

Case Studies within Prison B

1. Incorporating preparation and guidance in the use of ReaderPens and ExamReaders as part of the peer mentor training programme
2. Supporting those with poor or no reading skills in practical skills workshops and one day training courses with the use of ReaderPens and ExamReaders

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Author Note

Retrospective consent has been granted from the National Research Centre

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Abstract

A previous study was undertaken at HMP Channings Wood (Prison A), introducing ReaderPens to prisoners in their pre-functional skills' English lessons. The feedback from the tutors in HMP Channings Wood was positive, furthermore the tutors had identified the propitious influence the peer mentor role offered when supporting learners. The tutors at HMP Channings Wood indicated they felt it would be beneficial to introduce ReaderPens, including how to use and functionality, to peer mentors. Insight as to the impact of peer mentor support was studied in the Fletcher & Batty's 2012 report, 'Offender Peer Interventions: What do we know?' The report indicates positive peer relationships encourage and promote learning within prisons.

As the study at HMP Channings Wood ended, and we contemplated how to further the concepts and questions raised there, we were fortunate to have a chance encounter with the Exams Officer of Prison B. We therefore suggested the next stage of study could be undertaken within Prison B. The outline of the study was to introduce and train peer mentors in the use and application of ReaderPens within workshop-based classes; such as carpentry, electronics, painting and decorating. We would seek qualitative data using unstructured interviews with tutors, educational managers and peer mentors.

What do peer mentors do and how did the scheme come about? The Shannon Trust have successfully rolled out peer support initiatives for several years; and the introduction and consequent use of the Reading Plan strategy has provided evidence to the positive impact of peer support, for non-readers. Peer mentors offer 1:1 support and use individual approaches to guide and support the needs of the learner. Non-readers will describe a lack of confidence or feelings of inadequacy; often they keep their learning difficulties quiet, they may avoid learning or find themselves involved with the wrong crowd. However, evidence suggests when non-readers confide their difficulties to a peer, someone trusted, they will accept and take offers of help. In a recent audio interview Ben Okri, Radio 4, visited HMP Isis and talked to peer mentors and learners (Prisoners helping Prisoners, Shannon Trust, 2019). Okri describes the power and helpfulness peer mentors bring to learning, and the long-term impact this can have on a non-reader after leaving prison with improved literacy skills. Okri shares with the listener the direct positive impact this approach can bring.

During our study the tutors shared with us the positive impact of utilising peer mentor support to introduce a new learning tools, namely the ReaderPens and ExamReaders, into the classroom and ensuring engagement and interest was maintained.

Introduction

In our previous study at HMP Channings Wood, we met tutors supporting non-readers and foreign nationals in pre-functional skills lessons, we learnt about the positive impact of peer mentor support, (Franklin, 2018).

In this study we have sought feedback from peer mentors and tutors as to their views when utilising ReaderPens and ExamReaders within a variety of classroom and workshop courses in prison. The peer mentors and tutors noticed an improvement in confidence and independent learning when the non-readers had use of the pens. Additionally, the non-readers expressed how they felt encouraged to make use of the ReaderPens and ExamReaders and felt they had a choice in doing so. Furthermore, peer mentors told us why they felt the use of assistive technology had a place within the prison environment.

Our research question was to consider the individual learning needs of the reader with limited or no literacy skills, within the confines of the complex workshop environment; we wanted to see how the ReaderPen would help the learner to read the course material independently. Often the learner may not have anticipated the level of reading required to access their chosen course, due to their assumption the course will be a 'practical workshop' and therefore it will be a hands-on experience of learning. We also became aware of the challenges presented to the learner and tutors during 1-day courses, which must be undertaken to enable the learner to proceed onto the practical workshop courses.

In our previous research we had seen the positive outcomes for learners when they had access to ReaderPens. For example, in functional skill English classes the lesson has a traditional and formatted approach. The lessons are planned and delivered from the teacher to the learner. In this study the practical workshop environment is of a very differing nature, perhaps less rigid and involving physical learning alongside book-based lessons. Therefore, we considered what obstacles the learner will face when combining practical and theory-based learning. Our questions included: who would be best placed to encourage the learner to access the written materials? Who would have the time and skills to help the non-reader? Acting on the advice from educators in prisons it was felt the peer mentors might be best placed when supporting the non-reader. Therefore, the study would evolve around the experience of the peer mentor. Would it be helpful for them to undertake further training and knowledge in the use of ReaderPens? How could the introduction of the functions and use of the ReaderPens be included in the peer mentor training programme? Additionally, we hoped to continue to promote the reciprocal relationships already required and understood to be part of this successful concept, (Fletcher & Batty (2012), to ensure the continuance of encouraging independent and self-disciplined reading success.

