

The Policing Practicum as a Rite of Passage

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Abstract

In NSW the University model of police recruit education (Jennett & Bull 2006) requires recruits to maintain their motivation over 2.4 years of on-campus study. At Charles Sturt University maintaining their connection with and motivation towards their chosen career is a factor in the design of a mid-year practicum. The practicum also provides a reality check for those whose idea of a police officer's work is gleaned mostly from television. In this paper we discuss the reactions of a group of second year policing students to their experiences during their practicum.

Wenger (1998:10) argues that learning and knowing involve 'primarily active participation in social communities'. Whilst on-campus the students experience the academic community of practice and peers. Whilst in the field they experience the policing community of practice. The practicum becomes a 'rite of passage'. Those who survive, return with increased enthusiasm for their chosen profession and impatience to practice it.

Introduction

In addition to its central involvement in police recruit education at the NSW Police College, Charles Sturt University has a university degree, the Bachelor of Justice Studies (Policing), based at its Bathurst campus. It is this degree course which is the focus of this paper. The first two years of the BJS(P) degree take place on the university's Bathurst campus and then students relocate to the Police College at Goulburn and the field to complete both the Associate Degree in Policing Practice and the BJS(P) simultaneously. In the second year students begin to engage with 'the field' by studying JST 226 Introduction to Police Investigation (taught by a serving police inspector) attending police-run [? DB] residential schools at the Police College at Goulburn and experiencing a 60[?] hour field placement (practicum) in a local area command. The practicum, in particular, provides a reality check for students on their expectations of their own

chosen career and their own suitability to pursue it. Wenger's concepts of learning communities and regimes of competence will be used to discuss the findings of a study of second year BJS(P) students prior to and after the practicum.

Learning communities

Wenger (1998: 10) argues that learning and knowing involve 'primarily active participation in social communities'. While they are on campus, students experience the *academic community of practice* and the *social community of their peers*. Some already have friends or family who are police officers and derive at least some of their expectations of their chosen career from 'the field' indirectly through these sources. So they are indirectly participating in the *police community of practice*. However, in the main the influences on them in first year and the first half of second year are from their teachers (university academics) and their peers.

This study surveyed forty second year students towards the end of first semester, just prior to the field placement/practicum. Both open ended and closed questions were used in the survey. Unusually, (as compared to previous years) only a minority of these students qualified (i.e. passed their Professional Suitability Assessment (PSA) to go on field placement. Post practicum fifteen students were surveyed and participated in a focus group (constituting three

quarters of those who went on the practicum). While in the field the students become immersed in the *policing community of practice* ('the field') characterised as it is by adherence standard operational procedures and an occupational culture (Chan : Reiner 2000) which assists officers to cope on a day by day basis with the challenges of policing in NSW.

Students' Pre-Practicum Occupational Expectations

In this paper we are basically focusing on the demographic and qualitative findings from the surveys and a post practicum focus group. The pre-practicum group consisted of males and females with an age spread of 19-22 [CJ check]. Regionally, they came from the Central West, the North Coast, Sydney and the Blue Mountains for the most part. Most came straight to university from school but a few had worked or traveled for a year or two prior to enrolling. Some had done further study to qualify for university entrance. A few had relatives in policing. Most [?] stated that they wanted to become a member of the NSWPF, though somewhat surprisingly some did not, perhaps these were hoping to join the Australian Federal Police (AFP) (but this was not specified). While many said that they 'had always wanted to become a police officer' some had not.

Factors which motivated students to enter a policing career

Students overwhelmingly expressed a desire to 'help others', 'apprehend criminals', 'develop special skills', gain 'promotion', seize the opportunity to demonstrate leadership' and were seeking an 'active/outdoor job'. Many sought to 'improve society' and some were attracted to the 'reputation of the police', 'respect' in which police are held in society (one female ? student said 'it is a respectable job'). Many rated the 'danger and excitement of policing very highly and were attracted to it as an 'interesting job'. Most were attracted to policing as a 'professional career'. A few rated the 'ability to maintain a personal life outside of work' as 'extremely important' and a few rated the 'amount of leisure time' as 'extremely important for them. Only one (?) rated 'the opportunity to wear a uniform' as 'very important' but more saw the 'opportunity to carry a firearm' as extremely or very important. Very few identified 'the influence of friends and family' or the media as very important. Nevertheless, one identified the media as 'extremely important' in his choice of career (B1R8). Interestingly, one person who was attracted to the career for promotion and leadership opportunities did not value 'developing special skills' as important at all! Other students saw this as either very or extremely important. Two female students gave the following reasons for their career choice:

'To reduce fear of the police within particular communities'. (B1R4

Female 19ys)

'I come from a town where there is a lot of unfairness and youth crime. I want to help my home town. (B1R11 Female 19ys)

With reference to these two statements it should be noted that the BJS(P) is an important entry point into policing for young people from rural communities and can potentially facilitate their aim to become a change agent in the types of communities which they understand.

