

**The Bill Blackwood
Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas**

**Problem Based Learning for
Police Recruit Training**

**An Administrative Research Paper
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ABSTRACT

Problem-based learning is relevant to contemporary law enforcement because it has the potential to produce officers who are more capable of dealing with and solving day-to-day calls for service. Problem-based learning prepares officers to provide long term solutions to “routine” issues. This training method has enjoyed great success in the medical field for over 30 years and has the ability to restructure the field of law enforcement.

The purpose of this research is to examine the benefits that law enforcement could gain from a problem-based learning program. It is time for law enforcement agencies expand their abilities through improved training that focuses on a proactive response to crime and quality of life issues. Problem-based learning could become that enhancement portal, which law enforcement has desperately needed.

The method of inquiry used by the researcher includes personal observation of the problem-based learning program within the Haltom City Police Department and a review of books, journals, and articles on the subject. This researcher also utilized participant surveys to obtain objective viewpoints from trainers utilizing this training method. Much of the literature reviewed involved the medical field due to this process being new to law enforcement.

The researcher discovered that agencies utilizing the problem-based learning method experience recruit officers who are better prepared to handle routine issues. They develop better relations with community leaders and are more involved within the community. These officers also identify the root of the problem and provide long-term solutions to these problems, reducing the need for repeat calls for service.

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INTRODUCTION

The problem or issue to be examined considers whether or not problem based learning can be effective in law enforcement. This training technique is relatively new to law enforcement; however, it has been utilized in teaching other professions for over 30 years. This new tool to law enforcement is capable of developing an officer who is better able to serve the community in which they work and increase the benefits of the common community policing programs.

The performance of new recruit officers is often determined by the training they receive during the first few months of employment. By injecting the recruit into a training program which employs problem based learning, the recruit is taught to solve the source of the problem. This training technique, known as the Reno model, will produce officers who can not only respond to the day-to-day calls for service, but can also identify problem areas and provide long-term solutions to those issues (Reno Police Department, n.d.). By solving the root problem, the police may focus on other areas of concern, which will increase police effectiveness and efficiency, as well as improve quality of life issues for the citizens of the community.

In traditional recruit training, known as the San Jose model, the recruit is exposed to a variety of actual calls for service throughout this training period and is told by the field training officer how to react or handle specific problems (Kaminsky, 2002). In this training model, the recruit provides only short-term solutions, normally through the arrest of a violator. The recruit is not taught how to solve problems on a long term basis, which may result in repeated calls for service to the same location for the same type of call, thus reducing police efficiency and effectiveness.

The method of inquiry utilized will include review of existing books, journals, and articles on this subject. Surveys will be distributed to 12 participants who have been identified as currently using the Reno PTO training technique. Very little literature is available from a law enforcement perspective, and therefore, much of the literature being reviewed is from professions outside the law enforcement field.

This author anticipates that the research will show that problem based learning is a more effective training method for police recruit training. It is further anticipated that problem based learning will result in trained officers who can more effectively and efficiently meet the demands placed on today's law enforcement professionals.

The field of law enforcement will be influenced by this research because of the better qualified and capable officers that are produced in this training model. Officers who can solve complex issues through problem-based analysis and utilization of the scanning, analysis, response, assessment (SARA) model, which has been virtually nonexistent in past training programs, will enhance officer production. The program also lends itself to community involvement, which will build trust among citizens, businesses, and the departments who utilize it.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

During research of this paper, the author found very few references directly related to problem-based learning in the field of law enforcement and therefore, explored additional professions that have utilized a problem-based learning approach to training. It is ironic that the current law enforcement recruit training program, known as the San Jose model, was started in the summer of 1971 (Kaminsky, 2002). This is the same year the problem-based learning curriculum was being developed at McMaster

University by Howard Barrows for use in neuroscience studies (Barrows & Tamblyn, 1980).

Since the implementation of problem-based learning in the medical field during the early 1970s, problem-based learning has spread to include various professions and is even being utilized in high schools, middle schools and elementary schools.

