



METHODOLOGY

for adults in prison

Game-based digital learning. Playing to teach

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Erasmus+ Games 4 You project aims to integrate game-based learning into adult education in a way that is both interactive and engaging. Nevertheless, this strategy demands a great deal of adaptation in prison settings, where internet access around the world and the use of digital devices are either banned or very limited.

Education in prison is a fundamental right and is a pillar for rehabilitation and social reintegration. Education must be made available to all prisoners, as the Council of Europe's Recommendation No. [R (89) 12] states.

The Council of Europe's Recommendation No. R (89) 12 emphasizes that education should be accessible to all incarcerated individuals, mirroring opportunities available in the outside world while addressing the unique challenges of the prison environment.

Internet access for inmates is minimal at best, so educators need to use adapted forms of learning that can operate totally offline.

This document adapts the Games 4 You e-toolkit for offline prison education that embeds gamification and interactive methodology that do not involve online delivery.

This publication responds to European Council Recommendations regarding engagement, motivation and structured learning approaches in prison education and training.

Target group

Due to the varied educational backgrounds of inmates, the method is **based** on **flexibility**, **inclusiveness**, **and practicality** so that all participants can participate, regardless of their previous level of education.

This adapted approach is intended for inmates across various educational levels, including:

- Those with little or no formal education or literacy difficulties.
- Those having learning disabilities.
- Those needing vocational programs to get employed after release.
- Those who need social and emotional learning for reintegration.

Content of the methodology

All activities are designed to work without using technology, using only low-cost materials approved for prisons like paper, cards and recycling.

The revised approach replaces digital gamification tools with offline, interactive strategies, including:

- Physical learning boards and progress-tracking systems (e.g. badge charts).
- Role-playing games (RPGs) and cooperative board games adapted for education.
- Creative workshops (theatre, art, writing) to foster self-expression.
- Vocational simulations (e.g. mock job interviews, trade skill puzzles).
- Physical education blended with cognitive challenges (e.g. trivia-based sports).

Objectives

The main idea is to import gaming activities into prison.

This is followed by one of the Recommendations of the Council of Europe is "Education should resemble that provided to similar age groups outside, with a wide range of learning opportunities".

Teachers in prison need to make sure they meet this recommendation by:

- Providing offline-ready game-based learning strategies to teachers/ educators.
- Ensuring content is in line with the Council of Europe recommendations on the rehabilitation of inmates.
- **Promote active learning:** Making inmates play and play to learn; an active learning strategy reduces resistance to education.
- Cultivating key skills: Expanding reading, math, work-related skills, and interpersonal skills.
- **Supporting rehabilitation:** Encouraging emotional intelligence, teamwork, and critical thinking skills to ease and promote reintegration back into society.

Benefits for adults in prison

Adapting the e-toolkit to the limitations of prisons brings both dignity and the hope and possibility for change.

What are those benefits?

- **High engagement:** Game mechanics (reward systems, or levels of progression) attract and motivate the learners to learn more efficiently and enjoyably.
- **Real world value:** Skills prepare you for life after release (e.g. a job, resolved conflicts).
- **Psychological resilience:** Creative activities provide skills for emotion control and limit stress.
- **Social bonding:** These games create positive relationships between inmates and staff.

2. WHY IS TAILORED METHODOLOGY IMPORTANT FOR PRISON EDUCATION?

Fyodor Dostoevsky once said, "The degree of civilization in a society can be judged by entering its prisons. This can also be applied to the school in prison. By offering an education as motivating and enriching as that of schools outside the walls, we **provide a unique opportunity for those deprived of their freedom.**

Because of security restrictions, prisons frequently do not have access to cloud-based or internet-dependent learning platforms. Such solutions adapt education by **making it interactive and more engaging without the need for online access.**

Gamification increases engagement with challenges structured in ways that improve learning retention. Because digital tools cannot be used in prisons, gamification must depend on existing paper, physical, or at best, passive, pre-installed resources.

