

Problem-Based Learning at the Basic Law Enforcement Academy

As many are aware, the Basic Law Enforcement Academy (BLEA) is transitioning from traditional teaching and learning methods to a Problem-Based Learning (PBL) curriculum. Implementing this new methodology into our academy is a massive and important project. This “upgrade” to our curriculum will keep Washington on the forefront of police academy training and help us to achieve the ultimate goal: Continue to train new officers in the basics of police work *and* improve upon their problem-solving abilities. Starting with this issue of “The Dispatcher,” we will share our progress.

In future articles, we will cover such topics as the history of PBL at the CJTC, how we will test students, discipline standards and the academy “atmosphere,” subjects which have been added, learning journals, the BLEA Problem Solving Model, the BLEA Police Response Model, adult learning principles, what you can expect from recruits trained under the new curriculum, technology improvements at the CJTC, and more. In this first article, we will focus on Problem-Based Learning in general.

In a traditional method of teaching, students learn the information and skills, then practice with the information and skills, and finally apply the information and skills to the “problem.” That “problem” most often takes the form of a written exam or final mock scene test. The curriculum and instructors tell the students exactly what to learn. The students just have to trust that the information is valuable to them. They don’t necessarily understand or believe why they are hearing it. And unfortunately, lecture is the most prominent delivery method involved in a traditional curriculum. Lecture surely has its place as a valuable tool in training – but hundreds and hundreds of hours of lecture is nobody’s idea of a good time.

So... what is PBL? Problem-Based Learning is an *approach* to training and learning. The main idea is simple. Let the students decide what is important. Let them take ownership of their own learning. Students will have real motivation to learn the new information or skill. They’re motivated because they are facing a problem that’s “over their head.” This complicated (ill-structured) problem requires the acquisition of new information and skills to solve. This process of facing the problem BEFORE coming to a solution is more realistic. Real life presents the problems first – not the solutions. Real life is “over our heads.” When we want to learn something new, we have to figure it out for ourselves. We have to take ownership of how we want to proceed.

A PBL curriculum teaches students how to solve problems. It provides a system for working through problems. *Students learn how to learn.* And students take that problem-solving system with them into the work force. In its pure form, PBL seems quite unstructured. However, with well-designed ill-structured problems driving the learning, and a well-trained cadre of instructors, the learning goes where it’s supposed to.

PBL got its start in the medical field, at McMaster University. In an effort to improve the problem-solving skills of medical graduate students, Problem-Based Learning was developed. PBL is now the standard method of instruction for higher-level medical studies. Other fields have picked up on this teaching approach as well. In police work, PBL is closely related to the PTO movement, as PBL and the PTO model share many of the same goals and philosophies.

Only a small handful of police academies in the U.S. have implemented Problem-Based Learning into their curriculum. The CJTC Basic Law Enforcement Academy will be among the first to completely revise the academic curriculum with PBL as the primary format. There will, of course, still be a healthy mix of some more traditional instruction techniques utilized here – including a bit of lecture.

Our challenge is to find the best possible way to implement Problem-Based Learning into our academy. Due to the sheer amount of information and skills we must cover in a relatively short period of time, it takes some finesse. We are currently running a PBL curriculum pilot class (Class 625), which is helping us determine the correct balance of guided discussion, lecture, hands-on (practical), homework, individual work, group work, reading and research, and mock scene training.

The 86-hour firearms program, 70-hour defensive tactics program, 40-hour EVOC program, and the physical training program are not being altered at this point. These programs are already well defined and sequential. However, the rest of the subjects (commonly referred to as “core blocks”) are undergoing a major overhaul. The most obvious difference is that there will be no more core blocks. Subjects like patrol procedures, criminal procedures, criminal law, investigations, crisis intervention, and traffic enforcement are being integrated. The ill-structured problems students face throughout the academy will have a mixture of all these core blocks together – just like real patrol. A typical call on patrol requires simultaneous understanding and application of all these subjects. Now our curriculum will mirror that reality.

We look forward to sharing updates our progress and highlighting the improvements to our already outstanding academy.

Deputy Seth Grant, King County Sheriff's Office

TAC Officer / Instructor, BLEA

Lt. Debbie Mealy, Thurston County Sheriff's Office

Academy Commander, BLEA