According to Delisle (1997), “active instructional techniques like PBL can motivate bored students and raise their understanding and achievement. These student-centered strategies build critical thinking and reasoning skills, further students’ creativity and independence, and help students earn a sense of ownership” (p. 5).

The field of law enforcement could benefit from problem-based learning, like many other professional fields. Today’s challenges and the implementation of community oriented policing and problem solving (COPPS) all across America will make this teaching technique a welcome tool in training law enforcement officers. The ability to train an officer to identify, analyze, and solve the cause of problems within the community, not just mask those problems with temporary solutions, such as arrest, would be invaluable to the professional field of law enforcement.

Studies indicated that both problem-based learning and traditional learning develop the cognitive skills of the students, but those that learned through traditional learning fail to develop the ability to apply this information to real life situations, and therefore the information is quickly forgotten. According to Hmelo-Silver (2004), problem-based learning “provides students with opportunities to consider how the facts they acquire relate to a specific problem at hand. It obliges them to ask what they need to know” (p. 261). Problem based learning “offers the potential to help students become

reflective and flexible thinkers who can use knowledge to take action” (Hmelo-Silver, 2004, p. 261). Barrows & Tamblyn (1980) noted that “Facts related to us by others or information we have read ourselves rarely seem to have the tenacity of the information we have gained from our own daily confrontations with problems” (p. 1). Problem-based learning does aid the student in developing these life long skills of problem solving. As stated by Delisle (1997), “Students make a greater attempt to understand and remember when they see connections between the material they study and their own lives” (p. 8). Problem based learning will enhance individual officer skills, beginning with their foundation and prepare them for the future of policing (Reno Police Department, n.d.).

The very nature of the problem-based learning program encourages the officer to interact with others and create working relationships. As stated by Bynum (2001), “Problem-solving programs have the greatest potential for success if those who are directly affected by the problem have an active role in the problem-solving process” (p. 47). The Police Training Officer Manual (Reno Police Department, n.d.) identified this concept as community learning and stated that students “will form partnerships to solve the problem. Learning cohorts may include the police training officer, other police officers, members of social or community services, witnesses, victims, or other members of the community” (p. 12). As stated by Delisle (1997), “problem-based learning promotes collaboration, builds teamwork skills, and develops leadership abilities through cooperative work-group experiences” (p. 22).

The Police Training Officers Manual (Reno Police Department, n.d.) also suggested that problem based learning has proven itself to be effective and successful

at producing competent problem solvers in the medical profession. When properly implemented, it should provide similar benefits to the law enforcement profession. According to Bynum (2001), problem-oriented policing advances traditional policing strategies by seeking out “long-term results of a response as well as the immediate customer-service-driven response” and addressing “the causes of the problem in addition to its symptoms” (p. iii).

The traditional training concepts currently being utilized by most law enforcement agencies involve the recruit officer being corrected through performance checklists. These checklists contain a number of basic police skills that the training officer rates on a daily basis while observing the recruit officer. This daily observation method is thought to help protect the agency in case of liability due to inadequate training. However, research does not support this theory (Reno Police Department, n.d.).

Kaminsky (2002) has described that effective communication in traditional police training must go beyond the receipt of information, “Effective communication requires information to be presented in a manner that affects the student’s behavior...In this manner, the communication of instruction goes directly to the action required and the reason for it” (p. 157). Kaminsky (2002) further believed that memories must be created through repetition of information, or the information will be forgotten. However, this view is not shared by Glenn (2002) who stated, “The traditional discipline-based classroom training environment currently employed during much of academy instruction may limit student learning” (p. 53). Evensen & Hmelo (2000) believed that three conditions must be met for adequate learning. They include activation of prior knowledge, numerous opportunities to apply it, and the new knowledge must be associated with how it will be

used (p. 5). Problem-based learning functions on the idea that information will be remembered due to the student's use of the information in relation to real life issues affecting the student.

