LEARNING IN POLICE RECRUIT TRAINING: FINDINGS FROM THE FINNISH POLICE RECRUIT TRAINING EVALUATION PROJECT[1]

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INTRODUCTION

Traditional classroom learning and *problem-based learning* (*PBL*) are often depicted as polar opposite forms of knowledge acquisition. However, they do share certain weaknesses, really that can be avoided by means of other kinds of teaching arrangements. This is the simple point that we will drive home in this paper.

The insight at the heart of this paper originates from our project on the *Evaluation of the Effectiveness of Police Recruit Training in Finland* (EEPRT). It was unanticipated in the sense that the grounds for the insight were provided by the police officer respondents in their answers to one of the open-ended questions in our survey. They were asked about the strengths and weaknesses of the program, mainly in view of the *contents* of police training, but they gave their opinion on the best practices of learning and teaching within the program, mainly in view of the *methods of instruction*. In this paper, we will briefly introduce the EEPRT project

(its aims, data and methodology), but we will concentrate on the focal pedagogical finding mentioned above.

We assume that the readers are familiar with traditional classroom learning (see, for example, Birzer & Tannehill, 2001, 234-238), but a word or two on PBL is probably in order. We follow Barrows and Tamblyn (1980), Barrows (2002), and Cleveland and Saville (2007) in defining PBL. According to the compact presentation of PBL by Barrows (2002, 119-120), problem-based learning takes *real-world, unresolved, ill-structured problems* as its starting point. With PBL, learners have to assume *responsibility for their own learning*. Teachers *facilitate* learning, but the emphasis is on the growth and independence of the learners. *Problems* in PBL should be such that the learners encounter tasks of the sort in their *real lives*. (Barrows, 2002, 119-120.) Cleveland and Saville (2007) add two additional features to this list. They refer to *modified cohort learning groups* (including students, but also other people, community members, etc.)

as well as the idea that teachers need to take *emotional intelligence* and *multiple intelligences* into account (Cleveland & Saville, 2007, 12-16; cf. Birzer, 2003; Birzer & Tannehill, 2001; Werth, 2009; 2011; Shipton, 2009).

PBL has been also criticized in the research literature. According to Kirschner et al. (2006), the empirical evidence does not support the claims of PBL. Students need structured guidance in trying to learn complex new skills and competencies.[2]

Our findings agree with the propositions by Kirschner et al. Students are in need of a logically consistent framework that gives coherence to judicially, technically, and tactically skilled law enforcement. The police officer respondents of our survey, when reflecting upon their own training and work experience, were very clear about this need.

However, the logically consistent framework that is valued by the police cadets and the newly graduated police officers is often found in practice, not in print. Instead of classroom PowerPoint drilling (well-structured conceptual representations), the police cadets are in need of practical training periods with experienced mentors (off campus) and well-organized learning experiences, such as scenario training (well-structured practical experience), when attending contact education (on campus). On the basis of our qualitative research results, this is what the newly graduated police officers have come to appreciate in police training, while criticizing, at the same time, classroom teaching (if unrelated to practice) and PBL (if ill-structured).

AIMS, DATA, AND METHODS

It takes about two and a half years to complete the basic police recruit training in Finland, *The Diploma in Police Studies Programme*. Police officers with the diploma are eligible for the posts of Senior Constable, Senior Detective Constable and Detective in the Finnish police force.

The structure of the program combines contact teaching periods (periods 1–6 and periods 8 and 10, which are six weeks each) with two practical training periods in real policing contexts (periods 7 and 9). The police cadets work in one of the 24 police departments with a senior constable as a mentor in the patrol.[3] Taken together, the two practical training periods cover approximately 14 months, which is about half of the entire program. There is also a PBL component to the program. However, PBL has no exclusive status, but is implemented along with traditional contact education. It is a hybrid model combining pure PBL with well-structured scenario training.

The *Evaluation of the Effectiveness of Police Recruit Training in Finland* project aimed to evaluate two, long-term target benefits of the program: 1) the *employment* rate of the recently graduated police officers, and 2) the *skills and competencies* of the police officers when compared to the actual requirements of the occupation.

The data come from two surveys conducted in February and March 2011: a survey of the police officers who graduated during the latter part of 2009 (n/N = 105/165 police officers, response rate 63.6%) and a survey of the supervisors of these police officers (n/N = 88/165 supervisors, response rate 53.3%). The representativeness of the survey data was found to be good.

RESULTS

The key finding that we are reporting in this paper was actually unanticipated. We came across this finding when analyzing answers by the police officer respondents to one of the open-ended questions of the survey.

They were asked to give their proposals for how best to develop the program:

"If you consider the different skills and competencies taught in the program, which

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[2] The question of an ill-structured vs. well-structured approach to learning is subtle, and the discussion could go much deeper than this. Barrows and Tamblyn (1980, ix) begin their classic work on PBL by making the claim that PBL itself is a "rigorous, structured approach to learning …", regardless of whether or not the problems assigned to students are well-structured. See, however, *ibid*., p. 12 and p. 18.

[3] In Finland both the structure of the police organization and also the structure of police training will change in the beginning of 2014.
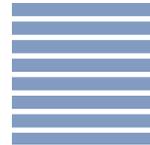
were the parts of the program that left you insufficiently prepared for the occupation of a police officer? Which parts of the program in your opinion are most in need of improvement?"

The single most important category of proposals for how best to develop the program was associated with practical training, especially with the perceived benefits of practical training and the exercises within the program (for example, "More practical training, the only way of learning is by doing"; EEPRT, 2011). But there was another, more subtle aspect to the answers. The police officer respondents seemed to have a clear idea of the type of practical training that had been the most valuable to them during their training period.

