

Christine S-M & Nancy W. (2016). Linking Educational Institutions with Police Officer Training Programs. *Journal of Education and Learning*. Vol. 10 (2) pp. 139-146.

Linking Educational Institutions with Police Officer Training Programs

Christine Sereni-Massinger*
Saint Leo University, Florida, United States

Nancy Wood**
Saint Leo University, Florida, United States

Abstract

Community partnerships that are formed through Community Oriented Policing help to assist law enforcement officers with academy education and post academy education. The training offered in the academy and the post academy Field Training Officer Program traditionally places little to no emphasis on critical thinking, professional self-regulation, communication skills or problem-based learning. In the last several years a new approach has been spawned. The Police Training Officer Program (PTO) is an innovative form of education that focuses on problem based learning for post academy graduates. The PTO Program emphasizes adult education, problem solving, emotional intelligence, and conflict resolution. This education is necessary to assist officers in de-escalation strategies within their communities and can lend to the reduction of civil disturbances. However, currently, relatively few agencies are offering this education to their post academy graduates and none are offering it to their academy recruits due, in part, to a lack of qualified instructors. PTO instructors must be proficient and fully trained in problem based learning techniques. Through Community Oriented Policing, law enforcement agencies can address this instructor shortage by partnering with university educational institutions to secure instructors who are competent in andragogy, critical thinking, and problem-based learning.

Keywords: *criminal justice, community, education, problem- based learning*

*Christine Sereni-Massinger, Associate Professor, Department of Public Safety, School of Education and Social Services, Saint Leo University, Saint Leo, Florida, United States.
E-mail: christine.sereni-massinger@saintleo.edu

** Nancy Wood, Assistant Professor, Department of Human Services, School of Education and Social Services, Saint Leo University, Saint Leo, Florida, United States.
E-mail: nancy.wood@saintleo.edu

Introduction

Opinions towards law enforcement are rapidly changing in America (Hudson, 2014). Civil disturbances across the Country are increasing. Law enforcement officers have experienced greater challenges within their communities as a result of cultural diversity issues. Tactical and substantive training that is traditionally offered at the academies is no longer enough. Officers need more than mechanical skills and rote memory capabilities (Vodde, 2009). Higher level learning including: problem based learning, critical thinking and interpersonal communication skills training are now needed. Higher-level learning may lead to de-escalation of civil disturbances and better prepare officers to interact with diverse members of their communities (Williams, 2012).

Traditional education in the academy does not promote problem-solving skills. Instead, it is offered in the pedagogical style of learning and teaching where the instructor provides the content to the student and an evaluation is thereafter performed. New officers are entering their professional roles in our American communities without benefit of problem based learning skills. These officers are given the charge to uphold social order and build community relationships (Mc Dermott & Hulse, 2012). Improved decision-making and education in critical thinking assists officers in questioning their biases and assumptions and can lead to de-escalation and community safety (Safi & Burell, 2007).

The Police Training Officer Program is the first post academy training program offered to recruits within the last 30 years. This Program is funded by Community Oriented Policing Program to assist law enforcement with the reduction of civil disturbances and community safety. The Police Training Officer Program promotes problem based learning, interpersonal communication skills, critical thinking and professional self-regulation. It has been piloted in six agencies across the United States. However, numerous agencies in the United States are not adopting the Program due to the lack of qualified instructors proficient in androgogy. Through the Community Oriented Policing Program agencies across the Country can partner with university educators to provide the PTO Program to both new recruits as well as current recruits within the academies, providing them with the policing education necessary for the twenty first century.

Today's training programs involve teaching a prescribed procedure or response to a specific situation, often the subject matter having a narrow scope. With police training addressing the tactical portion of developing a reflexive response, Police Training Officer (PTO) Programs are available to bridge the educational gap by providing a problem based learning framework to develop interpersonal skills, engage in conflict resolution and apply decision making skills. The purpose of the article is to identify the importance of linking educational institutions with police officer training programs in order to provide qualified instructors that are needed to teach PTO programs.

