

The Value of Journals? Courage and EI in police training

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Main points:

Learning journals are essential to recruit training. Don't be thrown off by LJJ errors
Journals are for "learning", therefore they should be available to both the trainee and trainer.

Liability issues concerning old methods of teaching far outweigh the issue of disclosure due to journaling. Master the proper use of journals.

As we enter 2008 I reflect on the latest PBL waves crashing over 21st Century police education. What do I conclude? With apologies to Charles Dickens: It is the best of times; it is the worst of times.

Throughout the U.S. and Canada, hundreds of academy instructors and field trainers in the PTO program are discovering how to employ up-to-date education in their craft. There is a new cadre of hundreds of PBL certified instructors, some of whom are taking bold steps to improve their teaching lot. Progressive leaders in Kentucky, California, Idaho, and Washington are moving to embrace the tidal wave modernizing the basic academy. These are the best of times.

But they are also the worst of times. Too many academies and training programs remain rooted in obsolete – and discredited – teaching methods: boot camp "discipline", rote learning, checklists, multiple-choice evaluations, death by PowerPoint, and sage-on-the-stage "entertain-ucation".

And the worst of the worst: The misuse (or no use) of learning journals!

Let's be crystal clear. Journaling is a tool for discovering self-awareness during training, an aid for improving concentration and focus, and a training ground to review emotional intelligence skills such as how the learner manages emotions. It is widely used in education and it is a well established means to improve learning skills.

I am occasionally asked to revisit a PTO agency, especially if there are program snags. I invariably discover the same basic program errors – usually emerging from improper PBL and PTO training. One of those basic errors is LJJ – the "liability-journaling fear".

The LJF errors

LJF error #1: “We cannot implement journaling due to the risk of liability and discoverability. What if a recruit screws up and puts that into his or her journal. Won’t I be liable to be sued if the journal is discovered in court?”

The short answer is this: **if you are training priests, CIA officers, or lawyers you might be protected from discoverability. Everything else is discoverable.** Always was. What does this mean? Simple: recruits must not put unprofessional or improper comments into their learning journals. If the recruit writes inappropriate material, it is better to see it in the open and to deal with it as the need arises. It will permit agencies to deal with what was previously only internal dialogue during the training period rather than later when they are working solo and off probation. That is the very point of journaling.

That’s why discoverability is not a weakness, it is a strength.

LJF error #2: “We do not allow our trainers to read the trainees journals. The PTO program originally said that and we think recruits should be able to “vent” without fear of retribution”.

This is the nightmare scenario.

Not reviewing journals is a recipe for disaster. Venting without feedback is what UnaBomber Ted Kaczynski did in his remote Montana cabin. Recruits need constant feedback and journaling is where that occurs. If private venting is required, outside mentors are the solution. Venting in journals is fine, as long as it is discussed.

Learning journals are for learning

A learning journal is just that...it's for learning. That cannot happen in isolation from the trainer. ***The embryonic PTO program did separate trainers from the trainee journals for a time, but only during the pilot portion of the program.*** We did so because we did not have the mandate to train the original PTO agencies very extensively in emotional intelligence or PBL. That more extensive skills training came later with the PBL Instructor Certification. ***Today, all trainee journals should be occasionally reviewed by the trainer. They are not secret documents kept by the trainee, but rather a shared learning tool used for the benefit of both the trainee and the trainer. We don't recommend checking it for spelling, volume and adequate penmanship, but we do believe the trainer should discuss the issues in the journal as he or she sees fit during the training process. We believe the trainer should make comments in his or her own journal about those discussions.***

I spoke to an attorney about these issues, Eileen Lawrence of Davis, Grimm, Payne, Marra,

a leading employment law firm in Seattle, Washington. With 26 years of labor law experience in policing issues, she tells me she is mystified why trainers resist journaling and journal reviews. Journaling is precisely the kind of tool officers can employ to protect themselves as trainers and to protect the trainees. “They need to journal their learning experience to improve their performance and reflect upon their duties as a police officer.”

Of course police agencies do need to take good faith measures to train their people. Ironically, if they don't use modern, state of the art methods – such as PBL and journaling – they may be vulnerable to civil action for improper training. Consider this: police agencies today already employ training methods that are decades out of date. Because they are rarely, if ever, sued specifically due to training alone, they think their training methods work. How absurd!

Gerry Cleveland, our PSPBL co-President and also an attorney, tells us: “wait and see what happens when a defense attorney brings in an educational expert to assess obsolete training programs or programs that still use checklists and “pass point standard” to evaluate trainees. Wait and see what happens when those experts discover trainers have no formal education in education or have failed to employ best practices such as journaling or journal reviews”. Cleveland concludes by suggesting that, “If agencies want to worry about law suits, they should concern themselves with updating absurdly out-dated training programs carried out by unqualified, untutored educators who are passionately devoted to PowerPoint lecturing, and evaluations based on behavioral anchors. Chief Executives of police agencies should concern themselves with trainers who know nothing about the impact of “stress teaching” intellectual topics inside the classroom, emotional intelligence, multiple intelligence or how new employees access information and technology for learning purposes.”

Those issues raised by Lawrence and Cleveland are the areas that should concern police executives when they discuss risk management, not journaling for learning purposes.

Given what we now know about PBL, in today's police training environment agencies who do not review trainees learning journals nor use journals in training are at greater risk for being sued.

Using journals properly.

There are many good places to get tips on journal writing. One of my favorites is:
http://www.infed.org/research/keeping_a_journal.htm#harvesting

For PSPBL members there are resources on the Articles page, particularly “DPA Journaling for PTO”.

Here are some journal writing tips:

The first decision is to decide what version the journal will take. One version is free-form (Gerry Cleveland and I prefer this method) where ideas can emerge as they come to mind? Another version is the D-P-A method, described in the article mentioned above.

The second decision is how to record the journal. Some agencies use hard copy books, while others employ electronic journals. There are no hard and fast rules about this. Both have merits.

The third decision is what to write. Most recruits tend to start with descriptions of the days activities. This is fine to get started, but descriptions should amount to less than twenty percent of the content. It is important to write personal reflections about those activities.

Some questions that can stimulate journal writing include: How did I do today? What did I do right? What did I do wrong? How do I feel about that? What was interesting? What was boring, fearful, fun, maddening? Why? What do I need to do to improve?

Another journaling decision is how often to write and what to do with the journals during and after the training. Journal writing should occur every day. What to do with journals is another matter. Different agencies have different rules. Some let the trainee keep their journal when training is over. This makes sense for the purpose of harvesting (described below). Other agencies keep the journals as part of the training record.

Finally, the most important role of the journal is called *harvesting*. By looking back over prior entries the recruit can harvest what expectations and beliefs he or she originally thought as they began their career. They can see patterns in their own behavior and they can learn from their mistakes, some of which they may have long forgotten had they not been written down. That is how experiential learning – what is known as *failing forward* – happens in PBL.

With the advent of PBL in law enforcement, we see enhanced critical thinking and problem solving in our trainees. We know emotional intelligence is a big part of that success. Emotional Intelligence is the latest addition to the PBL toolbox; it has extraordinary implications for resolving street conflicts, managing emotions, improving self awareness, and managing impulse control.

Journaling is the start of our journey into better EI skills development. Properly written, and reviewed, journals tackle EI deficiencies head on. They take courage, and skill, to write. They take constant vigilance by PBL and EI trained instructors. We must not shirk from our training responsibility due to our own LJF errors. That is how we can best help the 21st Century police officer.