A tailored methodology means that prison educators can provide quality, interest-based and meaningful learning without having access to the online. Adapting digital tools and gamification tools for offline environments can keep motivation running high, enhance cognitive engagement, and help inmates develop skills essential for reintegration into society.

2.1. LIMITATIONS OF SECURITY AND ONLINE LEARNING

Most prisons impose strict regulations on digital tools, limiting access to the internet for security reasons. You cannot have inmates have real-time access to cloud-based platforms like Moodle, Blackboard, or Quizizz.

Educators, therefore, are forced to use resources that are already pre-installed on their devices, such as locally hosted resources or non-digital gamification practices.

Here's how you can overcome digital restrictions:

- Local offline servers: Pre-installed learning modules. Local computer systems are used in prison to allow inmates to go through interactive lessons without the need for or access to the Internet.
- **USB learning kits:** Prison educational content in the form of gamified worksheets and learning progress tracking can be distributed in the form of pre-loaded USBs permitted to be run on prison computer systems.
- Paper gamification: Physical worksheets, flashcards, and board games that recreate digital learning structures, converted to an offline environment.
- Interactive activities: Using non-digital activities like role play, storytelling, and group exercises to create a simulated games-based learning experience.

2.2. HOW OFFLINE GAMIFICATION IN PRISONS ENHANCES LEARNING?

While gamification helps keep students engaged and remember what they learn, educators may have to **use game mechanics for offline use** if they don't have access to the internet. Gamification tools that depend on the internet gamification tools that depend on the internet can be replaced via offline methods like the following:

- Replace quizzes made by Quizizz or Kahoot! with printed quiz booklets and flashcards. Use coloured paper to imitate Kahoot's options.
- Replace digital leaderboards and points trackers with physical leaderboard charts and printed tokens.
- Replace online role-playing games such as Classcraft with printed material and storytelling exercises.
- Replace cloud-based collaborative learning with problem-solving games and discussion activities.

2.3. LEARN MORE WITHOUT INTERNET ACCESS

In order for prison education to be effective and engaging, customized methodologies must:

- **Employ tangible rewards:** Rather than using digital badges, researchers suggest sticker-based achievement systems, physical certificates, and peer recognition systems.
- Leverage pre-recorded multimedia materials: If educational videos and simulations are saved on a local prison computer, inmates will be able to pursue structured modules without the need for a real-time streaming link.
- Motivate a progressive organization: Learning logs are printed by instructors, where learners keep written records of their achievements and milestones.
- **Promote collaborative learning:** While collaboration is mostly missing in the online environment, engaging students in team-based activities and group competitions can go a long way in developing problem-solving and teamwork skills.

3. IMPACT OF GAMIFIED LEARNING IN PRISONS

Education plays a key role in **rehabilitation and reintegration**, and the application of gamification into education **enhances engagement**, **motivation**, **and skill-building** in ways that traditional teaching methods often struggle to achieve.

In prisons, where learners frequently lack access to digital resources and often face social as well as various educational barriers, gamified educational methods provide structured, interactive, and rewarding learning experiences.

3.1. GAMIFICATION TO DECREASE RECIDIVISM RATES

Among the most important impacts of gamified learning is the decrease in recidivism through teaching inmates the most important capabilities of life and society: critical thinking, problem-solving, and self-regulation. Research indicates that those inmates who receive well-organised educational training in prison are far less likely to reoffend because gamification promotes:

- **Goal tracking:** Offline leaderboard systems or badge-based achievements encourage self-discipline and personal accountability from learners.
- Adapting and adjusting: Role-playing scenarios in an interactive setting enable inmates to learn how to make decisions and solve problems, which is important to be able to do when not a prisoner.
- Behavioural incentives: Progress logs, certificates, or privileges can all be effectively employed to reinforce positive behaviour, as a reward system.

