogger* was used, with the support of the *Flickr* image hosting site, from where the participants took photographs under Creative Commons licences to illustrate their posts, and the *YouTube* video hosting site, which allowed them to incorporate audio-visual content. In this way, the library and *Òmnia* recognised the variety of forms of information that can be transmitted: on the Internet, the different forms of expression used are texts, photographs, animated images, sounds and videos.

These resources that the Internet offers are characterised by a high degree of participation and a liberal philosophy, as they are not institutional or commercial hosting sites via which an organisation offers products with restricted rights or subject to economic conditions. They are channels through which anybody, in their own name, can post what they create in a straightforward way, and free of charge, in order to share them publicly and open them up to debate among the members of a broad virtual community. Participation, with no interest other than the desire to share one's own reflections and worries, gave these resources intrinsic value that they share with the blog format, a value that was in harmony with the objectives of the workshop and which was something that we felt was worth transmitting.

In addition, these days, libraries are not limited to printed materials: they use a considerable range of tools and supports to achieve their mission, with no distinction between formats or media. So, the activity also dealt with the identification and selection of sources of information from different supports, the use of a word processor (for the spell-checking function) and of programmes for editing images, and the use of various dictionaries, both online and printed. In addition, the young inmates were given advice on general writing techniques and also specific techniques for the web setting.

Through all of this, in addition to promoting the use of different tools and techniques, in the planning of the activity we aimed to ensure that the participants discovered new channels of personal expression and enriched their language (in the broadest sense of the term); when people manage to express themselves and communicate comfortably in different settings, they can better develop their internal capacities

to express themselves with freedom and confidence, and they can improve both themselves and their relations with others. In addition, the acceptance of discourse and ways of being that are different from one's own makes integration into one's surroundings possible.

Convinced that a brief printed explanation would be a great help for these young inmates in grasping certain concepts, we prepared some hand-outs which were distributed at the start of the sessions. The inmates' difficulties with attention and comprehension, and the presence of people at an educational disadvantage—people who could not read Spanish and Catalan proficiently, who had been educated in other languages or who had dropped out of school— meant that we had to design materials that were easy to read. To this end, the contents were written following the *Guidelines for easy-to-read materials* by Tronbacke (2010). The texts contained clear arguments, short expositions and simple language; but they were still written in respectful adult language. Moreover, the hand-outs were printed on adequately sized sheets and were attractive, with a clear type face, and useful illustrations.

The advice on writing materials that are easy to read has much in common with the techniques of effective writing for the Internet. In a web setting, straightforwardness, precision and clarity are also key aspects of producing a text that is easy to read and understand. This parallel allowed us to use the hand-outs themselves as examples of good practices in writing for websites. In fact, writing is, essentially, an exercise in summarising that helps to make ideas clear, order them and express them concisely.

## **DEVELOPMENT**

The Barcelona Youth Detention Centre considered education of the inmates to be a broad and complex process that was carried out in widely ranging contexts, both formal and informal, which configured educational realities that were equally diverse. The arrival of summer marks the end of the academic year and it is the moment at which the training which the inmates have received needs to be given some sort of continuity. For the summer of 2006 this uplifting sociocultural project was programmed, which was characterised as having a light-hearted component, suitable for the summer period, while it was also included in the framework of education through leisure. The interest the prisoners showed in the contents of the workshop and the socio-educational dynamics that it generated made it advisable to programme an extension to the activity, which had initially been planned for the aforementioned summer period. So, it was continued and included within the education courses on offer and the treatment programmes as the Detention Centre; now, not so much as a library workshop, but as an activity in its own right.

During the running of the workshop, the principal objective of the organisers of the activity was to manage the contents of some blogs, improve the formal quality of the texts and consolidate habits. In the interpersonal plan, our interventions were aimed at improving the inmates' self-concept and their self-esteem. Special emphasis was placed on ensuring that their posts acquired importance through what they expressed, and not so much for their form, although it was necessary for the inmates to present their texts with a minimum formal quality. Some of the participants were reluctant to make corrections, giving arguments that showed a defensive attitude through which they tried not to recognise their weaknesses. However, through helping them and providing constructive criticism, we tried to assist them in completing the frustrating process that having to revise the language, and in some cases the contents, represented. Gradually, some of the prisoners became used to writing with a word processor, although others continued with pen and paper. They came to use the dictionaries, the spell checkers and the programmes to edit images more and more, and they became advanced users of *Blogger*: they acquired the ability to redefine design templates, download and manipulate images, and carry out other parallel tasks.