The education PTO programs go beyond the traditional training that requires prescribed procedures to become second in nature and incorporate critical thinking, emotional intelligence, interpersonal communication skills, and conflict resolution skill sets. Agencies will find that problem-based learning highly beneficial to assist police officers in various aspects of policing not covered by traditional training. By forming partnerships with educational institutions, policing agencies will have the ability to fill the gap of instructors needed to teach adult and problem-based learning to officers as part of mandatory annual and continued education. Through Community Oriented Policing, the importance of linking educational institutions with police officer training programs can address the current shortage of qualified PTO instructors.

Literature Review

For nearly thirty years, Community Oriented Policing (COP) has been a common approach used between law enforcement and communities. This approach provides a framework for a community and law enforcement to work cooperatively by focusing specifically on the developing strong relationships between the community and those law enforcement agencies in authority (Wehrman & De Angelis, 2011). Through the years, COP has pointedly grown with numerous jurisdictions having embraced this approach. The goals of COP include community cohesion and cooperative efficacy. Research has found over 90 percent of police agencies that serve populations of 25,000 or greater have implemented the COP method (Morabito, 2010). Various successful programs have been initiated from the COP approach including citizen's patrols, neighborhood watches and other similar programs (Taylor, 2002; Xu, Fiedler, & Flaming, 2005). The neighborhood watch initiative places the responsibility on the community for protecting each another as neighbors look out for their neighbors (Morabito, 2010). In fact, over 90 percent of police agencies that serve populations of 25,000 or more have adopted the COP method (Morabito, 2010).

To achieve the creation of communities bonding with agencies, much effort has been focused to the development of relationships between the community members and the law enforcement agents (Xu, Fiedler & Flaming, 2005). Particular effort is made to assign law enforcement officers to long-term posts in specific areas of the community so that there is opportunity to establish connections and develop relationships through consistent interactions (Chappell, 2009). Another effort is law enforcement visibility can be increased through less formal interactions such as officers engaging in informal conversation with community members, such as home or business owners. Research has shown these familiar interactions are proactive in addressing poor perceptions of law enforcement (Chappell, 2009). Consistent one on one interaction has increased opportunities for developing trusting relationships and lessening cultural misperceptions (Connell, Miggans, & Mc Gloin, 2008).

Researchers maintain that strong interpersonal communication between community members and law enforcement officers positively contributes to creating a safer community (Connell, Miggans, & Mc Gloin, 2008). Various agencies often encourage off duty officers to engage in informal relationship building within their assigned jurisdictions (Connell et al, 2008). Diamond and Weiss (2009) assert that this geographic accountability influences the crime rate and helps in lowering problems within the community. Some success has been noted in building trust with the diverse community members (Wehrman & De Angelis, 2011). As communities continue to become more highly diverse, further law enforcement education is needed to address problem solving within a diverse community.

Research has shown that as more community members are willing to work with law enforcement officers, the safety of the community will increase (Wells, Schafer, Varano, & Bynum, 2006). The research reveals that law enforcement agencies that provide diversity education in the training curriculum are more apt to readily address conflicts and lower crime rates (Fraser, 2011; Kapler & Gaines, 2009; Oliva, Morgan, & Compton, 2010). The education portion of the training curriculum for law enforcement officers would require qualified instructors who are highly knowledgeable on critical thinking, interpersonal communication, emotional intelligence and conflict resolution. Educational institutions can be instrumental in providing qualified individuals to instruct training in problem based learning for officers to be equipped in the necessary decision making skills set and de-escalation techniques (Safi & Burell, 2007).

Law enforcement's role has shifted beyond enforcing the law to becoming a front line problem solvers and crisis interventionists within the community. The level of education provided at most academies has not reflected this shift of new responsibilities and capabilities. The majority of police academies educate using the behaviorist style of learning, where information is received by lecture with the expectation that a student will practice the new information in the field (Birzer & Tannehill, 2001). Research shows that 90 percent of academy learning is task oriented (Hundersmark, 2005) with a reflexive expectation. Learning based only on lecturing does not provide students the opportunity to become better problem solvers through critical thinking application opportunities. Educational training focused on problem solving, critical thinking and interpersonal communication skills will provide today's law enforcement officer's professional skills set to more effectively address daily occurrences within the community they serve (Pitts, Glensor & Peak 2007).

