



The use of augmented reality in offender learning

Promising Practice

Implemented by:
Shrewsbury Colleges Group

Where:
The United Kingdom

Status:
Started in December 2020

Summary:
To develop high-quality resources using augmented reality (AR) that can provide prisoners with a more interactive way to create and increase skills to help reduce reoffending and enable them to lead law-abiding lives when released.

Overview

Shrewsbury Colleges Group is the largest college in Shropshire, with the widest choice of courses available for school leavers to study. It gives students more choices and dedicated subject resources at different campus locations. It offers the most extensive and flexible curriculum within Shropshire, comprising A Levels, Vocational Diplomas, Apprenticeships and Higher Education qualifications.

Description

The research background

Research in the UK suggested that 81% of prison leavers stated they received no support preparing for their release. This is one of the significant challenges that incarcerated individuals face as they try to rebuild their lives on the outside and become an integrated part of society. Post-release employment has been found to reduce the risk of reoffending by between a third and a half. However, most of the prison population has no stable employment experience. Further research recommends that employment programmes be based on strong local partnerships, with vocational training activities linked to real employment prospects.

Digital systems in prisoners' education – augmented reality

Digital systems are crucial to enabling the delivery of high-quality education to prisoners. If prisoners are released to secure employment, continue to study, or otherwise contribute to society, they must be allowed to use and improve their digital skills in prison. Augmented reality will play an integral part in the offender learning revolution. The methods developed are innovative for target groups and partner countries. Partnership and involvement with Shrewsbury Colleges Group and the AR approach to education in prison should give individuals the skills they need to unlock their potential, gain employment and become assets to their communities. AR systems provide and deliver personalized resources, information and digital processes for access 24/7.

Partnership

Shrewsbury Colleges Group has developed augmented reality to support learners, including young offender learners in prison. They have partnered with HMPPS - His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service - and partners from Romania and Belgium to create AR learning resources for various subjects. They use Zappar as their AR system and can create 'Zapcodes' for multiple uses, including health and safety, instructional processes, and more.

Objectives

The system was designed to develop high-quality AR resources that engage staff and learners in accessing specific resource topics translated into their native language. It aimed to improve education results in offender institutions, extend and enhance the learner experience using an engaging tool that enables learners to access the content at the point of need.

The project team had the following needs listed as essential to support prisoner preparation for release in the context of their labour market adaptation:

- Job skills: training in vocational and soft skills.
- Digital literacy: basic computer skills are essential for job-seeking and day-to-day life.
- Job interviews and workplace scenarios: Augmented reality can simulate job interviews and workplace environments.
- Post-release resources: housing assistance, job placement programmes and addiction treatment resources.
- Stress reduction and coping skills: AR resources would help offer therapeutic experiences that help inmates relax, reduce stress and learn healthy coping mechanisms.

Access to interactive, targeted resources for learners within custodial establishments

The initiative was implemented to develop and allow access to interactive, targeted resources and vocational education and training (VET) for learners within custodial establishments. It gave learners specific resources to support their needs for various topics. With security as a high priority, it was an innovative project to enable learners in a prison context to access resources via AR solutions in a secure and inclusive application. Technology

improvements are being implemented in prisons, including improved internet bandwidth and in-cell technology.

For prison learners, interactive learning offers flexibility in what is learned, how it is known and where it is discovered. This provided new means of accessing resources and information, such as AR, which made most virtual eLearning accessible. Teachers and learning support staff in prison settings must provide a wide range of teaching material and resources tailored to different learning styles and contexts and develop their skills to utilize them.

The creation of local partnerships with country-specific prison establishments, which allowed the learners to experience AR resources through the use of technology, provided access to instructional information, skills-based resources, revision and/or reinforcement (the implementation of the pilot courses).

Outcomes and impact

The staff and project managers learned to work on international projects and gained more confidence in their management abilities. Teachers learned new time management techniques using the activity plan and project timeline as the project progressed.

Providing access to education and innovative practices in a digital era

Regarding organizational impact, the project encouraged multicultural collaboration. It facilitated a long-term relationship between European organizations by transferring experiences, teaching resources and exploring new possibilities in partners' working methods. They shared expertise, and partners learned about innovative practices that can be adopted to strengthen, modernize and reinforce their organizations regarding work and development.

Opportunities for interactive resources for in-cell use to extend education and access to support information

Use of technology-enabled teaching and learning to support the needs of learners provides a mechanism for differentiated, personalized and blended learning approaches to offer variation and targeted learning for all partner countries. Targeted resources meet offender learners' needs and demands, addressing specific language needs.

Social inclusion for prison learners

- Development of high-quality vocational training and employability skills that prepare individuals for release jobs.
- Provide support for the needs of prisoners with Learning Difficulties and Disabilities (LDD).
- Develop and roll out augmented reality resources targeted to the needs of the learners and available to support learners in Romania, Belgium and the UK.

Challenges

Limited Internet Access

Some prison establishments had limited internet access, requiring access to the AR App for interactivity. The educators used mobile devices to check the AR resources and provided feedback in their free time. AR resource materials were uploaded on mobile devices and used offline for training activities.

Prison governors being moved

Prison governors being moved almost yearly has dramatically impacted the development of getting AR into prisons. Hence, the initiative had to be presented to the newly formed governors with the expectation that they would see the same benefits and potential impact as the previous governor in charge.

Insights

Digital systems are crucial to enabling the delivery of high-quality education. If prisoners are to improve their skills to secure employment, continue to study, or otherwise contribute to society, they must be allowed to use and improve their digital skills in prison. AR will play an integral part in the offender learning revolution.

Partnership and involvement with Shrewsbury Colleges Group and the AR approach to education in prison should give individuals the skills they need to unlock their potential, gain employment and become assets to their communities. Interactive learning offers flexibility in what is learned, how it is known and where it is understood. This can provide new means of accessing resources and information, such as AR, making most virtual eLearning accessible.

Ensure communication is open and transparent and obtain senior management support throughout. It is vital to have a well-developed IT infrastructure and Wi-Fi system in place. Always gain feedback from potential users to meet their needs. Continue to raise awareness of the benefits and practical uses of AR.

Next steps

The bigger picture around prison learner morale, mental health issues and family contact are most important. Future developments around using technology for education and prisoner health and care could form a new tool that addresses all needs without separate systems covering many functions. This could streamline systems and processes, creating sustainability and financial savings in the long term. The introduction and development of digital technology for prison institutions is a long overdue and much-needed area for change. This will support prison learners and staff, giving them new skills and knowledge that will make a difference.

Learn more

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