

Putting learning into practice: self-reflections from cops

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Abstract

Canterbury Christ Church University (CCCU) have been involved in police education with serving officers for over twenty years. The College of Policing (COP) are currently considering a range of options to develop learning within the police organisation and this involves a drive for more officers to be degree educated. The responses to a recent public consultation on this proposal involved some differing views on its introduction. Some of the criticism coming from officers themselves about the proposal argues that there is a limited evidence base for degree level entry and this small study provides some insight into this world. This paper will discuss the findings from interviews conducted with police graduates from CCCU following their completion of either a BSc or MSc degree programme in Policing. It will discuss officers' perceptions of their ability to utilise the learning they have gleaned in the classroom and how it is received from their supervisors and peers. The aim of the drive to increase education in policing focuses on the need for students to develop critical thinking skills, to further apply knowledge and their problem solving abilities. The research found that police officer graduates felt these skills were enhanced as a result of undertaking a degree, and felt empowered to apply their knowledge. However, findings indicated inconsistencies as to whether this knowledge was applied in practice. This often depended on whether an officer's immediate and senior management were receptive to embrace learning, more often than not there was a lack of willingness from management to 'hear' the learning from the police graduates interviewed in this study. Therefore, this research found that in order to embed knowledge systematically, a wider infrastructure is required to facilitate this at every rank of the police organisation.

Keywords: Police, Professionalism, Education, Knowledge, Culture.

Introduction: Professionalisation and the role of education

The term police professionalism has been widely contested (Sklansky, 2014; Chan, 1997; Fleming, 2014; Weisburd and Neyroud, 2011), as has what constitutes the type of police behaviour that makes them professional (Miller, 1999; Chan, 1997; Loftus, 2010). Its meaning is therefore ambiguous and is interpreted differently between and within practitioners, policy-makers and academics alike.

Arguably it is these complexities and tensions that make police reform so challenging. Sklansky (2014) identifies four key meanings of police professionalism. Whilst these are not mutually exclusive and should ideally work together there are some different notions of what makes up the meaning of professional. Firstly, the term may simply mean high expectations in relation to ethical behaviour, appearance, performance and the core application of the law. Other interpretations may relate to the police self-regulating which focuses on operational independence and politically distance.

Neyroud's (2011) perceptions of professional policing focuses to the application of expert knowledge, evidence based practice and an affiliation with the academic community to develop professional expertise and guide operational practice. Such ideas are fundamentally concerned with reflective practice and learning rather than a reliance on police intuition. In contrast to this, other definitions of professional policing focus on police common sense. As Segal (cited in Sklansky, 2014: 345) states, such rhetoric around the art of police work has always been present. Arguably it offers a more realistic option on which to debate the meanings of professional behaviour from the perspective of the practitioner themselves.

For the purpose of this article we will focus on Neyroud's considerations of professional policing. It is predominantly this model that is driving the professionalisation agenda in the UK which is focused on the implementation of a code of ethics, a drive for academic and police collaboration to further embed evidence based practice and the standardisation of police training through education both pre-entry, via apprenticeships into policing and through the potential for officers to gain academic credits based on previous training and experience. How much police knowledge can be provided 'off the shelf' via education is an interesting debate. Indeed the term evidence based policing itself has been widely contested (Punch, 2015) as have the outcomes of police research in terms of how much they could, undermine the professional identity of officers themselves (Wood and Williams, 2016). However, the Police Education Qualification Framework (PEQF) being driven by the COP is progressing across the UK.

The argument for the PEQF programme is predominantly grounded in the complexity of changing demands and the need to standardise training nationally. Technology and crime, child sexual exploitation, dealing with mental health and terrorism all provide justification for the police to be more reflective in their approach and to be able to think analytically in order to solve the problems presented to them via these 'wicked problems' (Grint and Thornton, 2015). It is argued that police officers through the application of a higher level police education will develop the critical thinking and analytical skills that feature in most teaching at under graduate and post graduate study. As Christopher (2015) argues, police officers are routinely placed in nuanced and complex situations that require professional judgement, interpretation and reflection. Tilley and

Laycock (2014) argue that as well as problem solving and critical thinking assisting with understanding the changing demand, such a focus on longer term crime prevention should in theory reduce constant police response to particular areas, to particular victims and offenders and at particular times.

Such ideas about the role of and application of education in policing are not without their issues. Indeed, Fleming (2015) has widely presented the difficulties of this within the professionalisation agenda in Australia and highlighted the conflict between officers feeling personally and subjectively professional without the assistance of education from academics. The reasons for this are multifaceted, however one key issue that is debated regularly around this topic is the impact that top down guidelines being imposed on an organisation and its' staff will have. It can result in much local challenge and the undermining of any success of a standardised professional agenda (Wood and Williams, 2016).