It was also necessary to give them guidance in an individual fashion, in simple ways and at basic levels, with guidelines and techniques for intellectual tasks. The majority of the inmates worked intuitively, without following any didactic method, and that meant that they often asked for help when they came to write the content of the blog in their own words or to present a summary of their ideas. This was because they had not acquired some instrumental competences concerning basic school learning and, even as adults, they presented personal characteristics that were more those of adolescents. Examples of this are a lack of attention and of self-control—they always wanted to have everything here and now—, their lack of a general work ethic or their low tolerance of frustration. However, none of this should surprise us if we bear in mind the emotional and intellectual development of some of these young people had stalled at a young age due to the personal situations that they had had to live through.

Just as the first texts of the blogs were characterised by the expression of opinions, experiences and worries that these young people had, which were the fruit of the knowledge that they had accumulated throughout their lives, at a later stage it was necessary to link that prior knowledge with what they had recently learned. The inmates started to show that they valued positively their time spent on personal improvement and they broadened the concept that they had had until then of productive work. Some of them had even expressed on numerous occasions that learning and being informed was akin to a waste of time. Later on, however, they started to accept this learning and they furthermore came to understand that culture, education or training are lifelong experiences, and not just something related to school.

### ***Prison Blogs, a Place of Freedom Behind Bars***

The young people showed a capacity for culture and aesthetics, creativity and ingenuity; they also proved to have a marked desire to write. Proof of this is the curiosity they showed towards the dictionaries: they avidly set about looking for synonymous concepts, for example. The word *freedom* even became the subject of some debate because, according to the dictionary, it is a synonym of *democracy*, and democracy is, even for many people in the outside world, actually a dictatorship: the «dictatorship of the masses», it is said.

Of the proposals for the themes of the blogs, those that stand out include literature, body building, social criticism, human values, hip hop and Latin American music, and the gay scene. The most notable feature is that almost all of these are subjects that move the inmates far away from the stereotype of young offenders and prisoners. In the blog, they had the opportunity to break free from the stereotype of delinquents as they could present themselves just like anybody else, with the same will to share their worries or hobbies in a space of individual writing or in collaboration with others.

The blog and the desire to seek out information helped the prisoners to become expert column writers, increased their interest in learning, opened up effective means of participation and provided new perspective both inside and outside the prison. It should be noted that some of the inmates had no problem in presenting themselves as inmates, maybe because the condition of being a prisoner carries with it certain kudos in their social circles on the outside or because going into prison is just one more stage in their lives.

The inmates realised that blogs are a way to get in touch with what happens in the outside world. Beyond sharing their hobbies or expressing their worries, they showed considerable interest in receiving comments and in exchanges with people on the outside who made contributions, always bearing in mind that the blog is a space for public communication and not for private conversations. In this way, the library and the *Òmnia* point were able to reformulate and strengthen their function as a link with the outside world.

Some inmates implicitly asked for special individualised attention; maybe they were not used to anyone paying attention to the needs they displayed. This demand for attention could be the symptom of immaturity that was best countered by encouraging them to grow up, and this is what happened, stimulating them and treating them perfectly naturally. In parallel, the more advanced inmates were asked to be patient, and in order to maintain a balanced level of learning, it was suggested that they could take what they had already learned a step further. It is necessary to point out that in general, the young offenders accepted constructive criticism and were pleased to receive the advice that they were given by those running the workshop, which was aimed at improving their writing, spelling and the readability of their work. In the process of creating their texts, the young people were capable of identifying,

finding and selecting the information that they needed, and after taking it on board and structuring it, they finally generated new ideas, new opinions and new realities.

