

## Developing Reflective Practice in Police Firearms Instruction

### Charting the Development

Three courses have now been completed as a collaborative venture between UCW and WMC with an approximately six month gap between each. The relatively long duration of the course (6 weeks) and the gap between courses has allowed time for much reflection on evidence gained through formal and informal evaluation. This section of the paper will firstly detail the ways in which evaluation has been carried out and the major issues identified through this process. The manner in which the course has changed since its inception to address these issues will then be discussed in terms of both content of the course and the nature of assessment.

#### *Evaluation*

##### 1. Open Learning Environment

Students are encouraged to give informal objective feedback throughout the course in the spirit of shared learning between tutors and students. This has typically taken place during sessions, after sessions, over meal breaks and at social functions.

##### 2. End-of-week Feedback/Review

At the end of each week a time-tabled slot is made available for a review of the week where students and tutors have shared views on all aspects of the weeks provision.

##### 3. End-of course Feedback

This takes two forms :

- a). Individual interview with the Personnel Development Officer
- b). Anonymous questionnaire with detailed questions pertaining to all aspects of the course content, modes of delivery and assessment.

#### *Reflections*

Whilst each course has generated much data in terms of its own specific evaluation, the result of this process at a more wholistic level has been that the following major issues have needed to be addressed:

*i). recognition of the importance of a highly co-operative and open partnership between higher education and providers for reflective practice to take place and develop,*

The first course was delivered very much on the basis of higher education delivering the theory and 'teaching how to teach' in the first 2 weeks of the course with the firearms content being very much outside of the remit. The firearms tutors sat in on the HE input but not vice versa. This created a situation which was perceived as two separate units delivering the course, and indeed one of 'HE being bought in to service a particular part of the course'. The second course was run with one of the HE instructors being actively engaged in all of the firearms work outside of the classroom which had the effect of both opening up the dialogue between instructors and presenting the team as more of a coherent whole. Recognition and acceptance of the very different cultures in HE and police organisations and the way in which these cultures help determine workplace behaviour was crucial to the development of this co-operative and open relationship.

*ii). need to portray and practice reflection as justified action in order for it to have credibility as a tool for continuous professional development in a disciplined organisation.*

The police service is a highly disciplined organisation, and the firearms role within it even more highly disciplined. There is on many occasion little room for discussion, too much analysis and reflection at the wrong time may cost lives. Firearms officers are trained to respond to instruction, not to question it. To ask firearms officers to engage in reflective practice requires them to accept that in some situations questioning is justified and has a valued outcome. These outcomes need to be actively demonstrated within the body of the course in its very early stages for the concept of reflective practice to be accepted.

*iii). need for clearly defined and accepted learning styles for experiential learning.*

Following on from this is the need to gain acceptance of the fact that there are individual differences in learning styles, that experiential learning requires a clearly defined approach but that within this approach different people have different preferred styles which need to be accommodated in a student-instructor relationship. Acceptance that development of the least preferred styles will enhance overall performance through enabling reflective practice is an important issue to address at the outset.

In summary, the course has evolved in such a way as to address the tension between what the students perceive they need (a police training model – e.g. '10 steps to follow to be a teacher') and what higher education tutors perceive they need (an educative model – to develop the skills and knowledge required for practice now as a firearms instructor but also with the capacity for continued development (i.e. life-long learning) through the process of reflective practice). Over time it became apparent that this could only be accomplished by establishing an open and co-operative partnership between the providers.

The next section will describe how these issues have been addressed within the course content and assessment.

### *Course Content*

Firearms officers need to gain knowledge of typically, weapons, tactics, health and safety issues and the law. Much of this is gained through classroom instruction where firearms instructors act in the typical role of 'teacher'. The initial involvement of HE was to deliver the Instructional Techniques part of the instructors course which was focused on teaching officers *how* to deliver this knowledge effectively in the classroom. This was based on the assumption that the HE tutors were 'experts' in classroom delivery i.e. 'teaching teachers to teach'. In the first course HE involvement stopped at this point and as discussed earlier this led to a perception that there were 2 discrete units involved in delivering the course. As much of the HE input was also theory-based and the HE tutors were not working with the students on learning how to deliver practical skills-based learning activities (through demonstration, coaching and mentoring) this meant the application of much of the theory was either not effected or if effected not necessarily discussed or reflected upon. In the second course, one of the tutors, a Chartered Occupational Psychologist, worked with students and firearms course tutors in an Occupational Psychology role on the developing skills based instructional techniques part of the program by helping students to make detailed observations and analyses of peers performances in instructional situations and by providing structured evidenced based feedback sessions. In practical situations it is very easy for content (i.e. tactics or weapons) discussions to drive the agenda, the presence of the non-firearms psychologist ensured the balance between content and the instructional process remained appropriate and that theory was applied in all the contexts in which they work.

It also became very evident after the first course that any theory needed to be presented in a very student-centred way and spread out within the time-table. Whereas the first course ran with whole days in the classroom, the second and third courses broke classroom sessions into half-days. Theory was delivered often through pre-reads and case studies. Typically theories of motivation and why motivation in a learning environment is important is presented with a pre-read being issued to students as evening reading prior to the completion of a group case study the next morning requiring a group discussion and presentation applying the theories presented.

### *Assessment*

During the first course one part of the assessment focused on the students presenting in groups a written outline of an initial firearms course. Feedback suggested this was seen as an add-on to the course which was not of great value at this stage in their training. In order to re-inforce the concept of reflective practice which underpins the course the written assessment was re-designed requiring students to present a written account 'explaining and reflecting upon the planning, delivery and assessment of an element of range work'. Students were required to tutor and coach an individual student through 20 practice rounds and then write a report, in an academic format, evaluating the tutoring and coaching, using the principles of reflective practice. Whilst students found the assignment difficult initially, all without exception have completed it to a satisfactory standard and a few have been exemplary.