What is the evidence base?

There is evidence to suggest that education further develops critical skills, better communication, a more nuanced understanding of complex police problems and police powers and can be more effective leaders (Roberts, 2015). However, there is limited evidence on officers' own perceptions of how education is received by the organisation and their colleagues, despite a large number of officers going through a variety of police related education every year in the UK. Indeed, this is what prompted the small scale study that the authors will discuss here.

There are different models and perceived aims of education within academia itself. One of the most well established long standing police education programmes is run at Canterbury Christ Church University (CCCU). The ethos there focuses on the achievement of professionalism via a process of continual development rather than it being established in the abstract, without the interplay between the lecturer and the practitioner and off the shelf (Bryant et al., 2013). Such ideas recognise the role of the practitioner as an active learner within the education process and therefore part of that journey must involve the opportunity to take the learning from the academy and utilise it in their operational role, alongside their own professional knowledge. Indeed this is where knowledge can help inform decision-making in a more reflective and evidence based manner. This notion of officer involvement very much

concur with writers such as Davis (2002) and Sklansky (2008) who argue that top down control to monitor police professional behaviour and decision-making can have the reverse effect. Such arguments, whilst not the focus of this paper are critical in the context of understanding procedural justice, community confidence in the police and the perceptions of police legitimacy (Rowe, 2015). Indeed top down prescriptive process can reduce reflexivity and in a culture which is becoming increasingly risk averse this is important to note within the challenge to the COPS's reasons for professionalising through education.

The CCCU National Student Survey (NSS) annually reports the results from final year students on the degree programme we run at our University. The programme has historically received high levels of satisfaction from serving police officer students on the programme. However, in NSS results between the years 2013-2015 we noticed a fall in the satisfaction rates under personal development. This was reported at 80 % in 2013, 74 % in 2014 and 61 % in 2015. Over the same time period the satisfaction rate relating to teaching on the programme rose from 88 % in 2013, to 94 % in 2014 and to 97 % in 2015. The personal development of students on this programme is largely facilitated but their employer. Therefore, it seems likely that officers are displaying in these findings a lack of ability to demonstrate reflexivity at work and the learning gained from the programme. The degree programme has reflexivity as a core component of the entire degree. However when officers attempt to apply this in practice, it is within a constrained context that allows little scope for its use. Overcoming these limitations requires a better understanding and collaboration between universities and police services and such issues may take time, effective engagement and mutual negotiation (Bryant et al., 2013). As Hallenberg (2012) states, unless senior leaders within the police are supportive of education, any positive outcomes are likely to be lost. Leaders need to create opportunities for learning collaborations and develop systems that encourage and incentivise staff (Roberts et al., 2016). However, even where support is forthcoming from senior police leaders, there are still strong cultural barriers that need to be overcome.

The resilience of the police culture has been discussed widely (Reiner, 2010) and that has implications for officers who want to use their learning at a practical level. The fostering of reflective practitioners within policing demands internal democratic structures that allow

for appropriate levels of dissent, diversity of thought and questioning (Wood and Williams, 2016). This can be problematic within an organisation that has a defined and authoritative rank structure (Silvestri, 2003). The failure to allow for the kind of reflexivity that allows officers to consider the nuances within which policing operates can result in police organisations denying challenges to unexamined assumptions, and an exploration of more innovative ways of working (Vickers, cited in Silvestri, 2003: 182).

Research shows us that there are real opportunities to enhance a sense of internal democracy within the police service through organisational justice measures (Sklansky, 2008; Haas et al., 2015). Fairness, participation, inclusivity of all ranks will encourage a more engaged and motivated workforce within the police (Bradford, 2014). Therefore, the allowance for student officers to be creative through their education is key.

Given the drive by the COP is focused on using education to encourage a learning culture, to critique current practice and to embed reflexivity the lack of support to use learning in professional development as is indicated in CCCU NSS findings indicate that the culture as is, is not ready.

Research indicates that certain internal processes can also inhibit reflexivity within the organisation. Current performance measures which focus on quantitative, target oriented approaches are still in place (Cockcroft, 2013), despite sustained criticism (Guilfoyle, 2013). Such methods predominantly prioritise the crime fighting view of policing at the expense of non-crime policing functions (Cockcroft and Beattie, 2009). As a result, the interactions / relationships and processes involved in police work are ignored to make way for numerical outputs. Therefore standalone quantitative measures make it particularly difficult to establish *being reflexive* as an important component of what it means to be a good police officer.

As Roberts et al., (2016) discuss investing in and standardising education within an organisation is an enabler to change. However, the organisation needs to both value learning and make a commitment to staff that its provision will assist the workforce to further understand current challenges.