Many students emphasised that the reason for their choice of the BJS(P) was as follows:

'Because I felt that I was too young to go straight to the NSW Police College. And I wanted to experience university lifestyles.' (B1R6 Female 19 ys)

'Having a full degree would be better than acquiring [an] associate degree of policing. I believe that having a degree would aid in promotion and future careers.' (B1R12 Male 22 ys)

The reference to future careers (i.e. plural) highlights the fact that only a few students expect policing to be their life time career. In fact, one student had his life mapped out as follows:

'I expect: to be a detective after three years as a constable, to be a detective inspector before 35, to be a police commissioner by 40 or to jump into politics.' (B1R12 Male 22 ys)

Later he went on to state that:

'My main goal is to become a politician in the future. [A] policing career would lay a ground work for my future career.' (B1R12 Male 22 ys).

This is not an unrealistic ambition as the number of former police who are in parliament, including at the national level, around Australia attests. (1)

While students were well aware of the negative aspects of policing associated with 'danger', 'stress' and 'dealing with violent people', many rated 'pay', 'job security' and the prospect of 'promotions', and 'excitement' as reasons which would influence them to remain in the policing profession for the long term. One said:

'Love for the job, satisfaction with assisting others, [a] sense of being a part of the community.' (B1R1 Male 20 ys)

'Working environment/colleagues; safe job in regards to money/employment; room to try different things.' (B1R15 Female 20 ys)

So, overall, prior to their field placement students expected a career in policing to provide them with a secure, comfortable working environment which would not be deskbound, would be exciting, active and varied. They expected to learn new skills, to be respected by the community which they would be 'helping' (although some were aware that respect might not always be forthcoming) and to get promoted. They expected their university degree to prepare them for this career and to facilitate their efforts to get promoted.

After the Field Placement

Fifteen (three quarters) of those students who passed their PSA were surveyed again and participated in a focus group. (2) While in the field students experience *the policing community of practice*. For those who 'survive the practicum', i.e. continue with the BJS(P) or, at least, with their intention to continue with a policing career after completing a longer period of study, the practicum is a 'rite of passage' from which they return with increased enthusiasm for their chosen profession and impatience to practice it. Others decide that policing is not the career for them and switch to another course.

In the focus group some demonstrated that they had been surprised by some of the things which they had seen.

'I knew that there was some paperwork in policing, but didn't realize how much until I went on placement'. ()

For any one who was hoping for an active, outdoor job this was a reality check. Others found their expectations fulfilled.

'I loved the flare and action'. ()

'Busier stations were more interesting. They were in less desirable locations like Sydney or Newcastle. They had younger officers, who were more dynamic and keener on the job'. ()

One observed that 'older officers were less keen on the job'. Another said that it was 'not as exciting as I thought it would be'. Another observed that in the country town where s/he [?DB] had her placement there was 'not much negativity. The officers were fairly positive and there were a lot of older ones' ().

When asked 'Did you find what you want to get out of a policing career actually correlated with what you experienced on the job?' focus group respondents said:

'I didn't expect much to be honest.' I'm not going into this to make a whole big change, to be honest. You're not going to change anything. You might arrest one or two people, but that's about it.' (Male student)

'You're just an observer all the time. You learn how it goes. You might arrest one or two people, but that's about it'. (Male student)

Students observed police officers 'using their skills, knowledge and abilities'. As one said, '[e]ven driving around there's a skill. They're always watching.' (Female student). Several commented that during their practicum, the police were seeing and commenting on things that the student had not noticed. Several commented that police had 'amazing communication skills'. When asked whether these skills were taught at the police College or learnt on and off the job, the response was 'Learnt on the job'. This reflects the view of this group that policing is learnt on the job, not at either the university or at the Police College. Another (female) student said 'I don't think any of it came out of training. It just comes from watching others. But some people have better skills'. (It should be noted that communication skills are taught in one entire subject and embedded throughout the others in the ADPP and that most police trained in the last fifteen years would have done at least one communication subject).

