

Blow up dolls and a hammer: is there a place for social learning on the National Firearms Instructors Course?

By Chris Beighton and Andreas Heath

Training can look easy, but it rarely is. And it certainly never is when you are training Firearms Instructors. So much can go wrong, expectations are so high, and there is so much knowledge in the room that you have to ask yourself what, if anything, can be taught here?

The National Firearms Instructors Course (NFIC), run by Kent Police in partnership with Canterbury Christ Church University, is a case in point. The University has the job of leading the delivery of “academic input” in situ. Two weeks’ work on training techniques sits in weeks 2 and 3 of a seven-week programme, leading to national recognition as an Instructor. That leaves just 2 weeks to get up to speed in the training techniques needed when Instructors go back to force and take responsibility for training firearms officers up in their own force.

But while the pressure of facilitating this is high, readers of articles in past issues of *Top Cover* will know that the whole thing is also extremely interesting, hugely varied, and, now and again, even fun. Many trainees are surprised to hear that the trainers learn a lot, too, during these programmes, and this particular fact feeds into many of the teaching and training decisions which are made as part of the NFIC programme.

Social learning

One of the most important decisions, as a trainer, is the deliberate choice of “social” learning approaches which work especially well in the NFIC context.

This is because social learning places great emphasis on social context and the working environment: learning happens in social contexts and as a result of social processes. What this means is that we often think of teaching and learning as basically copying things: the teacher has knowledge of skills and the learner’s job is to imitate it. However, in working, professional environments, this is not really true. When real problems arise, we work together to solve them and learn how to do our job better as a result. You might even say that by doing this we actually define what our job is. The key thing is that this kind of learning is 100% practical. Blue sky ideas are great, and we often develop new ideas and new ways of doing things in the process. But the solutions have to work for the people who are going to use them, and they must work with the resources which are available or can realistically be acquired, invented or otherwise obtained.

Which takes us, obviously, to the main issue in this article: blow up dolls and a hammer attack.

Blow up dolls...?

Back in 1957 – stay with us on this – Albert Bandura, a social scientist, noticed that young children tend to copy what adults do. No great discovery, of course, and the interesting thing is not really *what* children copy, than what they do when they go *beyond* simple copying.

Essentially, it’s about how children create new behaviour rather than simply imitating it. To study this, Bandura did a set of experiments involving – yes, you guessed it – an inflatable doll. A large

inflatable “Bobo” doll was put in a room, and an adult was filmed physically – and entirely gratuitously – attacking it in an aggressive and violent way. The doll was pushed, slapped and kicked and was unable to defend itself except by simply bouncing back. Children were first shown the film and then put in the same room with the same doll to see what they would do.

...and a hammer?

Once again, what Bandura observed is not, perhaps, very surprising. The children treated the doll in the same way that they had been shown: the kids used Bobo as a punchbag. What is perhaps more interesting, though, was the *level* of aggression and violence which the children displayed in Bandura’s experiment. The kids went well beyond anything that the adult in the film did. Where the adult had just pushed and kicked the doll, the children took hammers and even guns to poor Bobo. You can see all this on a popular video sharing website by the way – it is fascinating to watch. At times it’s quite scary to see just how far the kids will go once they have been given the message that it’s OK to be horrible to the defenceless Bobo.

But so what? Kids can be aggressive, for sure, and showing them violent films might make this worse. But the real point is that Bandura was just one of a group of “social learning” theorists whose ideas are, I think, really useful to have in firearms training. Again, bear with us on this: our point is that to train well, you have to work *with* your trainees as a social group, not against them. Bandura reminds us that a great deal of professional learning takes place in social situations, where we learn by observing what our peers do. We can invent and change, but ultimately, the things we do are fundamentally underpinned by the behaviour of others, in our work environment. This is perhaps illustrated by that famous Police saying, said to Probationary Constables up and down the country as they graduate to their areas “Forget everything they told you in Training School, this is where you learn the job.”

So unlike the sort of *individualistic learning* that often takes place in formal education settings – remember toiling away on your own on exercises at school? - Cops typify successful *social learning* because they often work best *with others* in teams and groups, perhaps no more so than Firearms Officers. In fact, they often rely on situations where everyone is part of a jigsaw which must fit together to work. What to do and how to do it is a shared thing, not just a rule to follow in isolation. People who *work* like this – and our experience suggests that Firearms has this kind of work ethic at its heart – often *learn* best in the same way.