Method

Consent was sought in December 2018 with the National Research Committee (NRC) after commencement of the study at Prison B. We therefore offer an apology to the NRC for this error and are now aware of the correct procedure when requesting studies within the prison service.

The application form to request the undertaking studies within prisons can be accessed from the NRC website.

(<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/her-majestys-prison-and-probation-service/about/research>).

Consent was sought and given from the educational providers of Prison B in February 2018.

The NRC granted retrospective consent for the study to be completed in January 2019.

Nineteen male participants gave consent to be part of the study and provided feedback. However, the number of prisoners using the pen daily, which was not recorded, exceeded this number. Those who consented but were moved from the prison with little prior notice were withdrawn from the study. Their revised location made it impossible to ensure their continued consent was given.

Eighteen of the participants were peer mentors. Their role was to offer support to readers with limited or no literacy skills. The peer mentors were given the opportunity to learn how to use the ReaderPen/ExamReader as part of their peer mentor training. Subsequent, to their training, they were asked to encourage and support independent reading for poor or non-readers by encouraging the use of the ReaderPens, if they identified the non-reader was a suitable candidate and indicated interest in using the ReaderPens during their lessons.

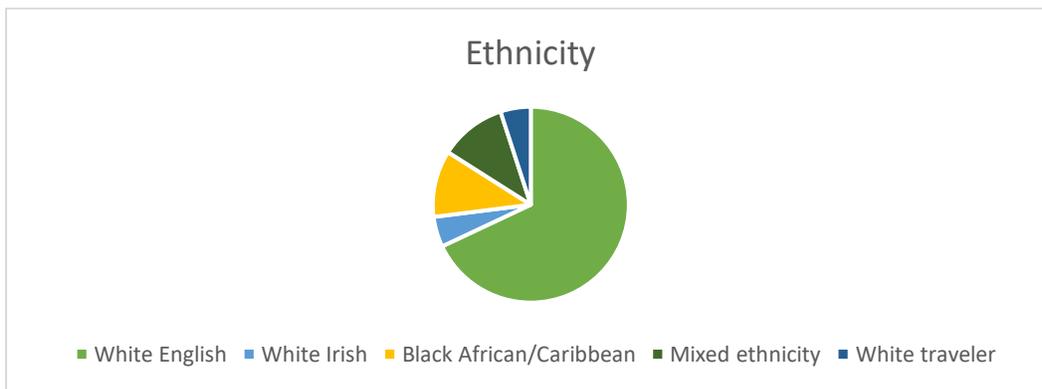
As we had previously undertaken studies in the traditional classroom environment with the delivery of Functional Skills English lessons, we felt studying a different environment and style of learning would enable us to explore the diversity of education available in prisons. We therefore chose vocational courses, alternatively known as practical workshop courses. It is likely that any poor or non-readers in the workshops may have chosen these practical courses believing they would not come with heavy written course material. Peer mentors in these courses are therefore able to support those learners requiring extra help.

One participant was not a peer mentor but due to his availability and continuance at Prison B we were able to interview him and gain feedback as to his experiences when making use of the ReaderPens. Although consent had been given by other user participants (not peer mentors) they were withdrawn from the study as they were not continually available throughout the study period. However, the tutors did share some of the experiences and observations these prisoners had expressed during the time they were using the ReaderPens.

The peer mentors ranged from 23 to 66 years of age. We asked the participants to self-identify learning difficulties/disabilities and any other medical background they felt able to share. The one non-peer mentor participant listed his disabilities as Mental Health and Dyslexia. Two of the peer mentor participants identified Mental Health/Other as a disability, furthermore one identified as having learning difficulties. All other peer mentors indicated no disabilities and/or learning difficulties.

We asked the participants to self-identify their ethnicity.