3.2. GAMIFICATION TOWARDS REINTEGRATION

Education in prisons is not just about personal development, but it is a gateway to reintegration. Gamified learning makes literacy, vocational training, and life-skills education more engaging and effective. Gamification makes skill-building more immersive and practical:

- **Simulation-based workshops:** Learners engage in physical role-playing activities that mimic real-world workplace tasks.
- **Team-based competitions:** Groups work together in task-based challenges, reinforcing collaboration and leadership skills.
- **Achievement tracking:** Educators use offline tracking tools (progress sheets, badge-based rewards) to motivate participation.

3.3. GAMIFICATION TO IMPROVE SOCIAL SKILLS

For inmates, effective social interaction and teamwork are critical for rehabilitation.

Gamification fosters collaboration, communication, and mutual support in structured ways. Here's how gamification can improve these skills:

- **Role-playing exercises:** Through guided role-play exercises mimicking real-life scenarios (e.g. workplace interactions, conflict resolution), learners can rehearse and practice skills.
- Offline puzzle-solving sessions where inmates can work towards a common learning goal in groups.
- Game-based peer mentoring: Organise inmates to teach and mentor other inmates in a contextualised learning game to enhance skills and confidence built.

3.4. GAMIFICATION FOR EMOTIONAL STABILITY

Imprisonment frequently brings about mental health issues like anxiety, depression, and trauma.

The gamified approach to learning provides structure, motivation, and emotional safety. Game-based learning supports emotional growth by:

- **Reinforcing the positive:** Progress-based reward systems help construct self-esteem rather than punishment-based models.
- **Building coping skills:** Gamification creates a structure for reflection and learning, where inmates learn not just how to process emotions but also how to develop solutions.
- Cultivating a feeling of success: Earning badges, certificates and accolades from peers promotes confidence and a sense of efficacy.

4. ADDRESSING THE SPECIFIC NEEDS AND INTERESTS OF ADULTS IN PRISON

Education in prison settings requires unique adaptations to accommodate learners with different literacy levels, limited digital access, and socio-emotional challenges. The Games 4 You e-toolkit presents an opportunity to introduce structured, gamified methodologies while ensuring offline accessibility.

4.1. UNDERSTANDING THE CHALLENGES OF ADULTS IN PRISON

Students in prison face the following challenges:

- Low levels of literacy and learning gaps: Because of low levels of education, inmates require instruction tailored to more active and experiential learning practices.
- **Restricted access to technology:** Learners are often cut off from using internet-based learning platforms and due to stringent security, it is often necessary to depend on offline resources or gamified physical activities.
- Intense trauma and disengagement: A lot of the learners are traumatized and have experienced adversity in their lives. So, their emotional barriers are high, and the strategies used in classrooms must be motivational and trauma-informed.

4.2. OVERCOMING THE CHALLENGES IN PRISON EDUCATION

While gamified learning is fantastic for prison students, it also challenges educators to change their methodologies to remain engaging, yet easier to implement offline. The e-toolkit can be adapted to correctional settings by implementing the following:

Implementing non-digital gamification

Digital tools are often limited in prisons so gamified learning must be paperbased, interactive, and collaborative. This can be done using:

- **Flashcards:** Educators can use flashcards (either printed or manually created) to reinforce learning in an aesthetic way, such as vocabulary building and problem-solving.
- Customized challenge-based board games: Teachers can develop problem-solving board games that simulate real-world challenges, developing critical thinking and teamwork skills.
- **Deck-based Q&A activities:** Inmates compete against teams with printed challenge cards to reinforce their knowledge.

