

FROM INSTITUTION-BASED TO WORK-BASED LEARNING

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INTRODUCTION

There is increasing interest in the organisation of learning in the workplace. Work-based learning (WBL) is being put under the spotlight in all its forms and manifestations. Underlying all of these forms is the assumption that a great deal of learning happens incidentally and informally during work. This is a shift of perspective, in that now there is greater recognition that learning occurs not only from pedagogical activities (for example, teaching and training) but also from participation in practical activities during regular work.

In Australia, there have been sustained efforts on reform in police departments (Bradley 1992: 133). These have been precipitated by the growing complexity of modern society and the concomitant expansion in the scope and sophistication of police work. The contexts and populations served by police now vary enormously in terms of ways of living and social organisation. Criminality is no longer confined to particular segments within society. In our contemporary society, the community and service functions of police are growing in significance as a more pro-active model of policing, as distinct from a predominantly reactive one in former years, becomes more firmly established. This changing societal context, and the resultant shift in police roles, both highlight the need to move towards new models and approaches to the initial and on-going professional development of police.

This study aims to explore the impact and importance of work-based learning for the professional development of police members (in this case, in SAPOL). Current strategic initiatives within the organisation emphasise the workplace as an important, but often undervalued learning site. The assumption is that shifting emphasis from traditional, institutionalised and time-served approaches to ones which seek to capitalise on the valuable learning resources that exist in the workplace will lead to more relevant, authentic, efficient, effective, transferable and team orientated training. This paper provides an overview of the research study and briefly reports on data from the first two phases.

The first part of the paper sets the context for the study by examining the importance of an integrated approach to professional development with particular reference to policing in

general and SAPOL more specifically. The role that the workplace can play in building an integrated approach to professional development is also examined. The second part of the paper briefly outlines the methodology for the study. An outline of the findings from the first two data collection phases is then provided along with emerging issues and future directions for the study.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The professional development of police officers has undergone considerable critique and reform within the last few years (Bradley 1992, Richardson 1994). As with other similar service occupations such as teaching and nursing, there has been much debate over ways in which theory and practice may be brought closer together. The traditional model of professionalism which emphasises 'technical rationality' assumes that the professional's work consists of the application of theoretical knowledge which has often been generated outside the workplace (NBEET 1994:6). As Schon (1983, 1987) points out, this approach does not match the reality of work in professions such as teaching where competency is developed in situations of uncertainty, instability and constant change. With regard to policing, change to the ways members are trained for their roles is seen as one of the most visible and vital tools in moves to professionalise police and to create a model of policing which is supported by a sociological as well as a legalistic framework. These new approaches to training stand in stark contrast to the more traditional programs which are underpinned by the 'limited expert' model of policing and focus on drills and instruction on law and procedures. As Bradley (1992: 145) notes,

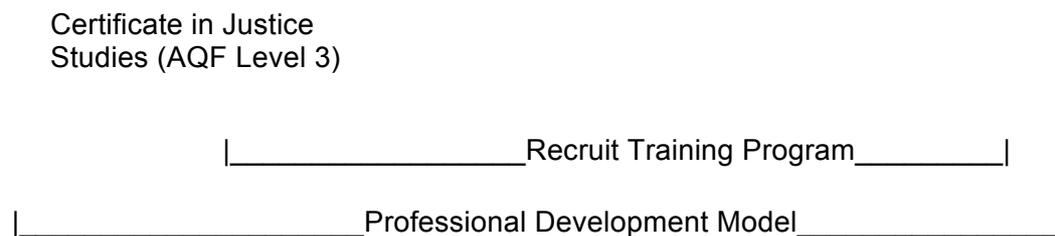
... this model conflicts with the realities of modern policing which sometimes require complex decision making, combined with a social ethic which emphasises flexibility... and integrity.

At the same time as this international debate on professional education has been unfolding, the provision of vocational education and training in Australia has been undergoing major reform. The national training reform agenda has precipitated an extraordinary rate of change within organisations involved in the delivery of vocational education and training (Harris *et al.* 1995). At the heart of the reform lies the belief that a more flexible and responsive vocational education and training system is better able to produce the type of workers required for an increasingly complex workplace, and that due recognition is to be given for relevant learning wherever and however it is acquired. These beliefs have in no small measure contributed to the "rediscovery" of the workplace as an authentic learning environment where learning can be closely linked with work.

