

IN DEFENSE OF “COP SHOP” PEDAGOGY

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Within the discipline of Criminal Justice, the term “Cop Shop” is often pejoratively used in academic circles to describe a method of instruction based on story and personal experience that often conjures the image of an off-duty police officer telling war stories. However, often missing from this negative perspective is the recognition that experience-based descriptions of events and the application of the constructs offered in class can provide an invaluable enhancement for the practitioner-focused student. The concept of such experienced-based application is discussed, and student evaluations of faculty with and without practitioner experience are analyzed.

COP SHOP PEDAGOGY

The term “Cop Shop” often carries with it a decidedly negative connotation within the realm of criminal justice academia. Some consider this instructional approach to be devoid of value and suggest it involves little more than telling “war stories.” However, such stories might actually provide valuable insight for students, offering a linkage between issues of theory and how they can be related to actual practice in the field. One of the major criticisms of academic education is an over-focus on curriculum content with little emphasis on application. (Wilkinson, 1992, 2005). This can leave a student with a litany of facts and figures, but little ability to apply the information in a real-world setting.

To be clear, we are not talking about aimlessly conveying a sequence of unrelated narratives to a class of future criminal justice practitioners in order to fill time or build a fan base. In our current conceptualization of this idea, our point is to emphasize the valuable contributions that can be made by those who offer students well-targeted, experience-based descriptions of how the theory of the classroom is manifest in real-world, practical situations. The inclusion of personal experiences of instructors who have actually worked in the field or related areas can be particularly valuable. Practitioner-educators can provide important linkages and comparisons between what a textbook or theory may offer and the experiences found in the profession.

Unfortunately, in many criminal justice academic settings, those instructing application-rich courses (which may be particularly relevant at the undergraduate level or specific, practitioner-based graduate programs) often have no such base from which to draw. The preponderance of the information offered in a classroom setting is often solely sourced from academia. As a result, students who are seeking their education in order to qualify

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for or enhance their practitioner career are not able to benefit from specific, personal-based stories that can exemplify how the theory and practice interact. There is something valuable, informative, and educational about having an instructor who has perspectives forged from real-world experience (Wilkinson, 1992).

Direct observation and non-randomized student reports of faculty effectiveness have identified that although many students appreciate the experience factor within the classroom, some faculty may possess a less flattering view of criminal justice instructors who have the experience to complement the theoretical or informational material typically offered in criminal justice academic programs (Garner, 2001). This can result in a willingness of those who do not have a practitioner background to minimize the potential contribution and be more willing to criticize what they do not possess. To be clear, this is not to suggest that instructors who do not have practical or practitioner-based experiences cannot be effective educators. The use of real-world case studies, guest lectures, professional panels, and so forth can be employed by willing instructors to enhance the presentation of such information in the classroom. However, because this may require considerable coordination and planning, many choose not to utilize these resources. Conversely, those who have a great deal of real-world experience are not necessarily able to effectively communicate or translate that experience within a classroom; experience does not guarantee one will be academically successful in the classroom. The point here is to explore the utility of a particular approach to education for a unique population of students. Specifically, this article addresses whether students may be provided an enhanced educational experience by instructors who can address not only the text-based information, but also the ways in which the material and theory presented in the text may be realized in real-world settings.

A number of studies have identified the importance of application with the acquisition and integration of knowledge. The application and analysis of information presented is considered a higher-order process that moves well beyond the identification or recognition phase of knowledge acquisition (Razzouk, Razzouk, & Razzouk, 2007). Several authors have identified a particular bias or concern in academic settings with an over-emphasis on content at the expense of meaningful application (Hendricks, 2007; Wilkinson, 2005). Additionally, when developing future professionals, the integration of experience and application with the theoretical and the informational may be the most helpful for students. Clearly, the use of real-world examples and case studies abound in other disciplines (Rakoff & Minow, 2007). Law schools (Milanowski, Kimball, & White, 2004), business schools (Garvin, 2003), and medical schools (Garvin, 2003; Stjernquist & Crang-Svalenius, 2007) embrace the practitioner-educator model of instruction.

This is not to say non-lawyers cannot teach law students, or non-physicians cannot teach physicians; however, substantial training and benefit can occur when veteran practitioners are involved (Rakoff & Minow, 2007). Practitioner-faculty are able to translate the knowledge into practical experiences and meaningful practice. Interestingly, one would typically not assume that a medical student serving on hospital rotations would be under the supervision or tutelage of an instructor or professor who was not a physician or medical professional. Similarly, we should consider the benefit to criminal justice students who

seek to become criminal justice practitioners being trained by those who have not only the academic education, but also the history and experience in the field. The focus here is supplementing the content of the classroom in a real-world, practical setting.