Comments from a number of students in the focus group suggested that the following skills are important for police officers:

'I think that a loud, confident voice is'. (Male student)

'Tolerance.' (Male student)

'An open minded approach to people and incidents'. ()

'Self control'. ()

'Being approachable'. (Female student)

According to their survey answers, all fifteen returned from their field placements keen to continue with their chosen career. Fourteen stated that they 'strongly agreed' that they wanted to be a member of the NSW Police Force and one 'agreed'. Compared to previous cohorts this is a bit unusual as several usually change to the general criminal justice degree to give themselves further career options or specifically aim for entry to the AFP.

Field placement had not produced any misgivings about their career choice among this group. They all still wanted to be police officers after experiencing policing but they had become 'choosy' about where they would like their first posting to be.

Peer community

This cohort of students has been identified by academic staff as not being as altruistically motivated (judging by class and focus group discussions) as previous cohorts and being less interested in academic study [DB?]. However, their responses to questions about their university course were consistent with those of other cohorts in that they were practically oriented, wanted more exposure to serving police and some could not understand the relevance of 'obscure subjects such as psychology, sociology and criminology' (). However, others identified psychology as particularly useful ().

In line with their practical orientation they nominated the field placement, residentials and JST 226 Introduction to Police Investigation (taught by a serving police inspector) as particularly useful. JST 201 Criminal Law was also frequently mentioned as a useful subject for those about to embark on a policing career. Some students nominated 'most' subjects as 'helpful' in preparing them to become police. The most anti-intellectual views are exemplified in the following statements:

'Field placement showed you what to do in policing. Most university stuff isn't relevant.' (Focus Group)

While some felt that they learnt 'more law than needed' in their course, others said they need to learn more about LEPRAs and 'the law ones are relevant' as 'It might come in handy, when we go to court. I didn't go to court so I don't know'. (Female student, Focus group).

This student cohort formed a *peer community* which was to a certain extent unsupportive of the academic side of their university experience and had absorbed attitudes from the *policing community of practice* that included the Police College in this academic experience. From their comments it seemed that they had a contradictory consciousness in relation to their orientation to the Police College. On the one hand, they looked forward to the Police College residentials and the further year of their degree there as more practically oriented, but on the other, they had absorbed from the policing community of practice the idea that it too was 'academic' and that they would learn what they really needed to know 'on the job'. While previous cohorts have exhibited some of these attitudes this group appears to be the most critical of the *academic community of practice* of any studied so far. Some of the reasons for this will be explored below.

We must ask how do students, or anyone for that matter, come to 'understand' their subjects, courses, place in the world? Wenger (1998: 41) cautions that we

should use the word 'understand' bearing in mind that its use often assumes 'some universal standard of the knowable'. He argues that:

'In the abstract, anything can be known, and the rest is ignorance. But in a complex world in which we must find a liveable identity, ignorance is never simply ignorance, and knowing is not just a matter of information. In practice, understanding is always straddling the known and the unknown in a subtle dance of self. It is a delicate balance. Whoever we are, understanding in practice is the art of choosing what to know and what to ignore in order to proceed with our lives.' (Wenger 1988: 41)

Students who enter the BJS(P) are seeking to gain knowledge and skills in order to assist them to achieve their goal of a career in policing. In the past inquiries such as those conducted by Lusher (), Fitzgerald (19) and Wood (199) found that police were educating new recruits into 'a police culture', i.e. the knowledge and practices of the police 'working personality' (Skogan ?). While there were many positive aspects to this culture, such as the camaraderie and support for each other in the face of danger for example, there were negative aspects to the same practices which led to covering up corruption and misconduct. The solution to weeding out this behaviour was judged by Wood to lie in university involvement in police education. (?education outside of the police environment – Wood's exact recommendation?)

Wenger (1998: 140) argues that learning takes place within 'a regime of competence'. Each community of practice has its own such regime. The NSW Police Force, like other police organizations, had its regime of competence, consisting of understandings about the way police went about their work and the nature of various categories of non-police, somewhat of an 'us' versus 'them' mentality (Reiner 2000). Wood thought that this regime of knowledge needed to be opened wider, to experience challenges to its understandings which would be achieved by constructive engagement with the university sector, where other regimes of competence were to be found.

Wenger argues that:

To say the concept of knowing is not defined outside a regime of competence is not to say that boundaries cannot be crossed ... [they can] But that can take place only when participants are able to recognize an experience of meaning in each other and to develop enough of a shared sense of competence to do some mutual learning. (Wenger 1998: 140)

Wenger (1998: 140?) argues that learning depends on certain relations – 'locality, proximity, distance'. He argues that 'learning is impaired when

experience and competence are too close' and also 'when they are too distant'.