Police training has not been divorced from these changes. In 1992-93, a study was undertaken to develop the competencies required of a general duties patrol officer in South Australia (Stehlik *et al.* 1993). This study later became the basis for the development of national competency standards for police at the operational level. Reviews of recruit training programs have resulted in the development of innovative approaches to preparing recruits for their roles. In Queensland, the new model of recruit training introduced in 1991 combined study at university and the police academy (Bryett 1992). Evaluation of this innovation led to further developments and the adoption of the Police Recruit Operational and Vocational Education (PROVE) program which is underpinned by problem-based learning methodologies (Melville and Cartner 1994). Another model of training has been developed in NSW that utilises 'sandwich' combinations of residential academy training, patrol observations, on-the-job training and final assessments. This program, the Police Recruit Education Program (PREP), is the subject of a current NSW research study into the processes whereby police professionalism is developed in recruits.

In South Australia, the proposed development model for professional development combines some of key aspects of both the Queensland and NSW approaches (see Figure 1 below). The model incorporates new entry requirements (completion of TAFE pre-vocational studies), basic recruit training and then a period of probationary field training of up to two years. During this period, members will also complete a Diploma in Justice Administration which acts as a gateway to further studies to gain a bachelor's degree in Justice Administration from the University of South Australia. One of the unique features of this model of professional development is the extended, formalised and officially recognised period of work-based learning. It is linked to the recently developed national policing competencies and will be underpinned by the philosophy that learning for work is a career long task which is embedded in the place and process of work rather than confined to an educational institution for a set period of time. The use of on and off job sites as legitimate learning environments aims to develop members who are 'competent in the workplace' as opposed to 'work ready', and recognises that the former takes time and experience and the opportunity to learn in real life work situations (VEETAC CBT Working Party 1993).

Figure 1: The Professional Development Model



WORK-BASED LEARNING

Within the Australian context, however, the use of the workplace as a learning site has, until recently, been characterised by a lack of serious research attention. Billett (1994) examined workplace learning arrangements in a mining and secondary processing plant to draw conclusions about outcomes from workplace learning. Kornbluh and Greene (1989) described how concepts of learning can be applied to the workplace, while the work of Field and Ford (1994), building on the work of authors such as Marsick and Watkins (1990), has identified qualities of the learning organisation. Welton (1992:32) emphasises the importance of the working environment in the process of developing competency in workers in the following manner:

Working conditions nurturing learning, the development of competence and personality growth will lead to the capacity for workers to develop 'dynamic knowledge' (that is, knowledge that will not only change themselves but also develop their social and work situation).

The potential of work-based learning to bring about cultural as well as structural change is significant, particularly in the light of research which highlights the importance of the workplace in the development of police attitudes (for example, Richardson 1994). Using the workplace as a primary learning site suggests the need for significant change in the way all

members of the police view learning and its relationship to work. Work-based learning presupposes that structural and social change will occur in the workplace. The shift in workplace culture and organisation will not only be a by-product, but also a pre-requisite, if the full potential of these changes to police training is to be a reality. This scenario brings into sharp focus some of the possible dilemmas which could beset moves to use the workplace as a site for learning for both recruits as learners and other staff who might be asked to act as workplace mentors, trainers or assessors.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The four research objectives of the research are:

- to analyse the process of change as SAPOL moves from a primarily institution-based model to an integrated model of training which emphasises the workplace as an important and complementary site of learning;
- to identify and explore the enabling factors and the barriers to establishing effective work-based learning opportunities for new police;
- to explore the impact of implementing work-based learning, with particular reference to managers, supervisors and other personnel who will work with new police; and
- to evaluate the effectiveness of the model of professional development, with particular reference to the outcomes achieved by learners and the perspectives of managers, supervisors and other training staff.

DATA COLLECTION

The research methodology is built around key events within the organisation where learning is most apparent and therefore most open to examination. The training of newly appointed probationary constables provides such an entry point into SAPOL's current approaches to learning in the workplace.

The research is being undertaken in three broad phases. In the first instance, a portrayal of existing approaches to work-based learning has been developed. Constables recently graduated from the academy, along with their senior partners were interviewed to gain some insights into how work-based learning historically has been viewed and undertaken within the organisation. Secondly, data were collected from a group of key SAPOL personnel who have played a significant role in shaping the vision of how work-based learning is to be integrated into workplace practice as a result of a range of new initiatives. The purpose of these two phases is to gauge the scope and dimensions of the reforms that the organisation will undergo and to map some of the likely enablers and barriers to the change process. The third phase, now under-way, is examining in depth the experiences of cohorts of probationary constables who graduated in 1998, their supervisors and other team members with work-based learning over a period of 18 months. The focus of this paper is the data collected in the first two phases of the study.

