
Community engagement: Considering adult-learning and problem-solving methodologies for police training

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Abstract

Police engagement with communities is a central focus of many law enforcement agencies. The capacity to successfully integrate in such a way may come naturally to some, but the training through which new police officers are placed should also prepare them for any such organisational ethos. While many police training interventions follow traditional learning delivery platforms, the introduction of interventions which address and consider adult learning approaches and problem-solving supports can significantly contribute to the development of skills and competencies which allow officers to engage even more effectively with the communities they serve. The inclusion and consideration of various models of learning in the police training and education process is essential, so that maximum benefit from the process can be afforded to learners, the organisation, and, the wider community. This article considers the inclusion of andragogy (Knowles, 1980) and the problem-based learning (PBL) approach to learning in police training, so that the development of skills necessary for community engagement can be facilitated.

Keywords:

Police training, adult learning, andragogy, problem-based learning, community engagement

Introduction

Given the changing nature of society and the resultant demands placed on any police service, the question of what exactly are the most appropriate methods of educating police officers is a recurrent one. Chappell (2008) reminds us that it is only in the last 50 years or so that the study of law enforcement training has achieved its own space in the broader sphere of training and development. Some approaches to police training utilise teacher-centred approaches at their core (Werth, 2009) and were often developed on a military model without enough thought perhaps being given to the transactional elements of learning (Vodde, 2008). The teacher-centred approach is viewed by some as one which does not allow a person to develop the ability to act outside set sequences to solve problems or to deal with changes (Gagne, 1962). The role of the police in society requires officers to have the ability to think critically and problem-solve effectively (Birzer, 2003). With this challenge, there is increased debate on how police training should be constructed and delivered. In this article, the concepts of andragogy and PBL are introduced to the debate, with the intention of considering more than just traditional training methods when it comes to the training of police officers for the modern world.

Doing the basics of policing

In recent years, the return to a policing model which places community policing at the centre of its operational strategies (Tilley, 2003, cited in Newburn 2003) has been a catalyst for the examination of how police training is delivered. McCoy (2006) stipulated that this necessitates the police officer 'to be a problem-solver, be self-directed, have respect for diversity, and be an effective communicator' (p. 88). Once selected for basic police training, student police officers must be facilitated in developing the skills necessary to do their job effectively, as protectors of the community.

The following words were written by a police consultant in New York almost a century ago, and while a variety of police skills are mentioned, the unchanging role of the police officer as a problem-solver and decision-maker is remembered:

'On his first tour he (the police officer) may be called to handle a serious incident wherein several persons are injured ... summon medical and police assistance, arrest the person or persons criminally responsible, procure witnesses and ... take a mental picture of the scene, assist the injured, render first aid, get the data report and keep the traffic moving. He may have to cope with a holdup or the commission of some other serious crime when he will have to bring into play his power of observation, his knowledge of human nature and his native cunning (sic.)' (Cahalane, 1929, p. 166).

Training is the keystone in the process which assists in the development of these necessary skills and, therefore, consideration must be given to what can best achieve this targeted end capability.

So why consider andragogy?

While there are many theories of adult learning, one of the best known of them is the theory of adult learning known as andragogy (Knowles, 1980). Andragogy places at its centre the premise that there are significant differences between the way in which adults and children learn, and seeks to focus on those different needs exhibited by adult learners. Knowles differentiated between andragogy and pedagogy, as viewed in the traditional sense, and thought it important to consider what exactly each brought to learning.

Knowles (1980) stated that 'the pedagogical model assigns to the teacher full responsibility for making all decisions about what will be learned, how it will be learned, when it will be learned, and if it has been learned' (pp. 55-56). Andragogy, on the other hand 'is a theory which is vastly in contrast to the traditional pedagogical model and it advocates both the self-directed learning concept and the teacher as the facilitator of learning' (Knowles, 1980, p. 57).

'The five assumptions underlying andragogy describe the adult learner as someone who (1) has an independent self-concept and who can direct his or her own learning, (2) has accumulated a reservoir of life experiences that is a rich resource for learning, (3) has learning needs closely related to changing social roles, (4) is problem-centred and interested in immediate application of knowledge, and (5) is motivated to learn by internal rather than external factors' (Merriam, 2001, p. 5).