Under these conditions 'they do not pull each other' [engage each other?].

'Crossing boundaries between practices [such as policing and universities] exposes our experience to different forms of engagement, different enterprises with different definitions of what matters, and different repertoires – when even elements that have the same form (e.g. the same words or artifacts) belong to different histories. By creating a tension between experience and competence, crossing boundaries is a process by which learning is potentially enhanced, and potentially impaired. (Wenger 1998: 140)

Many students who have chosen the full degree path into policing find themselves oriented towards a policing regime of competence but experiencing, in the first year almost exclusively, an academic regime of competence. Some struggle (or don't struggle!) to see the relevance of psychology's concerns with individuals' motivations and behaviours, sociology's focus on group behaviour which produces social structures which are key to social control and social stability and to social movements which burst these structures asunder to produce social change, and criminology which focuses on various explanations of why people commit crime, especially the structures of social inequality which

frustrate them in achievement of their life's desires. In a sense, the university's regime of competence is made up of many disciplinary regimes of competence. Therefore, it is difficult for some students, who see themselves as needing to learn practical policing skills and becoming physically fit enough to [?] pass their PSA, to appreciate the concepts, images, classification schemes, theories which predict human behaviour under specified circumstances and can help them to understand it, which the university curriculum makes available to them. In the words of one student, 'we should be taught common sense' (), and another, 'practical subjects'.

Wenger argues that

'Because learning transforms who we are and what we can do, it is an experience of identity. It is not just an accumulation of skills and information, but a process of becoming ... We accumulate skills and information, not in the abstract as ends in themselves, but in the service of an identity. It is in that formation of an identity that learning can become a source of meaningfulness and of personal and social energy.'

(Wenger 1998: 215)

Police recruits who study for a degree at university are in the process of achieving the identity of a professional police officer. Some understand, as Wood desired they should, that crossing regimes of competence, between those

which are to be found in the university sector and those which are to be found in policing, is a stimulating experience which should energise students in the short term, and produce more 'open minded', 'tolerant' police, whom people should find 'approachable' in the longer term. Class presentations, debates and so forth may even give them 'loud, confident voices'. These are all 'skills' identified by students who participated in the focus group for this study.

On the other hand, there were frustrated students who did not appear to understand this process of cross stimulation of regimes of competence, who demanded 'common sense', 'practical subjects', specific knowledge and skills they can use 'on the job'. For these students, the university does not appear to have engaged their experience, their past histories, in the way Wenger says is necessary for learning to occur. One student says this 'is a process which is necessary to weed out the dummies' () but sometimes 'the dummies' are those who have yet to understand the relevance of what they are learning. Providing a space where they can make connection with the academic community of practice is the challenge for university educators.

Conclusion

Students' experience of the practicum in the middle of the second year of the BJS(P) has been argued to be a rite of passage during which they experience a reality check on 'the fit' between their expectations of their chosen career and

the daily role of a police officer in the field. They also get an opportunity to decide whether they are suited for what they find, whether it is consistent with their expectations or not. Moreover, it is the point at which they have a first hand chance to participate in the policing community of practice's regime of competence. They observe what is 'known' and 'valued' in the regime of competence of operational policing. Much of what they learn highlights the contrast between practical knowledge (valued) and abstract knowledge (derided or, at least, undervalued). When they return to the university they are bonded as a group in which some have mentally already left the university and are impatient with what they are learning. This is especially the case when they were advised in the field by police officers that 'policing degrees' don't have value even if other degrees do (). While they are embraced by some, the university's regimes of competence may be derided or resented by others at this point, but whatever the student's perspective about their university experiences, their eye is on 'the prize':

'[It is a] reward to know at the end of the day you made a difference and saved lives'. (B1R14 Male 19 ys)

Endnotes

(1) The current Commonwealth Minister for Ageing, Justine Elliot, is a former police officer, as is the Coalition Spokesperson ? Dutton. The most notable example is Bill Hayden, who was Opposition leader in the early 1980s[??].

(2) Professional Suitability Assessment is conducted by NSWPF and involves criminal and health checks. Many students experience difficulties at this stage because of driving offences, not having a driver's license, juvenile police records, living at the same address as a known offender, or health issues. Some of the latter might be quite unexpected by them e.g. asthma as a child, a shoulder 'popped' during a school football march. Filling out these forms is rather complicated and one student (B1R11 Female 19 ys) said 'Gaining approval (completing forms) can be difficult for students from a lower financial family'.