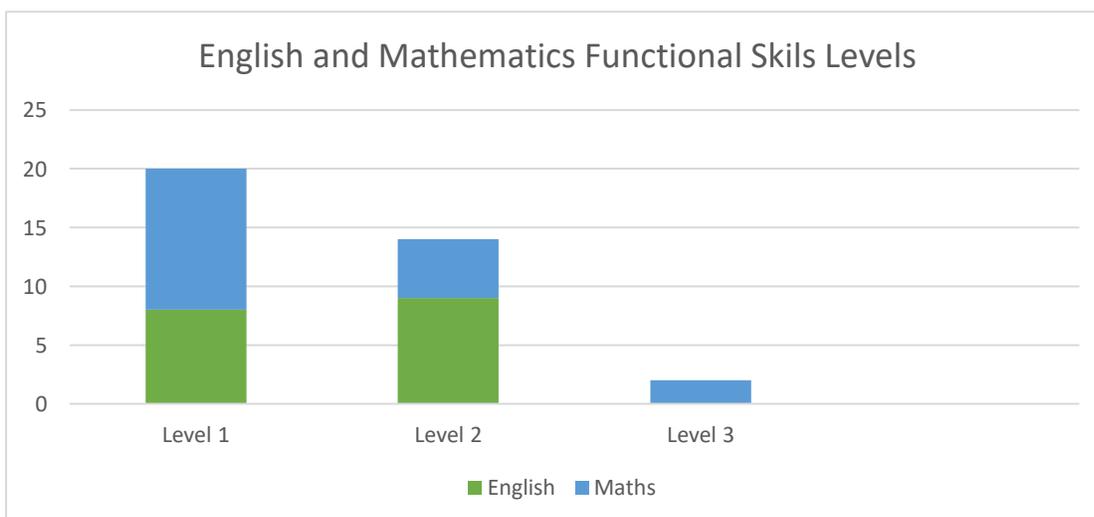
Table 1. Self-identified ethnicity of participants



The participants used a self-identification questionnaire, which provided a list of ethnicities. One participant ticked the ‘other’ box and gave an explanation, white traveller, as to how he viewed his ethnicity and we have used his description in Table 1.

We asked the participants to share their educational levels.

Table 2. Peer mentor education levels (note the non-peer mentor is not included in this table)



The non-peer mentor participant had Level 1 in English and Level 3 in Mathematics. He was the third of the participants to have this diverse set of results. He had self-identified with Dyslexia which may explain the poorer English level in contrast to the high Mathematics level.

Peer mentors are identified within prisons due to their educational abilities and having the potential skills to support and assist other prisoners who display or identify with learning difficulties. These prisoners are approached about the peer mentor programme and offered the opportunity to join the peer mentor course. The course involves learning to support and aid a fellow prisoner with a structured programme which requires commitment. Within Prison B the peer mentor support programme has been developed by the education department.

The peer mentor tutor indicated interest to be part of the study to be conducted in Prison B, during one of the study team's initial visits. She expressed her intention to include an introductory session on the use of the ReaderPens during the peer mentor course. The focus of the training was to have knowledge of the ReaderPen to then be able to offer the use of assistive technology, namely ReaderPens, as a learning tool when supporting non-readers.

Prisoner learners who showed further interest and availability were offered the opportunity to provide feedback by becoming participants of the study. There was no 'active' recruitment of these participants. Consent was explained and thoroughly explored to ensure the participants felt comfortable sharing their experiences and knowledge with the research team. However, a large number who did agree were subsequently moved from Prison B and as a matter of courtesy their information was withdrawn from the study.

The ReaderPens were made available in the workshops to all the men. The peer mentor participants were asked to feedback both theirs and the learner's experiences to the tutors. The tutors within the identified workshops were asked to gather information from the peer mentors. We asked the tutors to focus first on any struggles the learners experienced whilst using the ReaderPens in the workshop environment. We then asked them to share the benefits they saw the learners had gained as a result of using the ReaderPens.

The peer mentor participants would be asked to share their own thoughts and experiences of using and supporting the use of the ReaderPens during an end of study audio interview and/or feedback forms.

The Exam's Officer gathered consent forms prior to the study, informing and supporting both the tutors and peer mentors throughout.

During the final interviews the feedback, consent and data was shared with the study team and will be kept securely for a period of 6 months post publication of the study.