Long (2004) mentioned the concept which supports 'the unimaginative traditional view of the adult learner represents the adult as a big child' (p. 24), while the needs of the adult learner dictate that they need to know and understand why they are learning, how it applies to their lives and how it can benefit them. A child will attempt to achieve prescribed levels of success whereas an adult will need further and more expansive meaning and application put to the learning. However, it should also be noted that most adult learners possess high levels of motivation and task-orientation. This adult need for fulfilment, and practical direction to their learning, is central to the theory of andragogy, and life-long learning in general (Laal and Salamati, 2012).

Implications of andragogy for instruction

Galbraith (2004), when expressing the purpose of teaching adults, stated that it is the facilitation of personal growth which is at its core. This development should be done with the aim of improving 'the professional, social and political aspects of learners' (p. 3). This point can be broadened as it is directly indicative of the student-centred approach applied in the use of andragogy. The 'learner leader' is there to facilitate the growth, not to direct it in a pedagogical fashion. Even though the instances and circumstances of when adult learning takes place may change, it is this central pivot of the process which must be remembered. The importance of the facilitator does not diminish with the taking of this approach. It is essential that the facilitator of adult learning is accessible and supportive throughout the process. The facilitator must remain accessible and continue to be regarded as a resource.

Knowles (1980) also considered the importance of the 'learning climate' (p. 46) for adult learners, and saw it as imperative that the physical environment and the psychological climate is conducive to creating a secure and supportive place in which adults can learn. The option of questioning that which is being presented to them and not just having to accept it because the 'teacher' says so is a core climate requirement for adult learners in this regard. What should not be separated from the creation of this environment is the behaviour of the facilitator towards the learners. To bring it back to basics, the consideration that you are in fact planning to address adult learners must be included in lesson planning, to ensure the creation of a stimulating learning environment. The adult learner is the most important focus of all the orbiting decisions and agreements as the adult learner is experienced, motivated, self-directed and ready to learn. What a platform for a facilitator or programme designer to begin from?

Learning from problems

Barrows and Tamblyn (1980) defined problem-based learning (PBL) as 'the learning that results from the process of working towards the understanding of a resolution of a problem' (p. 1). Problems are presented to students and are then used as the centre from which the enhancement of problem-solving, critical thinking and the development of independent learning skills can grow. The process is student-centred and refers to the fact that the main responsibility for learning is placed squarely on the shoulders of the students. The PBL approach first developed in the field of medical education and it involved the embedding of the learning process in problems, or scenarios, based in real-life. This approach soon drew attention from other educational fields as to its further application.

The approach is grounded in the constructivist approach to learning (Ultanir, 2012) and as such follows the associated assumptions which proffer that: 1. knowledge is constructed

individually and socially from interactions with the environment; 2. different phenomena invite multiple, related perspectives; 3. knowledge is anchored in relevant contexts; and, 4. meaning and thinking are connected to the culture and community in which we interact (Hung et al., 2007). This constructivist, student-centred approach 'empowers learners to conduct research, integrate theory and practice, and apply knowledge and skills to develop a viable solution to a defined problem' (Savery, 2006, p. 12).

Andragogy and PBL in police training

'Educational theorist Jerome Bruner suggests that a curriculum ought to be built around the great issues, principles and values that society deems worthy of continual concern' (Rippa, 1969, cited in Glenn et al., 2003). While Bruner wrote about education, Glenn et al. (2003) commented that his vision 'is no less applicable to the education of those who serve the public' (p. 51). Therefore, the changes in society which have seen police forces begin to adopt more community-focused policing strategies should also be considered as influences on the choice of training selected to enable the successful implementation of these strategies.

Depending on circumstance, different training models require the consideration of the principles of both pedagogy and andragogy. In this situation, both sets of principles should not be considered as opposites but as methods of achieving the best experience possible for the learners. Knowles (1984) reminded us that, while andragogy should be acknowledged as being a model of learning which includes certain assumptions about how adults learn, the pedagogical model should not be discarded as a method of learning. Rather than seeing pedagogy and andragogy as in opposition, and pitting them against each other, they should be seen as two ends of a spectrum (p. 43).