We were also aware of a reduction in their rejection, insecurities or fear towards the outside world and towards the so-called official culture, thanks to the first comments that their blogs received. Certain prejudices about the outside world disappeared: the contributions brought about a feeling of being connected, of belonging to society, and they became positive and normalising points of reference. Not only did they stir interest in their own right, they also made the inmates feel that they were interesting. At that moment, the degree of responsibility and commitment on the part of the inmates made it look as if the project was on the road to success. The inmates not only worked on their blogs on the days when it was programmed, more often than not, they would visit the Òmnia point in their free time as part of their daily routine (Franganillo, Burgos, García, & Tomàs, 2008). Even so, there were still weak points that needed the intervention of those running the workshop.

## **Some Obstacles**

Right from the start of the workshop, we tried to show the young offenders that the blogs were part of an educational and cultural activity, and that their contributions should be seen in this context. They were personal blogs, but they should not be used as a tool for private communication, but rather as a medium for socialising in which, as with any means of public communication, there should be no place for certain declarations or opinions that could show a lack of respect or be offensive to some people. On the whole, the inmate population rejects and does not understand certain social norms and conventions. To this, it is necessary to add that being held in a detention centre affects the inmates' conception of reality and of their own situation. This led to some of the participants reading into certain indications a judgemental attitude, with the consequent refusal to continue participating in the activity.

In order to dispel such notions, and well aware that pointing out that the detention centre was there to act as an educational agent would not be seen as a convincing argument, it was decided to use the example of public libraries and the Òmnia point. We explained what their mission and objectives are, and why there must not be any type of ideological, political or religious censorship. All of that gave rise to the workshop, on many occasions, becoming the pretext for debate and reflection on what education is and what it is for, as well as the reasons behind social norms, rules and the law, or where the limits of freedom are. These were moments of dialogue, respect, acceptance of others and the possibility for some to learn from others, establishing interpersonal relationships and the group cohering. They were, then, enriching and necessary moments (Burgos, García, & Tomàs, 2007).

## **Results and Repercussions**

The Internet allows us access to a wide range of information and educational resources; it thus enables the creation of rich and varied learning contexts. But within a prison, the Internet can only realise this potential if, recognising the value of its content, there is no limit placed on access, beyond situations that may compromise security. Internet access without barriers can serve to guarantee the participation of the prisoners in the information society and allow them to maintain the vital points of reference they need with life on the outside. Taking on the responsibility to provide such access implies a greater educational commitment than acquiring computers or giving courses that teach how to use them (Burbules & Callister, 2001). In response to this argument, the librarian and the *Òmnia* point manager agreed, for the start of the workshop described herein, to provide unlimited Internet access on a trial basis. It would have been a contradiction to plan an activity based on the Internet without real contact with the worldwide web. In keeping with the security protocols of the prison environment, those in charge of the activity took responsibility for controlling the use of the web. This control was initially established as a security measure, but also as part of the educational process, since education fosters the adoption of responsible attitudes.

The publicity that the project received within different groups of professional and through some mass media increased the interaction between the participants in the activity and Internet users on the outside, thanks to the contributions made by the latter. The prisoners saw these comments as a two-way link between the prison and the outside world (from the inside to the outside, and vice versa): the users on the outside have the chance to change their preconceived ideas and challenge the stereotypes concerning the prison population. Meanwhile the inmates, for their part, far from appearing like people locked up in prison, reflect the typical characteristics of any young person.

The interest that their writing attracted represented, for the inmates, a stimulus for self-appraisal, for learning and for the continuity of the activity; and it helped to consolidate their degree of involvement with the blogs and the need to write interesting posts for their readers. This symbiosis was a constructive exchange. The evolution of the activity, through involvement and commitment, had the effect of ensuring responsible and effective use of the technology and of free access to the Internet. The prisoners learned to act as autonomous users who take responsibility for their blog through making their own decisions. They had the valuable support of the *Òmnia* point manager and of the librarian, but without being bound by their suggestions.

We can assume that the growth of the blogs was in parallel to the personal, sociocultural and educational growth of the inmates. It is clear that experiences

such as this strengthen the prison library and the Òmnia project as socialising and integrating spaces. But only the united action of all the agents involved in the process of learning can establish conditions that genuinely facilitate the inclusion of inmates in society.

## **CONCLUSION AND DECLARATION**

The chaotic overload of information to which we have become accustomed in the new globalised society clearly demonstrates the importance of digital literacy, as a set of skills inevitably linked to other forms of literacy. These skills have emerged in response to the needs of a more complex information environment, with new technology and a greater variety of mass media. The digital world is a tangled and unpredictable setting in which it pays to know how to get around so as to be able to determine the value of its contents, which are often of very low quality. So, digital education faces the challenge of promoting the skills necessary to find, analyse and use the most useful and pertinent information in each situation.