So rather than telling trainees what they need to learn and how to learn it, there are times where a social learning approach can be used more successfully. The NFIC programme at KPC is a good example.

One of the key aspects of the NFIC programme is the design and delivery of a week-long introductory skills at arms course. This is based in the Training and Tactical Firearms unit’s suite of rooms, range and other facilities. Volunteers from the military sign up for the programme and are trained in using a Glock Pistol. These volunteers are invariably highly motivated, very enthusiastic, and often skilled and experienced in other aspects of firearms use.

However, few, if any of these volunteers have any actual handgun experience, so the programme has to take them from “zero to hero” in a week.

The role of NFIC is to help trainers develop the skills and confidence to meet challenges like this, and here's an example from a recent programme. Trainees had just completed a round-up exercise which refreshed their memories about some of the learning theories they had studied 2 days previously. Importantly, the exercise also contained some new information about how to do things. This new information was discovered by the trainees in the course of the activity: in essence, *they* had to work out how it fitted with *their* existing knowledge. After some sharing of ideas, the group as a whole eventually undertook the task of deciding what lessons could be learnt from this round-up in the design of the week-long Glock course. As a group of 12, their challenge was to make a mind map which was both clear and useful enough to be photographed, shared and, crucially, used in the design of the Glock Military course. There was a tight time limit, and explicit responsibility was "handed over" to the group to stick to it, rigorously.

I think this exemplified social learning at work. The results were good, of course, largely because the trainees on NFIC are motivated, experienced officers with substantial knowledge of the area and the ability to apply it. But from the trainer's point of view, it also exemplified how powerful social learning can be. The trainees had to make sense of the input, together, albeit in a guided way. This means they really knew what it was and "owned it" in a responsible way. Plus, they had a concrete goal, and this goal had real value to the group as a whole – it was not just a teaching exercise, however interesting, chosen *by* the trainer essentially for the benefit *of* the trainer. There was material benefit to them, rather than just theory, and they recognised this. Perhaps most importantly, the group as a whole had control of what was going on. They were aware of this fact and aware they could go beyond what they had been "taught". They only needed to refer to the trainers on those rare occasions where their own expertise was insufficient. There was no teaching 'to suck eggs', and a real start was made on planning a complex skills at arms programme. The trainer's own expertise has more value because it is used for things that the trainer could actually really contribute, not simply recycling common knowledge or regurgitating de-contextualised received wisdom.

The trainees tended to agree. In feedback, the exercise was described as useful and especially helpful in giving time to discuss issues with colleagues. This meant that meanings could be worked out and clarified, choosing the best ideas through a process of "compounding" learning that helped remember important lessons. especially in the small group stage. At the same time, many felt that in larger groups it was more difficult to focus, contribute or listen to others. Also, it was not always clear to everyone how these discussions linked to practice.

So what?

Perhaps it's no surprise that the firearms instructors worked best in small teams, when the goal was focussed. The lesson from social learning is that such preferences need to be respected. It's a real learning experience when trainees bring their own ideas to the evaluation of teaching and learning processes. This can genuinely inform the trainer of "what worked", what didn't, and where it might lead.

So what does this tell us about social learning and firearms training? Obviously, in the firearms world, a problem solving, group-defined, discussion-based activity is not going to answer all our questions. There are plenty of reasons for taking other approaches which front-load information or

lay down the law in explicit ways for many parts of the curriculum. Any trainer who ignores this does so at their peril. For example, when training Firearms Officers you are training a group of 'Alpha' personalities. There is no doubt about it, your students will have strong personalities and there will be no shrinking violets. So, when using social learning exercises and techniques an important factor to consider is how to keep the exercise flowing without trainer interjection and without stalling at the first debate, everyone wanting to get their point across with no decisions made. Experience tells us that a useful method it often to set one of the students as a type of authority or 'difficult decision' maker-again a reflection of the social situation which they are used to dealing with.

So experience delivering NFIC suggests that there is also a need for training which reflects the way people deal with realistic problems in their working lives. Drawing on the collective wisdom of a professional group will, when done at the right time, and in the right way, make the most of the close social ties, strong sense of collective responsibility and pragmatic approach to complicated questions that typify police professionalism.

Sadly, a use has not yet been found for inflatable dolls and hammers in NFIC sessions here in Kent, but we're always open to suggestions. Who knows – maybe the next problem to be solved will require them! If it does, watch this space, because *Top Cover* will have an exclusive.

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