CURRENT APPROACHES TO LEARNING IN THE WORKPLACE

A number of key themes emerged from the interviews conducted with probationary constables and their supervisors about the current practices in relation to work-based learning. These themes related to:

- the nature of learning in the workplace and how this contrasts with learning at the academy,
- how learning takes place, and
- its impact on the workplace.

The nature of learning in the workplace

Learning revolved predominantly around the practical tasks needed to "get the work done". Rather than being unstructured, the learning was quite tightly constrained by a range of factors including the tasks that were required to be done, which could vary widely from one location to another and, more importantly, by the culture of the workplace - expressed most often by phrases such as *learning the way to do things around here*. From the supervisors' perspective, the workplace also played a vital role in enhancing the transferability of learning.

The workplace also acted as a site for consolidating the learning that had taken place at the academy. The workplace reinforced the theory learnt off-job and placed *it into its context*. The workplace provided a site for *refining skills and learning more about self and relationships with other people*. From the perspective of the probationary constables' supervisors, how these linkages were developed were very much dependent upon the individual constable and the manner in which they approached their learning (ie: their learning style).

How learning takes place

Learning was facilitated in a number of ways. It was most often characterised as *learning from doing*. Probationary constables often were "active" observers of an event. This was then followed by them attempting the task at a later time when they felt confident to do so. The facilitation of learning was most often undertaken within teams, or by the probationary constables using the rank structure as a means of determining who to ask for assistance. Learning "outside of the rank structure" (that is, the probationary constable making a deliberate choice to seek out a professional from another area) did not occur frequently. When it did occur, this behaviour seemed to be linked to a desire of the probationary constable to obtain more than they had been told by their immediate colleague (especially if he/she thought that the colleague's "answer" conveyed a sense that they were unsure of what to do themselves!).

Learning from mistakes also featured highly in descriptions of learning. Probationary constables reported that this approach to learning often carried the under-tone that they needed to *shape up or ship out*. Learning in the workplace relied heavily on the probationary constables being able to *take what they needed and to extend their learning by asking questions*. However, having the confidence to ask questions was often a problematic issue.

Impact of learning in the workplace

The importance of the workplace as a site for learning was undisputed by all personnel who spoke about their experiences. They believed that sharing the expertise and accumulated wisdom that existed within the organisation was vitally important to the success of their work. Learning was an intrinsic part of their role as police. The need for learning to take place in the workplace, however, created some dilemmas and tensions for all parties.

At times the learning process tended to create confusion for the probationary constable. They reported *being overwhelmed* at the enormity of the job and the amount of learning they felt they needed to do. In addition, they were very sensitive to the fact that their learning often interrupted the workflow, thus impacting on all personnel. Probationary constables perceived that other team members, including the supervisors, often displayed either one of two contrasting approaches to their learning needs. On the one hand, some staff and supervisors were very aware of the probationary constable and their learning needs. Extra efforts were made to do tasks *by the book*. They were very aware of the importance of not

passing on poor work habits. On the other hand, other staff appeared to be largely unaffected by the presence of the probationary constables and their learning needs. They appeared to *go about their business and usually only show any awareness when something went wrong or the learning needs of another staff member impacted on their work*. It was difficult for all staff to reconcile the need for time to learn and the urgency that often beset their working environment.

Supervisors, however, stressed they understood the value of the probationary constables' learning to the workplace. Moreover, they saw the probationary constables' (an indeed all team members') success as reflecting on their ability to do their job. The practical realities of the workplace, however, seemed to overwhelm many, creating a climate where the value of learning in the workplace was often viewed with ambivalence.

It is against this backdrop of approaches to learning in the workplace that new strategic directions for the organisation will be implemented. These directions encompass an integrated approach to training which emphasises the workplace as an important and complementary site of learning. The nature of the change to be undertaken and the possible impact of these changes, from the perspective of key personnel within the organisation, are reported in the next section of this paper.

KEY INFORMANT VIEWS ON WORK-BASED LEARNING

The purposes of current approaches to training and development and the rationale for the shift to work-based learning

The increased emphasis on work-based learning was seen to underpin a significant shift from learning for the purposes of gaining promotion to learning as an integral part of work within the organisation. This shift required a fundamental break with past HRD functions and a realignment of learning goals for all personnel regardless of their position.