Publishing content on the Internet is an important experience, if one is involved in writing and web design; two disciplines in which it is vital that inmates develop skills associated with reading and writing by means of links that connect one piece of information with others that are related to it. Blogs, as on-line content management systems, are a particularly suitable instrument to teach and learn disciplines that require proficiency in Internet culture, and interactive and hypertext languages. They allow the inmate to practice writing hypertext in a relatively simple way and without the need for great knowledge of graphic design or programming (Orihuela & Santos, 2004). Therefore, the possibility of running the workshop represented an exceptional opportunity to supply them with the tools necessary to acquire skills at handling information and, going even further, to integrate themselves into web culture.

However, nothing is easy behind bars, which may seem evident: having been programmed and with the corresponding authorisation, the workshop activity had to wait six months due to an incident at the Òmnia point which meant that the computers could not connect to the Internet. Indeed, even once that hurdle had been overcome, the Òmnia point was not always up and running: the instability of the electrical power supply and the unsuitability of the computing equipment caused frequent power outages and breaks in the connection. These brought activity to a standstill on numerous occasions, and broke up the continuity of the workshop. All these adverse circumstances are not isolated within a prison setting: the library also faces a series of limitations, especially economic, that effectively silence it, and it may well be thought that so many shortcomings are due to the fact that investing in detention centres is unpopular and does not generate votes at elections.

The prison is a setting in which the Òmnia project faces a challenge, at the same time as it represents a great opportunity for the project to demonstrate that it is a plan that aims to guarantee truly universal access to ICT, and that it must make it possible for everyone to participate, irrespective of their condition. These are some of the principles of the project: noble principles that are only effective if the infrastructure works correctly. The mission of Òmnia within prisons shares the same philosophy as the library and complements its mission. Precisely for that reason, Internet access should be a service integrated within the library, and not physically separated, as it was in the Barcelona Youth Detention Centre. Only if access is offered from the library can Òmnia contribute effectively to overcoming the digital divide and combating several illiteracies at once.

It is known that information management is a profession that includes a rich variety of profiles. Moreover, those of us who work as information professionals have been able to tackle the challenges that spring up in very varied settings efficiently. We still have pending, however, a challenge that we should tackle urgently and without fear: to eliminate the drawbacks that do not allow the prison library to advance along established lines or to create its own path forward. This key piece of the socialising machinery of prisons requires more resources. Guaranteeing access to information is, in addition to a fundamental function, one of the most complex issues a prison library faces. Physical, cultural and technological barriers, as well as those that are inevitable in a prison, make the way forward difficult for the library to become a tool that is suitable for the real needs of the prisoners. Prison libraries need more resources, and are open to any contribution from outside. The authorities should be more involved, and library studies professionals should attend to that need.

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## KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

**Media Literacy:** Ability to critically assess the accuracy and validity of information transmitted by the mass media (press, television, radio, and the internet) and to produce information via any medium.

**Xarxa Òmnia:** A program that fosters social inclusion through offering access to ICT tools. The Òmnia network is a preventative, socio-educational, community and support program for collectives who are at the greatest risk of vulnerability. It aims to encourage, both individually as collectively, inclusion and links between the people in the community. It is directed at the general population, paying special attention to people at social risk, especially if they need to improve their capacity to overcome their difficulties in accessing ICT, with the aim of preventing their exclusion from the community.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The Spanish law *Royal Decree 190/1996 which approves prison regulations* limits (art. 129) the possession of private personal computers to educational or training purposes, when this is justified by the prisoner and supported by a teacher or tutor. It prohibits the transmission of information from storage devices and connections to computer networks. It also leaves it for the internal rules and regulations of each correctional centre to decide on the norms for the use of computers and IT materials as communal tools for the different educational, training and treatment programmes. Although the *Organic Law 1/79 on general prison matters* (art. 51) and the prison regulations (art. 46–47) do not explicitly regulate devices for communicating with the outside world, for example, e-mail or chats, the security protocols at Òmnia points do forbid prisoners from using them.