Storytelling-based education

Storytelling-based exercises replace digital simulations with live guided storytelling and role-play scenarios, which benefit prison students by increasing literacy and emotional connectivity. To do this, we can figure out some activities such as:

- Collaborative storytelling sessions: Participants take part in collaborative dialogues and develop stories to build literacy, communication and self-expression. It encourages communication, teamwork, and creative thinking as learners build the narrative together.
- Role-play to solve real-world problems: Educators implement structured
 debate exercises relevant to topics of rehabilitation, employment, and
 personal development. Inmates learn how to act in various work or social
 situations to develop skills for interacting in the community.
- Scenario-based exercises in print: Offering activities that are roleplaying based, focused on exercises with worksheets that will ensure engagement, even without the element of technology.

Physical reward systems & progress monitoring

Motivation in prison education is crucial, as learners often struggle with low self-efficacy. Rather than using digital dashboards, educators can create manual tracking systems:

- **Physical token-based rewards:** Students earn physical tokens for participation, encouraging continuous learning efforts. Educators can create a sticker-based progress reward for accomplished assignments.
- **Certificate-based reward systems:** Been there, done that, but instead of a digital badge, students get a physical certificate for achieving an educational milestone.
- **Analogue points progress charts:** Achievements are recorded manually by the learner, encouraging motivation.
- **Peer-driven learning logs**, which record the achievements of individuals and groups. This promotes positive learning settings and collaborative encouragement models.

5. ADVANTAGES AND BENEFITS FOR EDUCATORS USING THE E-TOOLKIT OFFLINE IN PRISON

Those who teach in prisons operate within a very different set of constraints than other educators face: limited access to technology, minimal interaction with learners, and differing literacy levels. However, the Games 4 You e-toolkit and its offline education adaptations provide **procedural approaches** that combine an **enjoyable**, **dynamic and accessible learning experience** despite these limitations.

Whereas digital gamification often takes the form of interactive quizzes, leaderboards, and progress tracking, offline gamification can provide **comparable levels of engagement** with physical rewards, structured challenges, and team-based competitions.

Gamified techniques promote engagement without having to be on the internet. When people track their physical progress, they are more motivated to keep going and are willing to stick around for more.

Due to the absence of any form of digital interactivity in prisons, the way interactive learning works in prisons needs to compensate for this. Gamification, in the context of role-playing and discussion, is a more robust, direct substitute for increasing motivation and involvement.

Educators can implement:

- Role-play exercises simulate real-world decision-making scenarios.
- Peer-led debates and structured discussions reinforce critical thinking.
- Gamified storytelling where learners collaborate on narrative creation.

Examples of effective offline role-playing and discussion activities include:

- **Employment simulation exercises:** Inmates practice workplace etiquette, negotiations, and teamwork.
- Conflict resolution role-plays: Learners engage in guided social problem-solving.
- Narrative-driven learning: Educators introduce story-based challenges requiring critical analysis and response.

6. HOW TO USE THE E-TOOLKIT IN PRISON?

The Games 4 You e-toolkit offers **structured gamification strategies** that can be applied in an offline capacity for prison education.

This will help teachers to promote engagement, skill-building and rehabilitation.

6.1. CASE STUDIES

Various correctional education programs have successfully applied gamification to enhance motivation and optimize learning outcomes. Here are some examples that show how game-based learning is making a difference in prisons.

<u>Digital stories to improve literacy at a Norwegian prison</u>

A gamified method for literacy and self-expression: Digital storytelling implemented in a prison education program in Norway with limited access to digital spaces, the method has been adapted by educators to work offline through:

- Printed storytelling exercises allow inmates to create structured narratives.
- Role-playing scenarios encourage creative thinking and communication.
- Story-based learning challenges reinforce reading comprehension and writing skills.

This approach resulted in higher engagement and improved reading skills among inmates.

<u>Spanish vocational learning program: Gamified skills assessment to learn skills</u>

A game-based assessment tool was incorporated in a vocational education program for job training for incarcerated adults in Spain. The program used:

- Challenges based on scenarios, to mimic real workplace interactions.
- Badge-based progression rewards inmates upon completion of practical vocational work.
- Team-based competitions foster collaboration and leadership skills.