The general idea was that the meaning of the different component parts of the curriculum should be made clear and concrete from the point of view of the occupation of a police officer. None of the topics included in the program should be detached from the occupational procedures, but should rather support these procedures and the occupation as a whole in an intelligible manner. *Comprehensive Integrated Case Exercises* (*CICE*) were considered to be the best way to accomplish this. With CICEs, several different skills and competencies are used and applied to situations that resemble ordinary patrol and field realities. In this sense, these exercises resemble problem-based learning rather than subject-based learning (Barrows & Tamblyn, 1980, 11-15). The case exercise is particularly beneficial if it covers the whole procedure from beginning to end and if it deals with a case that is ordinary (common) in alarm or patrol missions, in traffic enforcement, or in criminal investigations (domestic violence, traffic accident, crime scene investigation). The judicial, technical, and tactical details are best understood in the comprehensive context of occupational procedures, "the full span of an assignment."

This was considered to be the best approach to training by the police officer respondents. However, they also noticed that some of the component parts of the program lacked this kind of coherence:

"The whole. How it all goes from the patrol in the field Þ crime investigation Þ district court sessions, etc. Too often, the core subjects were treated as isolated topics, so that you couldn't get the idea from the perspective of the whole process."

"Coherent entities, for example, registration, the check-up of a vehicle + driver, etc. The subjects were covered in distinct chunks Þ there's a need for exercises that are performed from the beginning to the end."

"The full span of an assignment — taking care of an alarm mission from the beginning to the end — I didn't really get it until I was already at work."

"All practical functions Þ more practical exercises; for example, patrol xx takes assignment 34, takes the load on, and tips it when back at the department. Takes care of things with the help of a radio and other equipment, as in real situations. Basic assignments of the sort."

"Encounters with difficult clients. The assessment of the situation, measures of use of force, taking into custody, and clearing the case, as one single exercise. Nowadays, all too often, these functions are treated as if they were isolated tasks." (EEPRT, 2011.)

The mental image of the "whole" or "coherent entity" denotes a logically consistent framework for action, a coherent occupational procedure. In essence, the respondents wanted clear guidance and to gain experience in perfectly ordinary occupational problems and not be presented with ill-structured, "unsettled and puzzling" problems (Barrows & Tamblyn, 1980, 18). Yet, in accordance with PBL, the framework that gives logical consistency and coherence to solving the problems is something the police officers say they find in practice (in the accumulation of experience), not in print. This is why they appreciate practical training periods with experienced mentors (off campus) and CICEs (on campus).

The categories in table 1 point out the weaknesses shared by both *traditional classroom learning* and *problem-based learning*. They lack well-structured, perfectly ordinary problems of the occupation that could be combined with intelligible practical solutions in real or realistic environments. These solutions are based on experience and embedded in practice. Teaching arrangements that provide the students with an opportunity for such an experience are feasible. Indeed, for the newly graduated police officers, they constitute the most valued part of the program.

The research literature is well aware of the existence of the domain of logically consistent
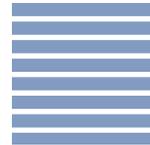
practical knowledge. It is probably best reflected in theories of *cognitive constructivism* (Neisser, 1976), *experiential learning* (Kolb, 1984), and *tacit knowledge* (Polanyi, 1964/1969; 1966). In an important article on learning, Lundin and Nuldén (2007) refer to *communities of practice* in law enforcement contexts.

Following Polanyi (1964/1969; 1966), we could say that knowledge – the skills and competencies – required for the occupation of a police officer consist of both explicit and tacit component parts. By this, we mean that while certain parts of knowledge can be expressed

in words and numbers, and written down in standard procedure documents, there are skills and competencies contributing to successful law enforcement that cannot be thus expressed. They are embodied in individual police officers (*bodily skills and habits, personal knowledge*) and embedded in unique patterns of interaction between police officers (*skills and competencies shared in action, cultures of knowledge*). Tacit knowledge may not be expressed in words and numbers, but it is a well-organized part of reality, which is supported by bodily skills and habits and by established patterns of interaction between individual police officers.

Table 1. Problems, solutions, and learning in police training

|	Well-structured problems and assignments	Ill-structured problems and assignments
Solutions from a real or realistic environment, knowledge based on experience and embedded in practice	Practical training period with experienced senior constable as a mentor; Comprehensive integrated case exercises; Scenario training	Problem-based learning
Solutions from a classroom or laboratory environment, knowledge based on conceptual representations	Traditional classroom learning	Learning by applying classroom learning, written examinations, essays

CONCLUSION

Police work consists of day-to-day practical diagnostics: Analyzing the type of the situation at hand, making decisions about the best available course of action, and actual implementation. Understanding the nature of the situation, mapping and evaluating the alternative courses of action, and skillfully implementing them in action all require extensive information and knowledge about similar or very nearly similar situations. Skilled law enforcement presupposes experience, because the schemata of different kinds of situations accumulate with experience.

From the point of view of learning, this means that a wannabe swimmer must swim.

Fortunately, from the point of view of teaching, it does *not* mean: "Just throw them into the pool!" There are several different ways of simulating the real-life situations of policing and of providing students with a glimpse of skilled law enforcement, from scenario training, CICEs, and practical training periods with experienced mentors to all kinds of combinations of these teaching arrangements.

We do not suggest that traditional classroom learning and PBL should be abandoned: quite the contrary. Teaching arrangements are complementary rather than contradictory in police recruit training. We will also need both classroom teaching and PBL in the future.
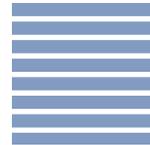
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