Results

The following quotes were given by poor or non-readers during a one-day course... The peer mentor who assists in these one-day courses was interviewed at the end of the study. The following are exact replications of the learners written words:

The pen is easy to use.

It helped me to stay calm and less stressed

I would recommend it 100%

It gives people the chance to be at the same level, those who struggle to read

Superb!

Really Helps!

Should be used in the library to help people learn more

It can read for me and helps me understand the sentences

Confident, once I got used to it.

Very good

Peer mentors

The peer mentor and tutor of the one-day courses have a difficult task. Not only do they have to assess the learning needs of each student, but they must also prepare the prisoner to pass the course within a short period of time, on a topic which may be new to many. It is essential the learner gains this qualification prior to moving onto the workshop courses. The tutor must assess the learning needs of her students exceedingly quickly and arrive at a decision as to what support and help she and the peer mentor can offer.

“The pen helps within such a short time frame in this course, to enable the guys to pass the test at the end of the day”.

We then focused on the practical workshops the other peer mentors were helping in. We wished to understand what they had initially thought when introduced to the pen. We asked about the help and support they had anticipated offering, and the experiences they had when working with a learner and the ReaderPen.

Firstly, *what is a peer mentor?*

“Supporting others in any way we can, I suppose, really”.

“Reading, writing, it could be in a workshop, it could be on the wing, it could be anywhere in the prison system really”.

“... a letter from home, problems with money, they could be struggling in the workshop, they don't know how to do something, could be reading, writing, ESOL, all sorts”.

Secondly, why were you approached to be a peer mentor?

“Phew... it's all sorts...”

“it might be those that have completed a course already and the tutor has recognised their skills, so he may ask them to become a mentor once they finish the course, for example, they have got on well in the course, showed support to others in their class. The tutor will pass their names onto me.”

Next, *the peer mentors were asked who the pen could help?*

“ESOL learners”

ESOL learners are foreign national prisoners for whom English is not their first language, prisons have identified ESOL learners will experience many educational challenges within the prison

classroom. There are currently 173 different languages spoken within prisons in the UK (Sturge, 2018).

The peer mentors were asked the nature of the text/worksheets they were using the pens to support the learners in the workshops.

*“mainly handouts and stuff like that,
to help with sentences rather than the odd word”.*

A carpentry workshop peer mentor was asked to share his experiences and thoughts with the study team. He talked about the ESOL learners.

*“I found it was good for the ESOL learners...
Its mind boggling the things you can do with that (pointing at the pen)...
There’s nothing holding you back”.*

He was understandably proud of his peer mentor skills, he shared with the team why the pen had become a part of his supportive concepts.

“I’m a Shannon Trust Peer Mentor and the pen comes into its element for me”.

Peer mentor interviews confirmed that the identified educational outcomes for Prison B had been met. Introducing the ReaderPens to the peer mentors, at an early stage of their training course, enabled the peer mentors to familiarise themselves with the technology, and consequently to share their confidence and experience within classrooms on a 1:1 basis, when required. This in turn enabled the tutor to undertake the important task of focusing on teaching the course work. Furthermore, the tutor understood the impact of peer information sharing, and how these relationships increase positive responses to the use of assistive technology.

*“... technology to them (the learners) is an assistance, so there was
less resistance to using them (ReaderPens) if it came from
a peer rather than an instructor”.*

Time saving strategies

Several of the tutors commented on the capacity to save time when having the ReaderPen and a trained peer mentor available to the learner. Tutors previously would have to pause in delivery of their course to offer support to the learner. A further time issue, which the study team had not considered, was the transient nature of prison life impacting on the potential capacity to finish a course.

The electrician tutor helped us to understand how the ReaderPen could alleviate some time issues. Not only did the ReaderPen encourage and support the speeding up of the student’s

learning experiences but also, the tutor identified an increase in first time pass rates for the Level 1 qualification. Historically first-time pass rates were around 70%. However, for student's using the ReaderPen, particularly accessing the dictionary facility to understand new terminology or words they had not heard or spoken before, the first-time pass rate increased to over 80% over a shorter period.

Dictionary

The dictionary facility was seen to enhance and encourage the learner's to independently seek and understand new concepts, words and increase their knowledge of language. As one of the tutors noted:

"a dictionary on a filing cabinet is just another big book"

He went on to explain, for those with a reading difficulty the sight of the physical dictionary could create a block to learning. Therefore, having the dictionary facility on the ReaderPen alleviated some of the anxiety when searching for an unknown word. In the past the tutor had noted some learners may sit and wait a whole session before asking the meaning of a word.