Results and Discussion

Traditional Academy and Post Academy Education

Traditional education in the academy currently focuses on rote memory and tactical skills. There is no standardized content across the Country. Each institution is free to delegate the education based on what they consider is relevant for that area. Training board standards identify certain topics that must be taught and the number of training hours required for each candidate (Caro, 2011). However, a vast distinction in the education provided across the Country exists. For example, although in San Francisco 960 hours of a 1080 training was devoted to theory, in Los Angeles an 828-hour training course is broken into 230 hours in the academy, 113 hours of firearm training and 140 hours of physical training (Kinnaired, 2007). Topics that are offered in traditional police academies include defensive tactics, driving skills and marksmanship. Substantively the topics that are traditionally covered include criminal law and traffic law. The content is presented in the pedagogical style of teaching and learning wherein the teacher presents the content and conducts an evaluation of the instruction with the students (Knowles, 1990; Knowles, Swanson, & Holton, 2005; Whitby, 2013).

Post academy education currently consists of the San Hose Model of Field Officer Training more commonly known as Field Officer Training (FTO) Program. The FTO program arose from a need to have officers trained in real life situations. New recruits are mentored in the field by more experienced officers known as training officers. This mentorship process assists the new recruits with

applying what was learned in the academy to real life situations. The training officers are often chosen because of their experience in the field versus their ability to teach. Harris (2008) contends that although such practical experience can be useful to recruits, it can also be limiting, in that it does not encourage recruits to question personal biases and assumptions.

Contemporary leaders in law enforcement have encouraged change in the content and delivery of education provided at the academy and post academy (Hundersmark, 2009). Today's law enforcement leaders propose the Constructivist approach, a model similar to andragogy. This approach encourages the student to learn through peer collaboration and problem based instruction. Open discussion is encouraged and students become proficient in collaboration regardless of their cultural differences. Proponents of the constructivist approach contend that collective problem solving and role-play better prepares the student to enter their community as law enforcement professionals.

The paramilitary approach to academy education currently focuses on the "how" wherein the andragogical approach focuses on the "why" (Vodde, 2009). Andragogy teaches adults to be self-directed (Knowles, Swanson, & Holton, 2005). The student is held accountable for their learning and self-evaluation is thereafter encouraged (Knowles, 1990; 2005). Knowles opined that the adult learner has a unique experience in learning and that they have a unique orientation to learning. These two assumptions combined suggest that adults seek to use problem-solving skills relative to their life experience and professions (1990; 2005; 2013). This type of education should continue annually throughout an officer's career through mandatory continued education.

The Police Officer Training Program

Law enforcement agencies in the U.S. were severely criticized after the Rodney King and O.J. Simpson matters. Shortly thereafter, a new alternative to law enforcement education was spawned. The Police Officer Training program (PTO) incorporates community oriented policing and problem solving. It emphasizes such skills as critical thinking, communication, and emotional intelligence. (Pitts, Glensor, & Peak, 2007). The program has six objectives, which included in these objectives is a focus to assist the trainee with real life problem solving abilities within their community. The program also focuses on educating law enforcement to initiate relationships with members of their community so that the agency and the community work together to solve problems.

The PTO program was started in connection with Community Oriented Policing to move away from the paramilitary style of police education. However, shortly after its creation, the tragic incidents of September 11, 2001 unfolded. In 2009 only 150 agencies across the United States had adopted this new educational program as mandatory for their law enforcement officers (Pitts, Glensor, & Peak 2007). Today, it is estimated that only a couple hundred agencies use this method of training. The exact statistics are unknown since each state has individual training guidelines.