A number of reasons were advanced for the promotion and importance of work-based learning in the organisation. They included:

- financial issues relating to a shrinking resource base, alongside a growing complexity in police work which required a 'career long' approach to learning;
- changing trends in teaching and learning which means that young people in particular are no longer content with traditional 'chalk and talk' methods of facilitating learning;
- evidence that a 'front end' approach to training, where recruits spend extended periods of time in an off-site learning environment, has limitations in terms of realism and direct application to an increasingly diverse work environment;
- recognition of the role that work-based learning can play in assisting transfer of learning from off-site environments to the workplace;
- recognition of the role of work-based learning in assisting personnel to demonstrate competency in their roles - work-based learning is built on the notion of demonstrated competency in the actual work setting;
- the potential offered by work-based learning to impact on 'workplace ethos'. One of the many cultures that exist within the organisation is embedded in each work group's standards, attitudes and behaviours. These can be affected by increased efforts to promote the development of each person within the group and the value of learning as a key feature of work roles, regardless of their place within the rank structure; and
- the contribution that work-based learning can play in the development of a learning culture within the organisation.

The rationales given for the promotion of work-based learning vary from very concrete and practical reasons to expressions of ideas about how it may fundamentally affect the multiple cultures within the organisation. The reasons also reflect the hope that work-based learning will impact at various levels - ranging from increasing individual knowledge and skills through to the development of a learning culture across the organisation.

Compatibility of work-based learning with current approaches to training and development

There was divided opinion on how compatible work-based learning (as perceived by the key informants) was with current practices within the organisation. Some respondents suggested that work-based learning was not compatible because it required a specific set of interpersonal relationships which were not built on *camaraderie, loyalty, backing each other up* but rather relationships which enabled people to look at *true performance and to allow people to ask for help, to offer help and to facilitate learning*. Some of the key informants believed that work-based learning will challenge some people's understandings of their roles and will require a fundamental change in philosophy and culture.

However, there were also a number of personnel who believed that work-based learning was entirely compatible with current practices. They believed that systems were already in place (ie: the current probationary period where some assessment of learning already takes place) and that the increased emphasis on work-based learning would provide the organisational commitment to ensure that the learning in the workplace which is already in existence will be utilised more fully than in the past.

Impact of greater emphasis on work-based learning within the organisation

The following table outlines views on how work-based learning might impact on various groups of personnel within the organisation. These views offer insights into the ways in which the change process might be felt differently across the organisation and, in the light of current approaches to learning in the workplace, some areas where potential difficulties might be encountered.

| <i>Impact on personnel (in general)</i> | <i>Impact on Academy staff</i> | <i>Impact on managers and supervisors</i> |
|--|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • will encourage greater interaction with colleagues which, in turn, will build greater confidence | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • change from providers of training to managers of learning | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • will provide an opportunity to diversify their work to include a role as facilitator of learning |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • will increase confidence in system as it will ensure some standardisation in | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • move from trainers to facilitators of learning in a wide range of settings | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • acknowledgement of existing role that personnel play in training |

approaches to the
importance of learning
and ensuring the
competence of all staff

(no longer just
confined to
classrooms)

- will require personnel to take greater responsibility for their learning
- will require a change in mindset from "I'm ready to do the job" to "I will always need to learn more"
- enable partnerships to be built with personnel in the field
- change focus from a "front end" approach to a "whole of career" approach to professional development
- the relinquishing of some responsibility for training to the field
- provides an added obligation to ensure the competence of personnel over time
- build awareness of the importance of their role as supervisors and managers
- added responsibilities in a context of tightening resources and increasing work pressures

A POSSIBLE WAY FORWARD

In analysing the learning undertaken by probationary constables, the concept of the 'learning project' may be of relevance. The learning project is normally conceived in the literature as a means of systematically organising learning activities around a central work-related theme or problem. It is a means of pre-structuring and controlling activities and thus reducing uncertainty (Turner 1993). While police work may be viewed as a series of projects, however, the extent to which they can be "pre-structured" or "controlled" to reduce uncertainty is extremely problematic. A prominent feature of much of police work is that it is anything but predictable! For example, McNulty of Arizona State University refers to academy staff usually defining police work in terms of situational uncertainty, and that lengthy and analytical schemes and motivational analyses are rarely helpful in getting the job done. Recruits learn to appreciate common sense knowledge as far more valuable than predictive theories in "grasping the vast multifariousness of life in the world" (Geertz 1973: 91). Common sense knowledge is highly valued in police culture as a means of dealing with the many ambiguous situations that officers face (McNulty).

Another feature is that these projects are almost always group, or team, projects rather than individual ones. In this sense, the concept of learning project differs from the generally accepted educational use of the term, as for example, in the case of Tough's (1979) work. Yet another key characteristic is that it is not necessarily (nor even commonly) trainers who organise the learning, but the workers (team members) themselves as it is embedded in regular work-related activities. These team members, of course, are ranked in this type of organisation, so there are various levels of strategic and operational managers who play a role in probationary constables' learning.