METHODOLOGY

This research will examine whether or not problem-based learning will be effective in law enforcement. It is the opinion of this author that problem-based learning for recruit training can and will be very effective for training law enforcement recruits. This learning model allows the training recruit to develop relationships with the community, other officers, and city departments at the onset of employment, during the training stage. These relationships assist the recruit in becoming stable with the environment. The recruit will learn important problem solving techniques, which will assist the recruit in real life applications now and well into the future.

The method of inquiry regarding this subject will include: personal observation of the problem-based learning program being utilized by the Haltom City Police Department, review of existing books, journals, and articles on this subject, as well as surveys distributed to 12 participants who currently use the Reno PTO training technique. Few agencies currently use this training program for police recruit training. The agencies identified have only recently begun using the problem-based learning program, and only a fraction of these agencies are located within the state of Texas. Due to this fact, little information is available from the law enforcement field.

The instrument that will be used to measure the researcher's findings regarding the subject of problem-based learning through use of the Reno PTO training model will include a survey. The survey will consist of six questions and will be distributed to 12

survey participants from the Fort Worth/Dallas Metroplex area. The response rate to the survey instrument resulted in only six returns, or a 50% response rate. The information obtained from the survey will be analyzed by this author and included in the findings.

FINDINGS

Problem-based learning has been utilized for over 30 years in various professions all over the world, and this author speculates that problem-based learning will become the new standard in training law enforcement recruits. The skills taught by problem-based learning are both needed and desired in the law enforcement field. These skills will better enable the officers of today for transition to the quickly changing demands of tomorrow.

A survey was conducted as part of this research and the results indicated that respondents favored the Reno PTO problem-based training model over the traditional San Jose model by 87% (Figure 1). The results also indicated that only 50% of the respondents thought that the Reno PTO model resulted in new officers who were better prepared, compared to 33% who thought the Reno and San Jose models produced officers that were equally prepared, and 17% who thought the San Jose model produced better prepared officers (Figure 2). Sixty-seven percent of the respondents indicated that officers trained under the Reno PTO model are more proactive when dealing with community issues and crime, with 33% indicating that officers trained under either model were equally comparable when dealing with these elements (Figure 3).