Educational leaders in law enforcement have spawned the PTO program based on such theorists as Dewey (1933), Bloom (1956) and Knowles (1990; 2005) who were each proponents of problem solving and critical thinking for adult learners. Knowles argued that adult education should be less focused on studying content and more focused on problem solving (Knowles, Swanson, & Holton, 2005). Knowles theory of andragogy teaches adults learners to be self-directed and self-regulated. Researchers theorize that education that promotes problem solving through critical thinking challenges students to make appropriate inquiries, hypothesize, analyze and appropriately judge a situation without applying assumptions and biases.

The PTO's problem solving method of education incorporates real life situations, allowing participants to learn with their community as part of the learning process (Pitts, Glensor, & Peak, 2007). Critical thinking is necessary for any professional in that it improves outcomes not only for the individual critical thinker but, also, for those who the professional serves. Applying cognitive skills in decision-making also helps achieve a mutually desired outcome for the law enforcement officer and the community (Halpern, 2003; Safi & Burell, 2007; Vodde, 2009). The PTO program also emphasizes interpersonal communication skills.

This is a 'soft skill' that is typically overlooked in the FTO program (Fraser, 2011). In training officers to develop interpersonal communication skills they learn to manage their own emotions as well as gauging encounters with the general public. These skills should be geared to de-escalation (Diamond and Weiss, 2009). "Encouraging police to use interpersonal skills in their work has brought big returns" stated Michael G. Fann, the director of loss control for Tennessee Municipal League Risk Management Pool" (Ceniceros, 2003, para. 11).

Emotional Intelligence (EI) is another core competency that is emphasized through the PTO program. Popularized in 1995 after two decades of research and scientific inquiry, EI is considered an important aspect of one's ability to manage their own emotion (Mayer, Caruso & Salovey, 2000) The EI

theory suggests that law enforcement officers are more effective if they are emotionally attached then if they are emotionally detached. This social competency helps law enforcement officers to become better leaders by having more empathy.

EI is also associated in law enforcement with “socio-emotional learning” (Mayer & Cobb, 2000). In the PTO Program students are encouraged to develop their EI by practicing mindfulness and also by journaling on a daily basis. Researchers contend that EI programs work if they are taught and managed by competent instructors. However, many instructors are not proficient at teaching EI since they are not proficient at experiential learning EI (Chernis & Goleman, 2001).

Linking with Educational Institutions

Many of today’s police officer training consists mainly of firearms use, tactical exercises, and arrest methods. Police training often entails reactive and repetitive training that instills muscle memory to a specific situation (Diamond & Weiss, 2009). Little or no training focuses on problem based training and providing a framework for addressing human behavior, as it relates to critical thinking, emotional intelligence, interpersonal communication and conflict resolution. Rather professional development of transferable skills is a needed and relevant educational component to provide today’s police force in order to be appropriately prepared for service (Diamond & Weiss, 2009).

It is necessary that today’s police training reflects and reinforces community policing (Diamond & Weiss, 2009). Problem solving and community partnerships need to be interwoven throughout the training that officers receive, whether it be academy training or in-service training. Traditional use of PowerPoint and lectures are not learner – centric and lack problem solving opportunities. Policing training instructors must be highly knowledgeable in adult learning methodologies in order to provide a non-lecture approach when instructing the problem based learning curricula. Educational institutions can assist in addressing the gap for qualified instructors by forming partnerships with policing agencies to teach adult and problem-based learning to officers.

Conclusion

In an evolving society, change is needed. The traditional post academy education is no longer sufficient. Higher-level learning is equally imperative for both law enforcement as well as the community that they serve. Problem based learning, critical thinking and interpersonal communication skills are necessary in a multicultural society wherein even minor civil disturbances can escalate.

Senior command within law enforcement agencies can follow the already existing Community Oriented Policing Model to encourage migration from the traditional post academy education to the Police Training Officer Program by partnering with universities. University instructors who are proficient in critical thinking, andragogy and problem solving can educate senior command, agency management and law enforcement trainers in practices geared to higher-level learning. This educational partnership can focus not only on post academy recruits through the PTO program, but also focus on recruits still in the academy. All law enforcement officers would, therefore, be educated in higher- level problem solving skills and critical thinking prior to their first professional outreach with their community

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