Some researchers have found that academic programs that have an emphasis toward application of the material presented in the classroom can result in higher performance ratings for their graduates who are in leadership positions (Krimmel & Lindenmuth, 2001). Additionally, experience-rich programs can increase managerial and conceptual skills of their students (Carlan, 2007). In the area of criminal justice, some of the most influential publications were not only experienced-based, but also were not distributed in a formal academic venue. Wilson and Kelling's (1982) *Broken Windows* was published in the *Atlantic Monthly* magazine; Goldstiens' (1990) popular *Problem Oriented Policing* focused on real world practitioners and was not published as a peer-reviewed text; and Martinson (1974) "What Works? Questions and Answers about Prison Reform," was published in *The Public Interest* and was arguably one of the most influential articles in corrections in the latter half of the twentieth century. Similarly, important and influential publications such as Sherman et al.'s (1998) *Prevent Crime: What Works, What Doesn't, What's Promising* and the Police Foundation's *Technical Reports: Kansas City beat patrol experiment* (Kelling, Pate, Dieckman, & Brown, 1974) offers a distinct commonality. They focused on practical considerations, were concentrated on practitioner interactions, and were application-oriented. They offered the practical utility of what might work, what was working, or what had worked in the field.

METHODS

In order to assess the potential value of a practitioner-educator approach, a sample of graduate and undergraduate student aggregate records and individual evaluations of faculty from one of the premier criminal justice academic programs in the U.S. were analyzed. Specifically, the student evaluation of teaching effectiveness was assessed to determine if there was a perception among the students as to the value of practical experience among certain professors. Additionally, a short survey addressing the topic of practitioner-educators was distributed to a sample of criminal justice faculty and instructors. This research effort sought to address the following questions:

1. What percentage of criminal justice undergraduate and graduate (masters) students indicate their pursuit of an academic degree was to enhance or better prepare them for a practitioner career?
2. Is there a distinction between student ratings of professors who have a practitioner background from those that do not?
3. Do the impressions of faculty on the value of practitioner experience differ based on whether a faculty member does or does not possess practical or practitioner-based experience.

RESULTS

Participants

An analysis of the aggregate records of degree-seeking criminal justice undergraduates ($n = 686$) revealed that 87% indicated their degree pursuit was designed to enhance or better prepare them for a practitioner/field profession. Not surprisingly, an additional analysis of the masters' students who were enrolled in the Master of Science program in Criminal Justice Leadership and Management ($n = 34$) revealed that 98% of those who chose to pursue an advanced degree did so to better prepare them for future positions within the criminal justice field or enhance their current standing. This latter finding was as expected as this master's program is comprised of current criminal justice leaders. These students reported they were seeking the knowledge, skills, and abilities to develop further their practitioner-focused career. (Some participants—who were also practitioners—reported their focus was developing their qualifications as a teacher or for promotion within the field.)

Student Ratings of Faculty

A random selection of 11 faculty members who self-reported a history of practitioner experience and 11 faculty members who self-reported no practitioner experience or background was identified. The pool included faculty who were both full-time and adjunct in both categories. The overall numerical teaching evaluations scores related to the area of the survey labeled as "teaching effectiveness" for the previous two years were analyzed for both groups. Table 1 reports the findings and reveals that there was a significant difference between the ratings of faculty with practitioner experience and those without such experience: $t(19) = 5.1007, p = .001$. Further analysis revealed that seven of the faculty who received the overall top 10 student evaluations within the academic division of the college had practitioner experience. None of the faculty in the bottom 10 student ratings had a practitioner background.

Table 1.

<u><i>Practitioner Experience</i></u>	<u><i>No Practitioner Experience</i></u>
Avg. 2-year rating ($n=11$)	Avg. 2-year rating ($n=11$)
$M = 4.5755$	$M = 3.8600$
$SD = 0.1125$	$SD = 0.1427$
$t(19) = 5.1007, p = .001$	

Student Comments

A sampling of the student comments section within the evaluations of those faculty who self-reported practitioner or field experience was conducted. A representative selection of these comments can provide further insight.

