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Open Range – what happens when firearms training turns into Higher Education?

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We've seen a lot of teachers do a lot of things, but when you're watching a trainer explain how to dispatch a cow, gain entry onto a house full of villains or deal with a sabre-wielding alcoholic, we know that we can only be in one place: the National Firearms Instructors Course

When we were asked if we would take part in a training programme with Kent Police in 2010, as University lecturers we jumped at the chance of a change of scenery. In our day job, we teach teachers, mostly in colleges of Further Education, delivering a 2-year part-time qualification that entitles the holder to work as a lecturer in a college, adult education centre and so on. Teaching methods, assessment techniques, dealing with training rooms and ICT are all part and parcel of what we do on a daily basis. So our brief was fairly straightforward: to deliver this qualification for a group of officers in Kent coming from all parts of the UK. No problem there then.

It was when we heard that the Police in question would be firearms officers that the questions started coming. Who were these people? What did they do? What could they possibly want from us? Were we in danger? We soon found out as we planned and delivered training as part of the National Firearms Instructor's course at Kent Police College.

The programme lasts six weeks, and is likely to grow in to seven very soon. It mixes the intensive technical training needed by anyone in charge of firearms training, and the academic input that supports this expertise by providing a base in how to convey it effectively. Our first concern wasn't the course content though, but our own credibility. Who did we think we were? And as we started preparing for the programme, it became clear that we had a lot to learn. But the Chief Firearms Instructor at Kent Police College Tactical Firearms unit made sure there were discussions about content, manuals were inspected and of course sessions on the range organised. Time in Kent's judgment suite was particularly useful; although we had never held a weapon before, we were taken through the process of responding in a critical shooting incident, and then debriefed. The learning curve was huge: seeing what it's like to feel the pressure, work as a team, and even take a decision that will affect many lives, all in a split second. Only then did we fully realise the extent of the responsibility and accountability of the AFO instructors, and the part we were able to play in it.

Our second concern was "who will these guys be"? But our stereotypes were soon sent back to where they came from. First off, they weren't all guys, and the toughest nuts, best shots and best drivers are not always the men. And they certainly weren't the "gorillas" some had jokingly warned us of. These 'guys' were perhaps the most perceptive and quick thinking students we had ever had. Learning points which were delivered and learnt in the morning were applied in the afternoon. Teaching session and development feedback given on the lesson was diligently implemented in the next, something we don't always see in other contexts.

There were so many other memorable moments such the session on destruction of animals, which included soft toys and blown up images of giraffes. The dynamic entry procedures concerned Sabrina greatly, particularly in finding out 'who would be paying for the door then?'

Micro-teach sessions, designed as a 'taster' to teaching were also enlightening: the one focusing on how to give an injection, which nearly made Sabrina faint, and the car-wash technique, still very much applied to her own car on a Sunday morning. One of Chris's favourites was an introduction to submarine tactics, using a real-life, homemade sub, ingeniously constructed from a plastic bottle, an old bike inner tube and a few nails as ballast. We all laughed when "HMS NFIC" bubbled its way across a washing up bowl of water, but we soon got the point: this was an object lesson in how to get technical points across without sinking the audience.

But where do trainees get all these ideas from? The fact is it takes a bit of a leap of faith to really believe that what you have is worth sharing and can actually be the basis of good training. One remarkable thing about NFIC is the first few hours of day one. You can sense the trepidation as 12 AFOs are forced in to what they expect to be a very uncomfortable place: academia. From the start, trainees are expected to critique, analyse, contribute, discuss...and this can be a challenge, especially if you're expecting (wrongly) to be lectured at. The great thing for us though is that any ice is broken so quickly, as groups form and effective teams develop.

Anyone in the force will recognise this though. If there's one thing colleagues know how to do, it's bond quickly, build teams and work together. But they also know how to communicate, explain, demonstrate, check...all essential teaching skills that not everyone can claim to do well. And so as we have begun to get to know the AFO's world, it has started to affect us too.

In fact, we have found ourselves using things we learnt with other trainees, starting with the jargon. Following a collaborative teaching session we don't 'reflect', we 'debrief'. 'Front-loading' describes the way we give important information out up front so that trainees know what they doing; tracking critical incidents from 'the smoking gun backwards' is a handy phrase to remind us all about the importance of training in the chain of events leading up to any sort of problem. We've not yet used "methods of entry", but when it becomes necessary to break into a classroom, Chris is definitely better equipped now than before. Amazingly, "shot-fall analysis" has been a useful term to help an archery teacher develop self-assessment techniques for his students: get your learners to look at the target, and see the links between the shot pattern and your stance, your technique, how stressful you feel at that particular moment.

There's no way we would have thought of doing this if we hadn't seen AFOs breaking down the reasons why shots had gone wide of the target. The more you think about it, the more you see that the sort of techniques, ideas and analysis which an AFO has to master have real applicability, and not just on the range. That said, we spent a lot of time on the range, trying to understand how AFOs were taught to shoot, the discipline of putting 'eyes and ears on the range', why were instructors and students staring at those little holes on the target at the end of the shooting... We asked questions, noted examples, obtained clarifications, took pictures, made videos, trying to soak up any information which may enable us to decipher their practice. This turned out to be crucial to our understanding of AFO instruction and to integrate our practice within theirs. The point is pertinent here, we do not intend to impose our teacher education on the NFIC, we want to complement it and wish to learn from it.

Looking back, and beyond the technicalities of teaching, we feel that our role consists of negotiating the 'grey areas' of education and training with the future instructors. We expect them to explore received ideas about teaching and learning and whilst this can be tricky for AFOs, it also challenges

us. Working on NFIC has overturned many of our assumptions about what and how to teach and train. For example, learning how to engage students with their learning and question one's practice as being critical is at the heart of teacher education but this needs to be in line with the rigour of AFO teaching practices, and the two are not necessarily so different. As for the dreaded course assignments, Sabrina would tell you that when you can hold a gun, there's nothing to fear from a bit of paper...

There still much for us to learn from the AFO teaching context but we hope that the current joint teaching approach has been beneficial to all parties. From our end, we can safely say that the relationships we have developed with the CFI, the NFIC course director, AFOs and the Kent instructors' team, have enriched our own teaching practice and given us a very different perspective on the notions of professionalization and professionalism.

For further information regarding Chris and Sabrina's research on the professionalization of AFO instructors please contact us at Sabrina.poma@canterbury.ac.uk