Research/method

In order to consider the extent to which our own police students at CCCU were encouraged to practically use their learning with their role, we conducted a small scale piece of research that comprised of undertaking ten semi-structured interviews with participants. All of the participants were serving police officers of varying ranks and forces, who had graduated from BSc in Policing (Hons) In-Service Programme on or before July 2015.

Findings

The two main findings from the research have been identified through the interviews following a thematic analysis undertaken on NVivo. The first related to positive perceptions from participants in relation to their academic study. When participants reflected on how they viewed the knowledge they had acquired from the course, they felt it contributed positively to an understanding of their own role and function in the workplace. This led to a sense of empowerment and a sense of individual professionalism. However, they felt unable to utilise this knowledge in their workplace. The second theme that prevailed related more to participant perceptions of the strategic delivery of professionalism and embedding the research agenda from the top and how this actually played out for them in practice. They felt there was a disconnect between the professionalism agenda coming from the COP and the operational reality in the organisation, as a result the agenda was perceived as being aspirational and short-term without a realistic ability of being able to embed knowledge and education in police forces in the long term.

1: Positive perceptions of the degree programme and a sense of individual professionalism

Participants of the research described how their involvement and engagement in education via the degree programme had helped shift their perspective to a more positive one and reinvigorated their passion for policing. They had gained the ability to think more creatively by utilising their knowledge from the course. Consequently, rather than being influenced by what they described as a negative canteen culture amongst their peers, participants had gained the ability to reflect on different perspectives and provide more positive suggestions to issues that affected their police work. As a result, they perceived themselves as having more credibility through knowledge and therefore more confident to use it within their work. This resulted in an individual sense of professionalism.

The knowledge gained from the course was considered to empower officers. This related to the level of inquiry that was subsequently applied when thinking about policing, in practice. The course provided a wider context for them about policing and relevant partners. Consequently, using knowledge to understand and analyse a particular issue had developed their ability to: identify different problems and barriers, to suggest realistic solutions and alternatives, using research, and to be open to new ideas. These elements were felt to be provided by the degree course and contributed to a sense of credibility and professionalism.

Promoting officers to think differently about problems by utilising knowledge and an evidence base informed by research is a key aim of the COP's professionalisation agenda. However, the ability for participants to utilise their skills gained from their degree programme was not consistent. Their ability to use research in practice was related to holding a strategic position/rank, or if in the capacity of their role, if they were a decision-maker. This was not the case with officers in operational roles. Therefore, overall participants felt that the organisation currently lacks the opportunity to listen and utilise the skills of officers.

'...I think it's really, really, really difficult for people who go back in after doing a degree and I think a lot of it is about that hierarchal framework because people of a certain level think they have the knowledge anyway so therefore why would they ask the lowly level PC or PS or whatever... But I just think it's interesting that at a time when they're supposed to be encouraging more engagement from the troops and bottom-up engagement and all that kind of thing that you still feel that you're almost looked down upon for the fact that you've tried to...'

This led to frustration and a sense of feeling undervalued and deskilled. Feelings of frustration about knowledge being dismissed in a 'dictatorial and top-down' environment were further compounded at an individual level. Participants had a high sense of personal legitimacy with aspirations to impact on organisational legitimacy in relation to more informed decision-making. These students were investing in themselves, to improve their own decision-making and to apply the knowledge internally. However, they found themselves disarmed and unable to do this as a result of top-down rank and file. This is despite the apparent drive for an evidence-based approach from the COP. As a result, the short-term gain of individual engagement with

higher education is being inhibited by the existing police culture and a lack of infrastructure to embed the professionalisation agenda from the top.

2: The strategic approach to drive education in policing was perceived to be aspirational and 'short-term' rather than embedding a research agenda in the long-term

Integrating education and research in policing was perceived by participants to be challenging at every level. At a strategic level the public sector cuts were seen to be the main inhibitor for investing in a long-term professionalisation agenda utilising evidence within policing. At an organisational level, the focus on police targets meant that 'short-term' and prescriptive policing agendas were advocated over developing an infrastructure to embed research. At an operational level, the culture was described as resistant to utilising and applying knowledge and expertise from police officer students.

Perceptions of the COP and its aims were sceptical

Whilst the COP is an independent body to the Home Office, the extent to which it is perceived as such is questionable. Therefore, the COP is seen to be an additional layer of governance dictating what is professional, rather than a body working for the police to professionalise officers.