The suggestion that pedagogical training methods still remain dominant over those considering andragogical methods in police training is one that has been argued by many (Birzer and Tannehill, 2001; McCoy, 2006; and, Marrenin, 2004, cited in Ryan, 2008). Birzer (1999) suggested that there must be a 'symbiosis' between the implementation of a self-directing training environment and the support which is given to police officers working under the community policing ethos. The further suggestion that 'many similarities exist between the andragogy theory and the community policing philosophy' (Birzer, 1999, p. 18) also supports the premise that incorporating both mindsets into the learning environment will develop the problem-solvers sought by modern day policing.

Glenn et al. (2003) have detailed the case for restructuring the training methods used in police training and make the case for training which facilitates the development of skills essential for community police officers, but point out the necessity in some circumstances to stand by the traditional method of instruction. When giving instruction in the firing of

a weapon, Glenn et al. (2003) agree 'there is little need or desire for individual variation' (p. 57), as precise, exact and definite instruction is required in the use of the weapon. However, the individual police officer will be able to make decisions surrounding the use of the fire-arm, in a way that goes beyond the rote learning of how to operate it in different situations, once training has been structured to reflect the necessity.

A change of mindset is required which embraces the pedagogical model alone, to a model which embraces the principles of adult learning in a positive and meaningful way, along with the view already held. The differences in the needs of the learner at the centre of both of these models will now be contrasted. Peace (2006) stated that this view must be taken to ensure training may be transformed to meet the needs of society and that 'the cornerstone of the success of the community-oriented neighbourhood policing strategy must now rest with the foundation training provided' (p. 336).

Gianakis et al. (1998, p. 486) contended that the requirements for a new approach to policing communities need to be supported by changes in the support structures of the police organisation. These support structures must include the training afforded to its members.

'By re-organising the police force into a community-oriented, decentralised and independent organisation with participatory management we can get both satisfied customers and satisfied employees. Police must engage in community-based processes related to the production and maintenance of local human and social capital. The means by which these goals are to be achieved are through the development of strong relationships and institutions and individuals in the community' (Fettes, 2002, p. 53).

Reith (1956) explained that the policing concept embarked upon by the first commissioners of the London Metropolitan Police was:

'...unique in history and throughout the world because it derived not from fear but almost exclusively from public cooperation with the police, induced by them designedly by behaviour which secures and maintains for them the approval, respect and affection of the public' (p. 140).

The context of teaching is vitally important in achieving such interaction and community integration. Tharp et al. (2000, cited in John-Steiner and Mahn, 2003) stated that effective teaching requires teachers 'to seek out and include the contexts of students experiences and their local communities' points of view and situate new academic learning in that context' (p. 134). This contention that learning, development and teaching takes place in a social and historical context is furthered by Vygotsky (1994) when he stated the importance of knowing where and when a person is from cannot be ignored. Birzer (1999) attested to the importance of the training curriculum in training police officers, both at their induction and throughout their career. The structured, formal way in which training is approached puts

a high emphasis on expertise but 'puts undue stress on students and does not encourage effective learning or support the community policing mission' (p. 18).

Peace (2006) goes on to say that 'behaviourist teacher-centred tuition is effective in addressing the need for programmed instruction, while the humanist student-oriented approach will succeed in enabling affective issues to be explored' (p. 346). While the use of adult learning principles is not suitable in all areas of training, in this instance, to achieve the skills required to foster a community policing ethos within An Garda Síochána, it is a method which is applicable.

'The training conducted in the police academies should highlight self-directed learning on the police recruit's part. This can go hand-in-hand with community policing. For community policing to be successful police officers have to be self-starters. When they (the police officers) discover a problem they will be expected to solve it in cooperation with members of various groups in the community. What better place to implement the self-starter role of a police officer than in a police recruit training academy? Recruits in training academies will benefit from an environment that incorporates many of the principles from the andragogy model of learning' (Birzer et al., 2000, p.18).

While the 'traditional' method of police training just referred to is behaviourist in its essence, and takes a teacher-centred approach to learning, where topic experts give their knowledge to students as passive recipients (Werth, 2009), this process does not altogether support the development of analytical, critical decision-making and problem-solving in most cases (Birzer, 2003; McCoy, 2006). It is on this point that many writers state the benefits of problem-based learning as a method of police training, over, or at the very least in conjunction with, traditional police training methods. The similar skills required by their students to carry out their roles, albeit in different environments and situations, brought police educators to examine the abilities of PBL as a tool to foster the use of critical thinking, problem-solving and self-directed learning. Police training facilities began to engage with the concept and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police training centre at Regina, Saskatchewan became the first to implement the methodology in the 1990s (Werth, 2009). Soon after, law enforcement agencies throughout North America and around the world followed the lead.