This led to an increase in participation levels, and inmates also became more enthusiastic about training for skills to help them secure jobs when they left prison.

<u>Erasmus project: Spaces for intercultural learning - Poland & Finland</u>

This initiative introduced gamification into prison education to improve intercultural communication skills among inmates. The program used:

- Gamification activities to promote collaboration and immersion.
- Correction systems in which prisoners achieved progress badges for educational challenges.
- Critical thinking, in addition to social skills activities, through interactive storytelling.

Active Games 4 Change (AG4C) - Europe

This project aimed to re-engage incarcerated youth with education through gamified learning experiences across countries.

Key elements included:

- Gamification through sports for social and emotional skills development.
- Challenge-based learning, where inmates completed structured tasks to earn rewards.
- Team-based competitions help encourage cooperation and responsible decision-making.

STEP2LAB - European Union

This EU-funded project targeted recidivism reduction by combining vocational education and training (VET) with gamification. Highlights include:

- Gamified vocational training to prepare inmates for work after release.
- Level system with skill-based challenges: Inmates climbed levels according to what they were able to achieve.
- Role-play and simulation exercises as workshops.

6.2. GAMIFICATION'S ROLE IN REDUCING RECIDIVISM & SUPPORTING REINTEGRATION

Several studies emphasize the need for a structured education within prisons, especially programs that integrate gamification elements.

According to the European Prison Education Association (EPEA), structured learning programmes result in:

- Lower reoffending rates education supports inmates in developing better decision-making skills.
- **Enhanced employment opportunities** in the post-release period trained individuals tend to find jobs more easily.
- Increased engagement and retention, especially for individuals who struggled to learn within the traditional school framework.

6.3. BEST PRACTICES: EFFECTIVE OFFLINE GAMIFICATION FOR PRISON EDUCATION

To implement game-based learning methods effectively in prisons, educators should be aware of the great diversity of students found in a school prison. As educators, we can employ diverse strategies to effectively manage this diversity and develop inclusive learning materials.

Adapting content for low-literacy learners

Many inmates have low literacy levels and require content that is heavily adjusted so that they can interact with it effectively and meaningfully.

Educators can achieve this by printing flashcards to learn new vocabulary, using narrative-driven storytelling exercises and reinforcing critical thinking through collaborative discussions.

Using reward-based mechanics for engagement

We can reward our students in prison by using physical badges or certificates, that the inmates can keep as proof of their achievements, paper logs to record the progress and token-based systems to keep their levels of activity and performance.

Ensuring dynamic and interactive learning approaches

By using games, we create dynamic classes, not based on lecturing. They are inclusive and led by the participants, building collaboration, communication and engagement.

7. RESOURCES THAT CAN BE MADE OFFLINE-FRIENDLY

Without internet accessible e-learning, educators must have physical and interactive learning tools to keep students engaged within prison.

Here are some great offline equivalents to gamified digital resources:

Printed gamified worksheets

These printed worksheets can vary from being game based puzzles, storytelling activities and comprehension questions. Use puzzles and crosswords and interactive storytelling by orienting choose-your-own-adventure style activities.

Educational board games

Board games are also great alternatives to digital gamification that have tangible learning and cooperative problem-solving alike.

These can be strategy board games that require strategy, such as chess or checkers, that teach logical thinking and patience. You can use collaborative challenge boards to offer missions to be completed as a team while players gain knowledge, cooperation, and critical thinking. Educators can also customize board games to keep learning fun, interactive and memorable.

Card-based learning kits for knowledge reinforcement

Teachers can print cards to review and reinforce the students' knowledge. For example, use memory and matching games. Also, by Q&A cards, educators can run quiz games and other competitions to keep readers engaged. We can also use role-play prompt cards: creating a scenario to emulate real-world discussion, such as how to resolve a dispute with a commercial partner or how to make a choice amid a moral dilemma.