In addition, the dictionary facility was an important function of support for ESOL learners. ESOL learners may speak or have a good understanding of English, but reading is a complex and often thankless experience, therefore the dictionary not only helped to 'speak' the meaning of a word but helped with pronunciation and sight recognition when coming across the word within textbooks.

A second tutor explained one of his learners had some reading skills, however if he came across a word he did not know he would use the dictionary to find out what it meant, the learner was accessing the ReaderPen independently and not waiting for someone to help him, this had increased the speed in which he was completing his course, particularly during theory based sessions.

Transferable Skills

A focus for all those involved in the study was the requirement to achieve transferrable skills, to enable the prisoner to have a future. Equally the need to reduce re-offending behavior, to re-enter and be part of a wider and valued member of a community.

As previously mentioned, the transient nature of prison life can impact on the outcomes for some students achieving a skill or examination result before transfer or release. Learning difficulties or disabilities will slow the process of gaining a qualification further as de-coding, spelling and writing requires help and support.

The above statements may fill one with a sense of disappointment, however, there is one course which all can undertake quickly and efficiently. The one-day, nationally recognised Level 2 British Safety Council qualification which lasts for 3 years. This course is required to be completed by all those who may wish to then go onto a trade specific course. The one-day

course gave us the first opportunity to introduce the learners to ReaderPens and ExamReaders. The peer mentor, in this course, was efficient and encouraging of the pens. Both he and the tutor provided feedback from the learners about their thoughts. This included the views of where else they would like to have access to the pens, and a large number identified the Library as a place where the pens would be exceedingly helpful.

The one-day course tutor felt it was imperative the learners had continued access to the pen in other courses, particularly pre-functional skills English and Mathematics. She commented the pen was:

“a good learning tool”.

There is no formal qualification requirement to commence on the practical workshop courses. An online diagnostic tool helps to identify any potential needs, such as a requirement to undertake functional skills English and Mathematics, alongside the workshop course. However, due to the withdrawal of entry requirements for the workshop courses, the subsequent supportive elements some students require to enable them to access the course was impacting on the teacher’s speed of delivery. If a learner had additional needs the tutors would need to support these alongside the delivery of the actual course work.

Consequently, the pass rates for the courses could be affected, we are already aware of the transient nature of prisons and therefore there is no guarantee that the learner will be around from the start to the finish of the course they have chosen to undertake. The workshop tutors appeared to indicate the practical aspects of the courses were readily and enthusiastically approached, and this was backed by the Exams Officer. However, the theory element potentially delays the learner. More so if waiting for an LSA or tutor input, before being able to move onto the next element of a course. All agreed the ReaderPens were improving time management, independent learning, peer mentor support and examination outcomes.

The voice of the learner

We met with non-peer mentor participant twice, firstly during the mid-way point of the study when he was using the pen to help him with the written aspects of an IT course. We met him again at the end of the study in the painting and decorating course.

“I learn to use the bits I need on it quite easily like within 5 – 10 minutes, so like my reading is not brilliant”.

We asked him why learning to read was important to him.

“Well reading is important because it like it’s an everyday thing. Like reading is when you walk around places and that you have to read signs like in the Visiting Centre you’ve got like signs and that and you have to read them to like find out more information about the place”.

When we mentioned the noise levels in the workshop classes the participant offered this advice.

“Headphones in it really helpful, cause like today its quite a small class today but when you got everyone that’s turned up, like we are missing about four or five people out of this class today. But when you got everyone that’s turned up that can get quite noisy so having the headphones to put into your ears is quite really helpful so that you can hear it”.

The ambient noise situation was reiterated by the electrician workshop tutor who requested noise reduction headphones and found these to be incredibly useful.

*“the noise cancelling headphones blocked off a lot of noise”
(sic. as would be expected in a busy workshop).*

*“...enabling the guys to get on with their work”
(sic. book based learning)”*

Overall our results indicated a positive outcome for all involved in this study. The tutors saw firsthand the benefit of increased confidence and how quickly their course could be delivered. Primarily due to no longer having to support the basic learning difficulties of the prisoner. The peer mentors appreciated the functions of the ReaderPen and noted how easy the pens were to use. Their enthusiasm and confidence encouraged the learners to have belief in the ReaderPens. The learners shared how the pens helped them, enabling them to be independent. Furthermore, the learners wished to have access to ReaderPens in other areas, such as the library.