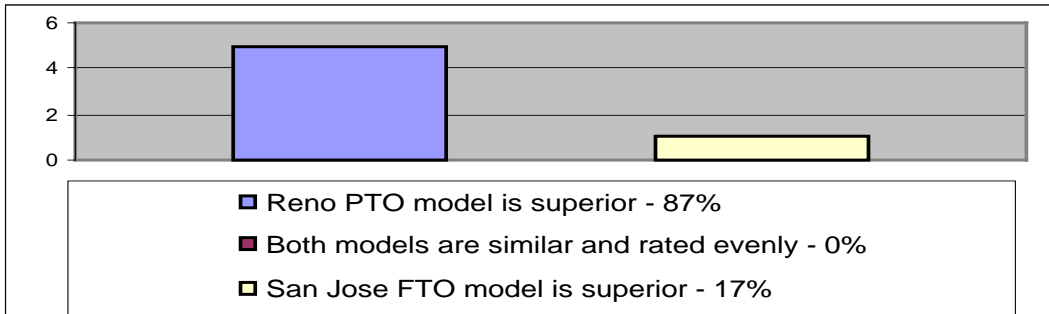


Figure 1. Respondent's ratings of training models

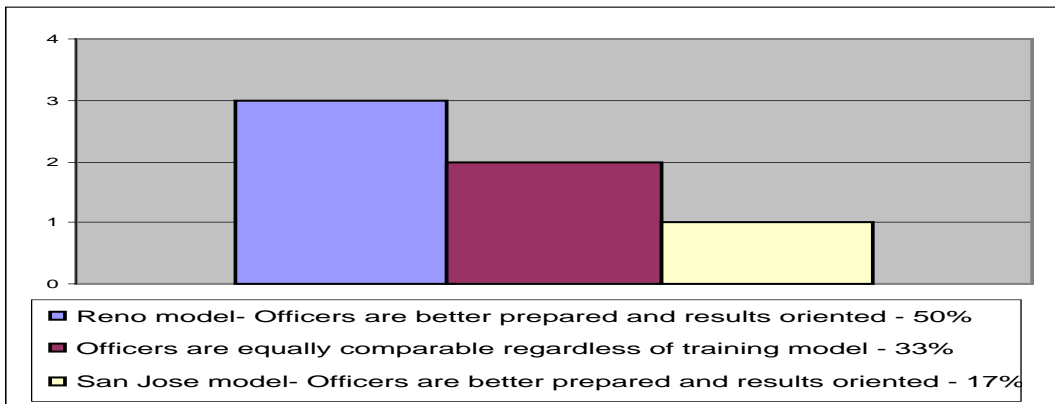


Figure 2. Training models compared

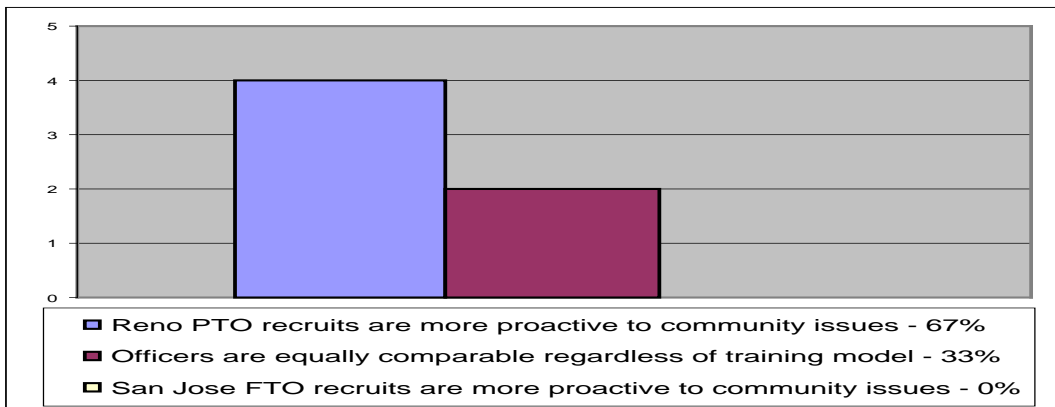


Figure 3. Results of training models

Since the beginning of this research, this author has personally observed over 15 recruits undergo this training process. Department statistics indicated that the majority

of these 15 recruits have performed at an improved level from that of other officers, who did not undergo the problem-based training. These new officers are better suited to today's issues in law enforcement and are prepared to seek out the root causes of these issues. Each of these officers continue to perform at a level that far exceeds that of other officers, and they routinely utilize the "SARA model" for problem solving.

The primary setback with agencies implementing the Reno PTO model is the availability of training. 50% of the survey respondents indicated that training is difficult to obtain yet cost effective, while the remaining 50% thought that the PTO training was easy to obtain and cost effective. Sixty-seven percent of the respondents indicated that they would recommend the Reno PTO training model without reservation, while 17% would recommend it, but with reservations based on availability of training, and 17% would not recommend the Reno PTO training model at all (Figure 4).