'...For me realistically I don't think anything has changed. I think they've rebranded a lot of things. And some of the things that are coming out of it particularly we're now going onto the Skills of Justice process in terms of how we're assessed and the competencies that we hold as staff and again that's another organisation that actually the College of Policing are adopting, so at what point are they independent because actually they seem to be leaning on a lot of our organisations that actually are linked to the Home Office. So their independence is always questionable. For me apart from the rebranding of a name I've not seen any change in the way they run as an organisation...'

The COP is considered as detached from operational police officers and staff

There was a sense that the COP was detached from the operational functions and realities of policing. Ironically, one participant learnt about the COP and its aims from undertaking the degree programme, rather than from any formal communication from the organisation itself.

'...The grass roots level — because I got into the degree and the academics I found out more about the College of Policing and the NPfA and all of that. Most people don't know anything about it. They don't know what it's there for, they don't know it's there for them...'

Organisational infrastructures are not conducive to embedding evidence-based practice or the application of knowledge at a local level

The organisational focus on police objectives and priorities were described as one of the main barriers to embedding knowledge. The infrastructure was felt to be driven by a strong culture of performance that is purely focused on inputs (officer numbers) and outputs (what they do). For example:

'...I don't think there's a facility in my job to apply knowledge back into the structure. I think if you get into a role and you're trained in that role and you're expected to go off and do it and if you branch out into something different, there's no way to feed that back into the organisation. I think a lot of it is that you're viewed as a number and I know it's callous, but you're a number, you're an officer, you're a small wheel in a big machine and therefore what you can do, what your skills are, don't matter...'

This quote illustrates a perceived conflict with the top-down, performance-driven approaches that set agenda for action at an operational level, as opposed to involving officers more democratically around decisions. Establishing reflexivity as a core attribute within policing is challenged by such rigid performance structures. Indeed, as Cockcroft (2013) argues, despite a sustained criticism of targets, especially the way in which they prioritise the crime fighting area of police work at the expense of non-crime policing functions which is arguable where the demand now predominantly lies (Punch, 2015). Quantitative measures as a standalone make it very difficult to establish *being reflexive* as an important component of a police officer's role (Wood and Williams, 2016).

Infrastructures to practically support police officer students to study was inconsistent

The officers described a lack of a consistent system to support officers whilst developing their learning. Although corporate policies existed to support the practicalities of studying as a full time worker, through the provision of funding or study leave, accessing this was inconsistent at a local level.

Some respondents were not aware of such policies to support them because they had not received information from their line management to support their development. Whilst some officers had received funding, this was described as reduced since the cuts to budgets and reduced police officer numbers. This sense of unfair process has serious implications on officers' commitment to the organisation and buy in to its' priorities (Myhill and Bradford, 2011).

In the absence of practical support from the organisational at a local level — individual motivation was a key factor in making the programme work

The police officer students were self-motivated to achieve their degree and make the course work around their own personal work commitments. The motivations, as to why police officers undertook a degree in the first place, referred to their own professional development and to obtaining a further qualification. In some of these cases the officer students wanted to expand their portfolio in order to leave their current department or role or indeed, leave the organisation altogether. There was a sense that management felt threatened by individual expertise gained through the completion of a degree programme. Some students experienced total disinterest from their senior management for undertaking a policing degree. Others had their motives for studying questioned, with the implication that a degree was either a 'ticket' out of the organisation or a perceived threat in preparing the police officer students for promotion.

Despite these unsupportive attitudes being displayed from middle and senior management, the students believed in the programme and felt the individual benefits in undertaking were positive. The programme provided them with the motivation and resilience to overcome some of the practical issues and lack of support experienced whilst undertaking a degree.

Without a consistent organisational infrastructure to support the development of individuals engaged in educational programmes and the embedding of knowledge exchange, the use of knowledge was 'ad hoc'. It relied on the individual to challenge 'upwards' the information learned from the programme and this could be seen as blocked at the first stage, due to a lack of receptiveness, at both senior and middle management levels.

Conclusion

Understanding the implications of these findings is critical in the context of the COP's agenda to professionalise the service and the PEQF. Moreover, the findings of this research suggest that the short-term gain and personal sense of professionalism described by students can be overturned by the perceived rigid approach and organisational inflexibility to use knowledge in the workplace. This is further indicative of a culture that is resistant to the kind of reflective practice that should feature as a core component of ethical policing. Paradoxically, process driven frameworks operating within the organisation ignore the process of decision-making, the ethics involved and indeed the behavioural aspects of police encounters. All core aims of the professionalisation agenda.

To further understand and more effectively deal with the type of 'wicked problems' (Grint, 2010) the police are increasingly faced with, critical thinking is imperative. From the findings of this small piece of exploratory research, it seems that what the current internal structures advocate and measure as 'good police work' conflicts with the reality of the job and, indeed, the aim of standardising education within the policing environment.

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