Busy professionals: any time for community learning?

Melissa Baker, University of Technology, Sydney, Australia

Introduction

Maintaining high standards of professionalism in a volunteer organisation is hard enough; providing the necessary ongoing learning that incorporates new knowledge and reflective practices is rarely achieved. It is argued that the key to ongoing community learning for participants in a volunteer organisation is participation in a continuing process of dialogue and cooperation (Fenwick & Tennant, 2004). This paper specifically examines the professionalism of police chaplains as volunteers who also have overlapping demands from three other cultures. Since police chaplains' formal and informal learning practices are limited, the organisation's management struggle to find appropriate ways to maintain their chaplains' professionalism.

This paper groups theories of formal and informal learning into three different practices located in local and global contexts. Local context is the local community where a police chaplain is based and global context is the wider volunteer organisation to which they belong. *Collective practices* provide the foundation of learning within one's local and global contexts. *New knowledge practices* lead to awareness of their contexts through formal and informal learning with other local-minded volunteers. *Reflective practices* generate knowledge of learning as one reflects on one's practice in both contexts. Whilst these practices appear to be mutually exclusive, it is demonstrated that they overlap and are embedded in the process of social learning.

Police chaplains are busy professionals volunteering their time to the police organisation. Addressing the question of whether learning should be a priority for busy volunteer professionals will lead to addressing the question of how to apply ongoing learning practices to police chaplains.

Framing the research

The qualitative research is an ethnographic and autoethnographic interpretive inquiry of police chaplaincy in New South Wales (Australia) and in New Zealand. The main objective of the study is to explicate how police chaplains perceive themselves and their individual and social learning in their role in order to improve the service of chaplains by developing, through mutual dialogue, the potential of collaborative support of peers in a community of practice (Baker, 2006). The study is intended to ascertain what police chaplains know about their role, their learning and how they perceive themselves.

Two positions frame this research. First, a learning position theorised from my observation and participation as a police chaplain in both New South Wales and New Zealand. Second, creating competency position theorised through a written survey, interviews and in situ observation with police chaplains in both

jurisdictions. The research is guided by four areas: (1) the professional work of the police chaplain; (2) the notion of kinship framed by communities of practice, culture and identity; (3) the major challenges; and (4) the continuing professional development and training of police chaplains. This paper focuses on the fourth area. It asks if learning in context as a professional police chaplain is vital in providing a stronger base for further development and training for police chaplaincy in the regions studied and potentially worldwide.

It is important to point out that Australian and New Zealand cultures are similar and different. Both countries have successfully created a society out of immigrants and refugees, yet Australians complain about their hybrid culture as if it is a threat to their national identity (Mackay, 1999), in contrast to New Zealanders who have integrated into one culture. Australia is one of the most multicultural societies in the world, with more than 200 different cultural and ethnic backgrounds (Duguid et al, 2006; Mackay, 1999). Police chaplains from both countries reflect the cultural diversity, particularly New South Wales as they include specialist Muslim, Buddhist, Jewish and Greek Orthodox police chaplains across Sydney.

The New South Wales Police Service is the fifth largest police force in the world, totalling almost 15,000 sworn officers. The New Zealand Police Service has 7,500 police officers for the entire country. One notable difference between the two police services is that New South Wales police carry a loaded gun on their person at all times, while New Zealand police have a gun locked in their car for emergency use only. The stress of being a police officer is part of their role. Not many people understand the pressure police officers experience. It is difficult for police officers to have friends outside the Police Service, particularly in country towns where people they arrest are often their neighbours. Police officers welcome police chaplains into their midst across both jurisdictions.

The learning context

Police chaplains play an important role in bridging the gap between frontline police officers and civilians in their dual role as a minister within their local context and as a police chaplain in the local and global contexts. A police chaplain is typically male (New Zealand has a much higher ratio of women police chaplains), in their 50s or 60s, usually a minister of a church with a Christian faith, theologically trained (required in New South Wales, but not in New Zealand), skilled with pastoral care, relational and approachable and has a passion to work with police. Whilst the Church has experienced a global decline in numbers (Barna & Hatch, 2001), ministers play an important role to reconnect people to be more active in local communities. From my interview with a New South Wales police chaplain:

> PC12: When I am talking with the police and doing something with them, I don't make any bones with them that I am a Christian, but here is something that is central to me and it is part of the job that I have. (A lady at the last police chaplains training session) spoke about part of her job of policing is doing the work of God, bring order out of chaos, that rang a lot

> of bells with me. I actually use that in both formal and informal contexts with people. You are surrounded by chaos and it will only get worse unless they find order. I find that people respond really well.