8. TEACHING STRATEGIES ADAPTED TO THE NEEDS OF INMATES

Prison education is an important opportunity for rehabilitation and reintegration. Despite this, the cognitive, emotional, and technological issues encountered by students in prison frequently need specific teaching approaches.

Prison education needs to accommodate these to promote engagement, skill development and personal growth.

Cognitive adaptations

Not all prison students arrive at the prison school with the same level of education—some have serious literacy issues, some have learning disabilities, some have never been to school.

Strategies to meet cognitive needs include:

- **Different learning needs:** Using differentiated instruction, where different materials are provided at various levels of difficulty and multimodal teaching (visual, auditory, and kinaesthetic).
- **Guided learning:** Chunking lessons into parts with a gradual learning experience to ensure confidence and capability.
- **Peer tutoring:** Promoting cooperative learning between inmates to solidify understanding and gain interpersonal skills.

Emotional and psychological support

It is a known fact that countless incarcerated individuals suffer from trauma, anxiety, or lack of self-esteem—the very conditions that block learning. Strategies that are responsive to emotion include:

- **Teaching with trauma awareness:** A nurturing, non-judgmental space that recognizes history but emphasizes survival.
- **Emphasizing the strengths of students:** A strength-based approach focuses on existing skills and potential rather than deficits (which tend to undermine motivation).
- **Positive reinforcement:** Praise or a certificate of achievement or keeping progress records to encourage persistence and self-efficacy.

Technological adaptations

While prisons typically restrict access to technology, digital literacy is essential for successful reintegration. This is a key focus of our tailored methodology for the E-Toolkit. To bridge the gap, prisons should stay as aligned as possible with digital advancements. As we know this is currently mostly not done, the school has a very important role on this.

Inmates will need digital skills upon release, yet they lack access to these tools while inside. To prepare them, educators should:

- Discuss relevant digital tools and platforms.
- Explain their functions through demonstrations.
- Use screenshots (or printed guides) to illustrate key features.
- Keep learners updated on evolving apps and technologies.

This proactive approach helps prevent the digital gap from widening between life inside and outside prison.

9. ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES FOR THE TARGET GROUP

Given the absence of internet access, educators must incorporate creative, hands-on activities that foster critical thinking, literacy, vocational training, and emotional growth.

Offline gamified literacy and language development activities

Many inmates face literacy challenges, requiring adapted, interactive learning exercises to improve their reading, writing, and comprehension skills. A great activity is organising a book club discussion, where educators organize a reading group, encouraging critical analysis and comprehension development.

Scriptwriting and dialogue-based activities, where learners write and perform scripted dialogues, can also reinforce language learning and creative expression.

Vocational training and employment readiness activities

Vocational education prepares inmates for employment after release, ensuring self-sufficiency and reduced recidivism rates. Hands-on job training exercises and simulation-based role-playing are great learning opportunities. Resume and job application workshops with printed templates can help the inmates prepare for the future.

Social and emotional learning activities

Since rehabilitation is not only academic but also emotional, incorporating social learning techniques helps develop resilience, interpersonal communication, and behavioural awareness. We can organise conflict resolution role-plays where learners navigate real-world interpersonal conflicts, reinforcing decision-making skills. Trust-building activities such as team-based challenges and cooperative learning games help develop social confidence and collaboration.

Creative & artistic engagement activities

Art-based activities foster self-expression, emotional resilience, and cognitive development, helping inmates develop new skills and hobbies. Music and poetry sessions in which learners compose songs or poetry reinforce emotional processing. Painting, sketching, or sculpting provides therapeutic engagement. Theatre and role-playing exercises develop confidence and teamwork.

10. ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

European Prison Education Association https://epea.org

Council of Europe Recommendations on Prison Education https://rm.coe.int/09000016804c858f

UNESCO Lifelong Learning - Prison Education Report https://www.uil.unesco.org/en/adult-education/prison-education

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