While police training has used the PBL method to develop certain skills, it is accepted that there are some topics within police training which still utilise a more traditional, behaviourist style method of training (Moody, 2010), with these topics including firearms training, self-defence and physical training. While literature and research has shown that approaches embracing andragogy and problem-solving have their place in the training of police officers, it should be remembered that these approaches are not designed to replace more traditional pedagogical models of training, but to work hand in hand with them to address the needs of those undergoing the training.

Police training in an Irish context

At the foundation of the Irish State in 1922, An Garda Síochána (translated as Guardians of the Peace), the Irish Police Service, embraced a community policing approach to the delivery of its service in the community. This concept of policing sees the police as being part of the community, working in the community, and solving the problems which the community experiences. While community policing was central to the ethos of An Garda Síochána from its inception a focus on the core skills required to carry out such policing needs to constantly considered. The skills and techniques include the ability to problem-solve, make decisions, critically analyse situations and exhibit a level of confidence while doing so. Some are naturally possessive of these skills, while others need them to be garnered, developed and realised. Therefore, it is essential that every effort is made to allow this process to take place while undergoing all manners of training.

Encouragement the ethos of community policing and problem-solving in the training environment will assist in the development of skills and allow transfer of learning to the workplace. If you can show significance in the outside world, for the skills being learned in training, then the transfer will take place from the classroom to the outside world. This acknowledgement by An Garda Síochána that community policing is central to the work and ethos of the organisation reinforces the need for training to support and develop the achievement of this ethos. McCoy (2006, p. 79) stated that it is essential that there is a shift away from traditional police training methods to enable the achievement of the required skills for community policing to be achieved. A move from teacher-centred instruction must make way for learner-centred training.

'Community policing does not allow the police officer to use his patrol car as a shield from the public. Instead, community policing demands that the officer establish trust, communication and ultimately, a problem solving partnership with the citizens he or she serves to make a lasting difference in the community. We no longer want to diffuse a problem, we want to solve it' (Birzer et al., 2000, p. 8).

As a result of the direction chosen for the delivery of the policing service in Ireland, the development of the individual in this regard is essential. No longer can all training be teacher-centred and pedagogical in its essence. Therefore, the relevance of adult learning and problem-based learning theories to police training is clearly evident, when what is being sought from police officers is examined and what can be delivered using these theories is acknowledged. Current Garda Síochána basic training is built around the PBL approach to instruction and integrates the learning of police procedures with the development of the capacity to problem-solve and make decisions. This approach to achieving a more applied and analytical police officer is central in the delivery of the BA in Applied Policing which all new entrants to the organisation need to complete successfully.

Conclusion

While traditional police training is based on a pedagogical model which revolves around discipline and curriculum content, changes in policing requirements within modern society challenge the types of police officers which this sole method of training may produce. Positive working relationships, and community interaction, between the police and the public are essential. There is a place and a time for the use of pedagogical instruction, yet the consideration of other methods of training is viewed as being essential, as the introduction of self-directed learning principles will encourage the further development of students. Having learned how to problem-solve and approach situations with a level of analytical capacity perhaps not possible to achieve with traditional learning methods alone, will allow a transition from the learning environment to the operational policing arena. The expansion of the use of adult learning principles and PBL can move the training from the traditional teacher-centred situation to a more learner-centred one, therefore supporting the individual and society in the process.

An Garda Síochána is an organisation which realises this self-confidence in the individual as core to the implementation of the philosophy of community policing. The power of self-confidence within the individual is essential in attaining a high level of engagement and communication with the community. This is why the context of learning is so important. Police officers operate in an individual capacity when making decisions on a constant basis. The ability to carry out such a process is not one which is granted to all, but it is one which can be learned and developed. While many different skill sets are essential to the effective working of the police service, problem-solving and decision-making are at the centre of these core skills and can be assisted in development using the learning interventions discussed. While these interventions are essential to educating police officers in an Irish context, it should be remembered that not all the current training that is delivered needs to be cast aside and redeveloped but rather complimented where possible by other approaches to learning.

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