A problematic for police chaplaincy anywhere in the world is that not many people in society, even in the police service, understand or are aware of the service chaplains give to the police. This is in essence the importance of my research. It has been informative for me to be a police chaplain in both New South Wales and New Zealand. In Sydney, New South Wales, I wear a police uniform; in Auckland, New Zealand, I am in 'civvies' with a police ID tag around my neck. The survey results from New South Wales police chaplains in 2005 stated that in their opinion the strongest cultural symbol was the cross at 88% (worn on our epaulettes), closely followed by the uniform at 73%. Their New Zealander counterparts have neither to identify themselves as a police chaplain. I reflected in my research journal about this difference:

> As I changed from one role in New Zealand to another role in New South Wales as a police chaplain, I began to see the difference of being in a police uniform. Regardless if police officers know you or not, you are immediately recognised in uniform. You don't get the response 'what can I do for you?' when we are here for them. It also helps society to understand who you are, what you do and why you do it. When I walk proudly down the street in uniform in Sydney, people know what I do; when I walk down the street in Auckland in business pants, people do not know what I do. To inform and to educate are two important hurdles and the uniform helps. [24 Oct 2006]

Currently, ongoing learning for police chaplains is limited to the culture in which s/he serves. New South Wales police chaplains gather together annually for four days at their Police College to mainly learn about police culture and to network as a community. New Zealand police chaplains gather together biennially at their Police College for much the same training and they also meet every other year in their regions. Essentially, police chaplain training is limited and barely constitutes formal learning or ongoing learning to increase professionalism.

Four different cultures (national, local community, church and police) play an important part in the role of a police chaplain and all of these cultures contribute to the role of a professional police chaplain. The police chaplain's national culture gives them perspective on what it means to be an Australian or a New Zealander working with the police of their country. There is a sense of pride and belonging attached to their country that shapes their identity. The police chaplain's local community gives them a place to serve others as a minister. The knowledge they receive from their local community provides a context for their global work as a police chaplain. The church culture acknowledges the police chaplain as a minister and chaplain. It gives them permission to serve the wider community and at the same time represent the church. The police culture welcomes the chaplain into their world and helps them to be part of the police culture. Learning is essential in all four cultures

as it shapes the chaplain's knowledge, participation, dialogue and cooperation with the people they work alongside.

There is much literature on formal and informal learning. Reflective learning theories share one central belief: 'as learners we construct, through reflection, a personal understanding of relevant structures of meaning derived from our actions in the world' (Fenwick & Tennant, 2004, p.60). Edwards (2005) suggests that learning is more complex and relational, and by the shaping of activities, learning co-emerges. I believe the key to ongoing learning is the social component whether that comes under formal or informal learning. Brown and Duguid (2001) state that learning is a complex social process. Habermas suggests that individuals can only become individualised through a process of socialisation (cited in Vasta & Castles, 1997). Gonczi (2004) states that learning, the creation of knowledge, takes place through action. It is through networking, role taking and participating in social forums within the local and global contexts that the participants begin to understand the culture and have a sense of belonging to that culture (Brown & Duguid, 2001; Gonczi, 2004). The more the learner participates, the more the learner will develop new knowledge through the process of interacting with other likeminded professionals.

Each time a learner creates new knowledge, the knowledge is transferred and developed through reflective practices in the context in which it is situated. For the learner, a process of practices is foundational for the volunteer organisation and its future. The more the community of learners gathers, the more knowledge building and constructing and testing of theories will lead to genuine understanding. 'Real understanding and competence is essentially a result of social rather than individual activities' (Gonczi, 2004, p.21).

Can this type of social learning be expected for volunteers? Duguid, Slade and Schugurensky (2006) explored the notion of volunteer cultures at SCUTREA 2006. They surmised that research on learning in volunteer cultures was scarce mainly due to volunteerism seen as not 'real work' and such learning as a volunteer is not yet formalised. This is a valid comment, making it harder for a volunteer organisation to provide the right level of learning appropriate to the needs of the individual in their local context as well as their role in the wider global context. Moreover, unless police chaplains gather for learning in both local and global contexts, they will not have a sense of belonging to the organisation, they will not learn new knowledge and apply it to their role, and it will not lead them to a greater understanding of their context. The more police chaplains reflect on their practice, the more they will actively interpret what they see and hear. When this occurs, they construct their own unique knowledge (Fenwick & Tennant, 2004). Critically reflecting on practices is necessary for any organisation. Fenwick and Tennant (2004, p62) state critical reflection combined with social action (praxis) develops new awareness of underlying 'inequities and oppressions'. *Praxis* supports the shift to focus on the three different practices outlined in this paper.

The collective practice of professionals
In today's world, consumers want 'good service' and a professional standard. They expect to pay for expertise and quality credentials and/or materials (du Gay, 1996). This move to a culture of 'better service' requires employers to be more effective in recruitment and training of their employees. As people expect professionalism in business, they also expect professionalism in the Church and ministries such as police chaplaincy. Therefore, chaplains need to provide a professional service. The New South Wales and New Zealand Police Services hold police chaplains in high regard. Although chaplaincy is voluntary in nature, police officers and their staff expect police chaplains to act professionally with high standards and values, in their roles as both minister and police chaplain.