"Brought realism rather than more book reading without relevance"

"Appreciated the knowledge of how it works in the real world"

“The real-life examples made the class more understandable and enjoyable”

“This guy know (sic) what he’s talking about because he has been there”

“We need more instructors like (name omitted) that can bring experience to the classroom”

“Many classes I’ve taken are nothing more than regurgitating the information in the book; it was refreshing to have an instructor who actually knew what they were talking about”

Faculty Perceptions

Faculty from both groups were asked the question: *Does practical or practitioner experience with the subject matter of a class make a difference in student learning or knowledge?* Not surprisingly, those with practitioner experience overwhelmingly indicated that such experience was, indeed, valuable as it provided students with explanations and examples beyond the text to help them solidify their understanding of the material and recognize the considerations involved in the application of the information. Faculty who did not have practical or practitioner-based experience were more likely to report that any difference was likely trivial, that course content is the same for the student, and “war stories” will not help a student pass the class.

Post-Graduation Comments

As a part of an on-going program evaluation of the degree-granting institution, a post-graduation evaluation is routinely conducted by the college. The graduates are asked about a number of areas related to their assessment of the overall program, course content, instruction, and so forth. This is not instructor-specific as this is part of a larger program evaluation process. As a part of the present study, the comments offered by undergraduate students were analyzed on the following question: “What would improve the teaching/courses?” The following relevant responses were reflective of the prevailing sentiment offered by the responding students:

- More courses that had practical implications
- Classes that actually matched what I need in my work
- Teachers who knew more than what is in the book
- More instructors like (name omitted) who knows what he’s talking about because he has actually done it
- Classes that could better directly impact success in CJ positions
- More faculty who have practitioner/practical experience

DISCUSSION

In reviewing the student assessment of both teaching effectiveness and their considerations on what could improve criminal justice courses, there is strong evidence that a practitioner-educator is valued. Students ascribed significantly higher scores on teaching effectiveness for those faculty who had practitioner-based experiences and backgrounds. It is reasonable to suggest that higher scores in this dimension relate to increased learning and understanding—those elements associated with effectiveness; however, further analysis is needed to better assess such a proposed linkage. Similarly, the written comments offered in both the evaluation instrument and the post-graduation program assessment supported the desire by students to have courses and instruction that were more practically-based and offered by faculty with actual field experience.

Additionally, there was a distinction in the survey administered to the faculty regarding the value of practitioner experience. Those with prior experience cited the value of relating the classroom materials to real world practitioner settings. Those without such experience minimized the contribution and suggested that this approach would “not help students pass the class.” This information may be instructive when we consider the environment that exists in much of academia. The publish-or-perish reward structure in many academic institutions does not necessarily favor course instruction that provides students with real world perspective. Faculty sometimes lament that teaching “gets in the way” of their research and publication efforts. As a result, one can see how a response that focuses on pass rates versus application and practical understanding can unfold in such an academic environment. Many criminal justice students who are seeking a practitioner career in the field are likely not particularly concerned with faculty publication records; they want courses that will help them in the challenging profession they have chosen.

The results suggest that students found practitioner-educators positively benefited their educational pursuits. Though certain criminal justice courses may have the same base content, the evaluations by students revealed significant advantages to those course taught by faculty who had the experience base to relate the theory to practice. Again, further study is warranted. As mentioned previously, faculty who may not possess real-world experience in the profession can likely moderate this result by the use of realistic case studies, guest lectures, professional panels, and so forth. The goal of this research is not to malign criminal justice faculty who do not have practitioner experience; instead, the goal is to highlight the possible advantages that those with such experience can bring to the classroom and to our students.

As we consider the quality of instruction offered in our heavily focused, practitioner-directed students, we must consider the needs of the students being served. What are our students expecting? What are those who hire our graduates expecting? What would better serve the profession more generally? In many cases, when it comes to the reality of hiring criminal justice faculty, the emphasis is on publication records and research activity, not on what might best serve the needs of practitioner-focused students. There often seems to be a greater focus on hiring faculty who research practitioners, rather than hiring potential prac-

itioner-educators themselves. Such bias can be hidden behind a focus on a lack of publications or teaching record. However, at some point there needs to be a recognition that there are vastly different reward structures at play for those in academia and those in practitioner positions. It would be more difficult for a practitioner-educator candidate to develop an extensive academic publication record given the focus and demands of the profession. As a result, it would seem to make sense that forward-thinking educational programs identify such discrepancies and provide certain allowances, especially for those programs meeting the needs of the practitioners and those who employ them.

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Received: 8/2016

Accepted: 11/2016

Suggested Citation: Garner, R., & Lyons, P. (2016). In defense of "cop shop" pedagogy. [Electronic Version]. *Applied Psychology in Criminal Justice*, 12(2), 126-132.