



Staying the Course: The Changing Nature of Police Education ©

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I found myself in a classroom recently with a group of health care professionals. I was facilitating a class and I had one of those “ah-ha” moments. In that ‘penny-dropping’ instant, I learned an undeniable truth. Everyone in the room was discussing a change that was coming and how they would all be whisked away from the wondrous ‘old days’ into new and uncertain times. Given that I’ve spent a combined 30 years in policing, education, project consulting, and legal practice – all carried out in several countries and a couple of continents – this truth should have been obvious to me much sooner. I also realize that I can do absolutely nothing about this truth other than to observe it closely and then ignore it.

This simple truth of which I speak is that people don’t want to be content - in medicine, in law, policing or in any other field for that matter. Consider why: if we are happy and satisfied, no one will pay any attention to us. Simply put, we change because we have to change. Nature dictates that we humans change or we die. This is as true for organizations as it is for individuals. A further truism is that we will never go gently into this foreign land called “change” without the appropriately prescribed, culturally requisite levels of protest.



As pitiable as this makes us appear, leaders need to accept the fact that those around us will complain to get noticed and, they hope, rewarded for all their hard work in dealing with everything being asked of them. Change is hard and our response as a species has generally shown itself to be a very loud and rather annoying bleating. This truth – I’ll call it the *change and complain game* - appears to be one of the tricks we humans play on ourselves to recognize the passage of time and events while simultaneously and grudgingly accepting our total inability to do anything to stop them.

So, today, in honour of our Lake Superior hosts, I’ll offer a lake storm metaphor to describe how we in policing are playing the *change and complain* game. I don’t think anyone in this room would be surprised at my claim that we in policing are heading into

some rather *turbulent waters* in the next few years. Many of us in police education have seen this *storm* coming for some time. By now, we have all heard the early warning signs of those who predict we will end up *crashed on the rocks* of education if we drop our military style training. Soon, we will see and hear the ever swelling and rising tides of criticism about the *dangerous and untested horizons* of training we sail towards. Finally, and thankfully, - for this metaphor tires quickly - at the first strong gust of trouble – a law suit or a poorly trained recruit - we will hear the clarion calls from the frightened among us to abandon our collective plans to offer *adult-learning* classes and head back to the *safe and trusted shores* of “instructor knows best” training that we all know and expect from police agencies.

Travelling backwards, effectively back to conventional police training, to absurd amounts of lecturing and toxic levels of PowerPoint means that we will have to satisfy ourselves with police trainees and other new employees who will graduate with solid 1960s to 1980s skill sets. Going backwards means we continue to wait for the efflux of time on the street, rather than our academy instructors and our training programs to prepare our recruits for their places in our patrol cars. Most significantly, returning to old style, mimetic, instructional techniques presents a huge opportunity for those who reject problem solving and analytical policing to devalue our newest members from the first day they join our ranks.



So let's face this change reality with some courage. Individuals who are taught from their youngest years to fear change really don't want to do anything more than just complain. Our job is not to worry about them and it is most certainly not to JOIN them! There is no doubt in my mind that the doomers and gloomers will join us in the future, but we must allow them their full-throated whinge about how the sky is falling and the world – and the policing world specifically - is going to hell in the proverbial hand basket. I suggest we listen to them, we empathize, we comfort while patiently encouraging them to join us as we move forward.

As an educator, I learned very early in my career that until we value what our learners bring with them to our classrooms, we have no chance whatsoever of having them internalize, evaluate and duplicate our values, our teachings and our practices. Command and control classrooms – and instructors with “letting go of power issues” appear to be an easy default option for detached executives who fail to realize that training remains the single most important long-term task they oversee.

Our job, as those who know about appropriate adult training methodologies, involves constantly reminding ourselves, as well as those executive decision makers in our organizations, that the particular brand of service offered by the rigid, authoritarian



instructors – comforting and familiar as that service seems - costs our organizations dearly. Trainees who are influenced from their early days in these dysfunctional classrooms learn to sit quietly and to conform immediately. They learn that a genuine expression of dissent from those around them makes them unwelcome and perhaps undependable. They learn an early lesson that will remain with them for their entire service. They learn that answers are to be had by

simply looking upward to the front of the class and by extension, upwards in the organization. When they leave the *command and control* classroom, they continue to look *upward* for answers to problems rather than outward into the community or perhaps even inward, to their own experiences for solutions to endemic problems that they will face throughout their careers. Above all, if you will allow me a return to my lake metaphor, they fail to understand that those who think alike, sink alike!

Although this position of mine may seem oppositional and perhaps just a tad strident, I would by way of testing the nature of these comments, direct your attention to the policing field at large and pose the following questions:

1. Is your current training working? Do your new employees move quickly to competence and engagement on the street?
2. Are you attracting high-quality, well educated, motivated candidates?
3. Are you satisfied with the diversity within your ranks? (Not just colour or race, but linguistic, social, cultural, gender, and religious diversity)
4. Do your employees look back fondly on their training time at the academy?
5. Are your instructors well educated in facilitation methodologies?
6. Do your recruits spend most of the time in their classes talking rather than listening?
7. Do your instructors use no more than five or six PowerPoint slides per lesson?

If you are answering “NO” to these questions then you have your answers about the efficacy of our current training systems in policing.

Not many police executives would subscribe to a philosophy that neglects and even abuses new employees. Yet across North America, Academy personnel, including many of our permanent and part-time instructor corps have failed to keep pace with the changing needs of police services and the current research in teaching and learning strategies. Lecturers who spend their entire class time playing Socrates or dispensing wisdom to the newest members of the flock from the front of the room, for hours on end, clearly inhibit rather than support the independent, problem solving behaviours we seek in our newest members.



As policing leaders, especially leaders who know what truly works with adult audiences, our job is now and always will be to recognize that we will never stop police officers whining about the changing times. What we must never do is give up, give in and go back to the safe harbour of incompetent teaching and inefficient learning. The choice is ours to make.

Good luck to everyone in Duluth and I am very sorry that I am not there to share the camaraderie and warm kinship that marks our happy band of police educators.

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