Being 'professional' can mean a variety of things. The English Oxford Dictionary (2005) says *professional* is a person having impressive competence in a particular activity. Hargreaves (2000) states 'professionalism' means to improve quality and standards of practice and 'professional' means the quality of what one does through one's conduct, demeanour and standards. Police chaplains from New South Wales and New Zealand, when asked in their interview 'what does professional mean to you?', responded:

> PC3: It seems to me that it is being equipped with necessary resources for the job at hand. And all the things that go with being a professional anything – well resourced, well trained, a good communicator, someone who is trustworthy, reliable and that we are consistent in all that we do in terms of our standards and relationships with police officers.

> PC4: to be professional means to conduct yourself professionally, maintain integrity, to maintain high standards of confidentiality and the handling of information which is highly volatile sometimes. So, to be professional is to maintain high standards of professional conduct.

> PC8: Professional means qualified. Someone who's had training suitable for their practice. Professional requires a certain standard of behaviour and codes of practices.

> PC13: There is professional and unprofessional. And I would hope in this case that all police chaplains are professional, not unprofessional, that is keeping confidentiality and having a manner about them that is providing a 'professional' (very good quality) service. There is also professional and non-professional. I think monetary factors usually come in under this category. So we aren't really professional because we are not paid, but since we have qualifications and experience as a minister and police chaplain, we're not non-professional in this expert area. Therefore, we are able to conduct ourselves in a professional manner.

From these definitions four meanings emerge – a professional is one who is competent, well trained, has high standards and conducts himself or herself in an appropriate manner. PC13 raises a pertinent statement contrasting our

professionalism with our volunteerism. Although police chaplaincy is voluntary, police chaplains see themselves as ‘professional’ in terms of behaviour (professional versus unprofessional), not in terms of remuneration (professional versus non-professional). In order to be a volunteer professional police chaplain, is formal and informal learning fundamental to their professionalism?

Police chaplains are well qualified, highly respected ministers before entering police chaplaincy. They are called upon to exercise their skills within the police service at highly professional levels. Cornford and Athanasou’s (1995, p.18) paper on ‘developing expertise through training’ concluded expertise is rarely taught, but if structured training for beginners through to the more advanced is taught it can act as a catalyst for development. Expertise needs to be supported and valued in an organisation; this will benefit individuals, the profits of the organisation and contribute to the community over all.

Where does a professional learn competence, standards and conduct, which are embedded differently in each culture? Gonczi (2004) would say that adopting a relational approach to learning, rather than a task-oriented one, leads to competence. Society also plays a vital influential part in our learning (Sparks & Butterwick, 2004; Wenger, 1998) and it is through society that we acquire cultural values (Milner & Browitt, 2002). Therefore, professionals learn through interacting with others within their community in order to develop knowledge, identity and professionalism.

New knowledge practices, however, cannot stand alone. Cervero (2000) claims that keeping professionals up to date on the profession’s knowledge base is a problem. Whether they are a teacher, physician, manager or clergy, he says, they typically apply themselves to short courses, lectures, long talks and audiovisuals, making never-to-read again notes. ‘This picture is as universally recognizable to people in any profession as it is criticized for being largely ineffective in improving the performance of these same professionals’ (Cervero, 2000, p.3). To improve professional practice, learning must take place through the community as a collective practice alongside reflective practices, not just by applying ‘knowledge’.

Therefore, the integration of both reflective practices and the emergence of new knowledge are essential. New knowledge already exists in both police chaplaincy services in their annual or biennial meetings as a whole community. This practice is important and needs to continue as this is the only time the whole community gathers. However, the downfall in their current learning system is the lack of reflective practices. This can easily be achieved through regional meetings. The things that I learn and do in Sydney or Auckland city will be different from another police chaplain in Wagga Wagga or Nelson, so regular regional meetings with like local contexts are crucial. These meetings will enable continual dialogue, consistent networking and participation with other professionals in the same culture.

The future

There is only so much one can expect from a volunteer busy professional, however, there is an important standard of expertise, competence and professionalism that holds the service of police chaplaincy together. If one chaplain acts incompetently or unprofessionally in any one of their four cultures, then that could effectively nullify the good work and good name of police chaplaincy. To maintain a high standard in any line of work, ongoing learning is essential; moreover, once a year does not encourage the level of professionalism needed to fulfil this role adequately.

What is effective practice? 'It occurs when professionals are most likely to be aware of a need for better ways to think about what they do' (Cervero, 2000, p.9). This paper has argued that social learning as a collective practice with new knowledge and reflective practices is essential for volunteers who play an important professional role. Learning, whether formal or informal, should take priority in a given organisation. The question of 'how' begins with the organisation's management being aware of the professional needs in the given contexts and then acting upon that awareness. The response would provide ongoing learning for both global and local collective practices, firstly, as professionals learn about their practices creating new knowledge and secondly, as professionals regularly reflect upon that new knowledge. Once this ongoing learning is achieved, high standards of professionalism in the police chaplaincy service will be maintained for the benefit of all.

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