Discussion

The overall difficulty, when undertaking studies within prisons, is the time spent and lost attempting to gather raw data due to the surprisingly transient population.

Further constraints include the movement of prisoners around the prison, from their wings to the education block, a slow but carefully implemented procedure. The key holders will open a door, everyone steps through, a key holder will lock the door behind you and then you can move onto the next locked door or gate. A reduction in staff or training days creates 'lockdowns' when prisoners cannot be moved safely around the prison.

Finally, the support and work of the security department, who must check and be confident with the equipment being brought into the prison environment.

Once overcoming the physical challenges, we then considered where and when the ReaderPens could be used. For example, where would they be stored? The education departments within Prison B are spread throughout the prison. We worked quickly to overcome initial issues, such as having ReaderPens readily available to those who required them, the right place at the right time. We negotiated how many pens each department required to alleviate further hold ups in the day to day lesson plan

Although our sample number is small, we garnered from the feedback in the interviews, a similarity of identified outcomes. The participants were not informed of the study team's impending visits and therefore had no time to 'prepare' for the audio interviews they had agreed to and were asked to attend on the morning of the team's visits. We felt; therefore, the responses were genuine and not rehearsed. Due to the prison environment we did consider the prisoners may answer as to how they felt the study team wanted them to respond, as opposed to their honest thoughts.

What we did hear was **the positive reciprocal relationship peer mentors have with learners**. Their willingness and pride in wanting to help and seeing themselves with a purpose. One peer mentor explained **how helping others had enabled him to reevaluate his own needs, with a focus on his future for when he leaves prison**, and his plan not to return. His views are supported by the Bagnall et al. study of 2014, from which evidence indicated the positive effects the peer mentor role offers, including health and mental health well-being.

The peer mentors, however, did assume that their help was wanted, and they felt there was no embarrassment or stigma. This view was challenged by the non-peer mentor participant. Although he was happy to have the support within the educational departments, he was not so certain when it came to sharing information from the outside world, such as solicitor letters. **He wished to be able to access them independently, he said 'trust' was incredibly difficult to gain within the prison environment and therefore there were times he would have liked to have used the ReaderPen for his personal correspondence.**

Our participant's thoughts around independent learning can be linked to a study in 2016 by Coates, 'Unlocking Potential'. The study explored the importance of self-directed study. To further consider Coates' findings we wish to consider a prisoner we met in Prison C who shared his story with us. He left school at 10 years of age, spending most of his adult life hiding his difficulties from family and friends. During the Prison C study this participant told us he found the ReaderPen to be helpful and he wished to be able to use the pen in his cell. He wanted us to tell "the powers... that this is important, that it needs to be available", (Franklin, 2018).

Furthermore, his tutor explained the prisoner tried to read in his cell but would often mispronounce words, which impacted on his confidence. The prisoner had concluded the ReaderPen was helping him 'hear' and 'say' words correctly. In conclusion, self-directed study will only work if there are supportive mechanisms, which are available in a variety of places, to enable self-validation to occur. Our studies have concluded there is limited time in education where a tutor and/or peer mentor can help with reading. The peer mentor support may not be wanted or valued outside the educational environments due to privacy.

To summarise, the ReaderPens and ExamReaders were received positively by all within the prison education department. All participants shared positive experiences, or offered alternative concepts and/or ideas, when using the ReaderPens. The participants shared with us a keenness to progress. The tutors explored the importance of reducing time restraints, due to the specific and individual learning needs of each student. Staff wished to encourage and promote the supportive aspect of peer mentors, who are seen on an equal footing with the learners and who offer trust and understanding. Additionally, the pens helped the tutors identify learning needs and have a readily available tool and answer to these needs. They no longer were having to await the arrival of an LSA or stop the progress of the course to 'teach' reading, writing, spelling and comprehension skills; of which the tutors are more than capable of. Removal of time restraints could reduce the number of learners who do not gain a qualification or transferrable skills. The block to learning is alleviated through encouragement to use assistive technology supported by peers and self-learning when using ReaderPens.

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