In this situation, then, the notion of 'learning networks' is of particular significance. Learning network theory (Van der Krogt 1997; Poell *et al.* 1998) may provide an appropriate frame of reference for the organisation of work-based learning in policing. According to this theory, learning systems in organisations can be seen as networks of different *actors* (in this case, probationary constables, team partners, supervisors, field training officers, etc.) who organise the *processes* in the learning network. Such processes are interaction processes, in which learners undertake actions together. The constant interaction processes bring about diversity and dynamics in learning networks. Over time, these processes result in learning *structures*, including the structuring of content, an organisational structure and a learning climate. These structures in turn influence the actions of the actors in the learning processes.

From this perspective, then, learning is **a social rather than a mental operation**. That is, learning is located among people rather than inside the head of a single person. The assumption is, as Poell *et al.* (1998: 345) state, that people learn (ie: the theories on which they act are changed) as a consequence of their participation in the processes of the learning network.

In van der Krogt's theory, the diversity in learning structures is captured along three dimensions: vertical, horizontal and external. At the end of each dimension is a theoretical type, called a vertical, horizontal or external learning project. A fourth theoretical type may be conceived in the centre of the model, called the liberal learning project. Learning network theory therefore postulates four different theoretical types of learning projects, as follows.

(1) liberal learning project - individual workers organise the learning they think is necessary to deal with their work problems; they team up with others experiencing similar problems to learn from each other for their individual benefit.

(2) vertical learning project - trainers and managers organise learning activities and work situations for workers, who participate in the processes but have limited influence on learning policy and program development.

(3) horizontal learning project - workers systematically tackle work problems and reflect on the experience in order to learn.

(4) external learning project - refers to situations where contributions are made by actors outside the organisation to the learning of workers (such as the learning professionals undertake through participation in continuing professional development activities).

The potential of learning network theory appears to be that *a typology of learning projects* such as the one above *can refer explicitly to the relationship of competence development with work development and to the power relations between the actors involved*.

In our study, we may be able to contribute to the empirical evidence on such a typology as this one, and either confirm these theoretical types of learning projects or develop our own in

analysing ways in which learning takes place within SAPOL. Such evidence would not only contribute to the rather embryonic body of knowledge on learning network theory, but also practically inform SAPOL on how learning occurs in their organisation and thereby contribute to their efforts to develop effective models of professional development for their members. Our research will therefore COUNT in these two ways.

SOME CONCLUSIONS

Work-based learning can be viewed as a problematic but vital enterprise within the context of police work. The importance of learning from one's peers has always been a part of the training of new or less experienced personnel. However, this learning is often assumed to be a fairly straightforward process, quite often divorced from the complexities of the workplace. Research accounts of learning in the workplace have noted that learning occurs in a *social* context where factors such as status differences between groups of workers and receipt of remuneration for work have a real impact on the process of learning (Retallick 1993). When these factors are combined with tasks contained in a work role that has a high public profile and can often require personnel to be placed in real danger, the question of learning from one's work takes on a new dimension.

Our initial research suggests that a gap exists between existing approaches to learning in the workplace and the aspirations held for work-based learning. In particular, there would appear to be considerable challenges to be faced if the hoped-for benefits in terms of (re)shaping workplace culture and contributing to building a culture of learning within the organisation are to be achieved.

Current practices suggest that learning is viewed as a necessary but problematic part of police work. New recruits appear to be highly sensitised to their need for learning and the difficulties this creates for their colleagues in the workplace. One approach to facilitating learning seems to predominate. The "learning by watching and then doing" approach seems to rely quite heavily on the resources of the recruits for it to succeed. Asking for help did not appear to feature highly in the incidents of learning reported thus far. Entrenched work practices, rank structures and cultural norms about what constitutes "good" policing practice all act as factors which affect the learning which takes place.

There are, however, many aspects of current practice which the organisation can build on in order to achieve their stated goals. The importance of the workplace as a site for learning was undisputed by all personnel. The sharing of expertise and accumulated wisdom that exists within the organisation is acknowledged as vital to the success of policing. Harnessing this good practice, whilst at the same time building a climate that will be supportive of the affective changes needed to achieve the goal of becoming a learning organisation, appears to be one of the core issues in managing the change process over the next few years.

There is also little doubt that the change process will provide considerable challenge for all SAPOL personnel. Moves to integrate learning into the workplace will affect all ranks in subtly different ways. They will impact on workplace relations as well as the work practices of all personnel. Exploring and interpreting the unfolding of this change process is the next challenge in our research study.

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