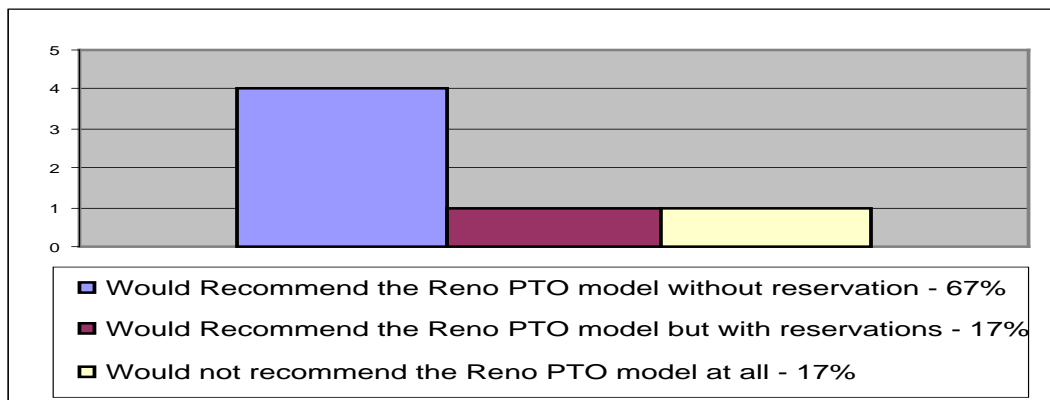


Figure 4. Recommendation of training models

Survey participants also made the following comments about the Reno PTO training model: "Coordinator training is difficult to obtain", "[Reno model] recruits have better knowledge of community and the community leaders", and "Reno [model] contains better documentation and produces more rounded officers." These comments

indicate that participants in the Reno PTO model are confident and satisfied with this new training model.

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSIONS

The issue examined by the researcher considered whether or not problem based learning could be effective in law enforcement. It was anticipated that the research would show that problem-based learning is a more effective training method for police recruit training, resulting in trained officers who can more effectively meet the current demands of the law enforcement profession.

Based upon the evidence presented in the current literature, officers exposed to problem-based learning have shown higher levels of motivation and a sense of ownership within the community. According to the survey, officers trained under the "Reno PTO" model were better prepared, more proactive to community issues, and results oriented. Departmental statistics also indicated that these same officers have received a higher percentage of commendations and positive feedback from the public than their counterparts.

The researcher concluded from the findings that the problem-based learning techniques utilized in the Reno PTO training model resulted in recruit officers who were more effective and efficient at addressing traditional crimes issues. Through the use of problem based learning, officers are seeking out the root causes of problems and addressing them with alternatives, other than arrest. Temporary solutions should no longer be considered common, but rather long term solutions that tend to eliminate the problem as a whole. Problem-based learning should become the new standard to which recruit officers will be measured.

The findings of the research did support the hypothesis. The reason why the findings did support the hypothesis is probably due to highly effective training techniques utilized in the Reno PTO training model. These techniques have been successful in the medical field for more than 30 years and will surely prove to be just as successful in the field of law enforcement well into the future. Limitations that might have hindered this study resulted because of the lack of information in the law enforcement field. The Reno PTO training model has had little time to establish solid documentation on its effects, which required this researcher to look outside the law enforcement field. The study of the Reno PTO training model is relevant to contemporary law enforcement because it has the potential to produce a better, more prepared officer right out of the training program. The entire law enforcement profession stands to benefit by the results of this research through increased productivity, efficiency, and effectiveness of new officers completing this training.

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APPENDIX

Reno PTO vs. San Jose FTO L.E.M.I.T. Survey

1. How would you rate the Reno PTO system against the San Jose FTO system?
 The Reno PTO system is superior.
 The Reno PTO and San Jose FTO are similar and rate evenly.
 The San Jose FTO system is superior.
2. Comparing the two training systems, please choose the most accurate answer?
 Officer trained under the Reno PTO system are more prepared and results oriented.
 Officer completing either system are equally comparable in preparation and results after training.
 Officer trained under the San Jose FTO system are more prepared and results oriented.
3. When utilizing the Reno PTO training system, Officers are:
 More proactive and less reactive to community issues.
 No different than those trained under the San Jose FTO system.
 More reactive and less proactive to community issues.
4. As a new agency wanting to start a Reno PTO training program, please select the answer that best describes the availability and cost of training:
 The Coordinator and PTO training are easy and cost effective to obtain
 The Coordinator and PTO training are difficult to obtain but is cost effective
 The Coordinator and PTO training are easy to obtain but not cost effective
 The Coordinator and PTO training are difficult to obtain and are not cost effective.
5. Would you recommend the Reno PTO training program to other agencies?
 Yes, without any reservations
 Yes, but with reservations
 Not at all
6. Are there any comments you would like to make about the Reno PTO training system?

Once Complete please return this survey to:

Russell Ragsdale
505 W. McLeroy
Saginaw, Texas 76179

Or

Email it to rragsdale@saginawpolice.org