

RESEARCH CONFERENCE 2020

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Experiences, Reflections, and Applications of Service-Learning Among Rookie Police Officers

**POSTER
PRESENTATION**

OCTOBER 1, 2020

**WALDEN
UNIVERSITY**

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Abstract

Though police officers learn how to de-escalate volatile situations in police training, some officers still rely on use of force and are not fully incorporating positive engagement to de-escalate volatile situations. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the experiences and perceptions of rookie police officers about service-learning in college criminal justice courses. The findings revealed that rookie police officers with prior service-learning experiences continued to engage with youth and community organizations and develop altruistic behaviors. This study has implications for positive social change by creating a police officer training curriculum to prepare police officers and to enrich relationships between community members and police officers.

Doctoral Capstone

Problem

Use-of-force (UOF) was ranked the top critical issue in policing (Hyland, et. al. 2018).

Southeast Metropolitan Police Department (SMPD, a pseudonym) has had an increase in the number of (UOF) complaints filed against newly trained officers over the past 3 years (averaging 6.75%) which outranked the national average of 11 years (4.8%) (Hyland, et. al. 2018).

The problem addressed was the quality of the training on de-escalating techniques for UOF to all officers, specifically to newly trained officers within their field training phase of policing.

Purpose

The purpose of this **qualitative basic design study** was to explore the experiences, observations, conceptualizations, and experimentations of service-learning (Eyler, et. al., 1997) in college criminal justice courses among rookie police officers.

Significance

This study presents the following

- Original contribution to the field of education practice among police academy instructors and curriculum developers;
- Contribute to positive social change in police reform;
- Effect change in policing curriculums for de-escalation and positive engagement;
- Benefit communities for cohesion with police;
- Fills the gap in knowledge of linking service-learning after college and particularly within the police training community (Association for Experiential Education, n.d.).

Conceptual Framework

Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory provided the path to understanding positive engagement through 4 stages of experiences.

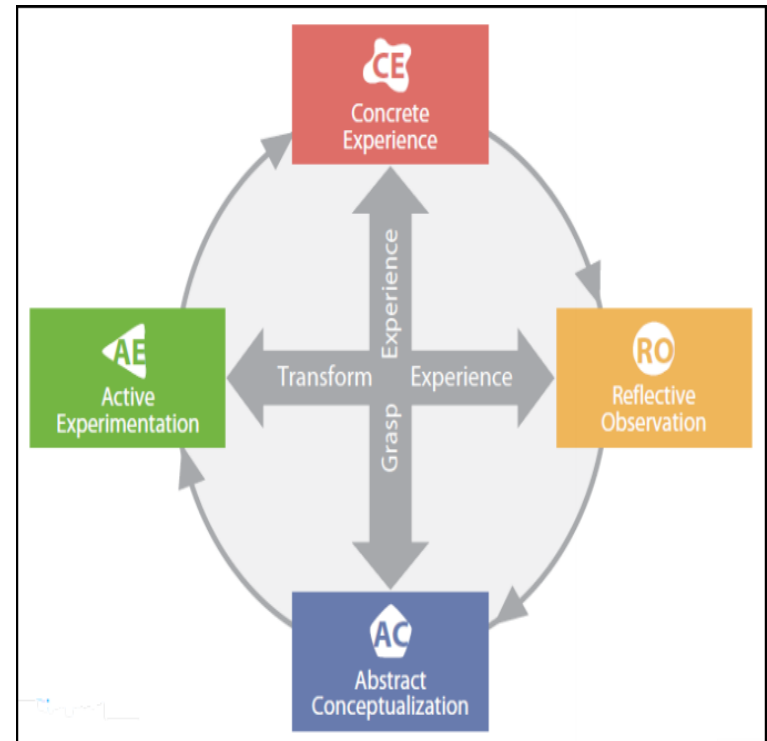


Figure 1. Kolb's experiential learning cycle.

Relevant Scholarship

The search for current literature revealed limited literature relating service-learning in college used beyond and into professional practice. Because of the limited literature about service-learning in relation to police officer training or practice, the review was presented to contextualize police officer preparedness and service-learning starting with a brief history of American policing and ending with how service-learning can be a positive impact in police preparedness.

However, considerable research on the impact of service-learning in college; the impact of service-learning post-college; and service-learning and adult learning proved that past and shared experiences are critical and valuable to life experiences.

With Kolb's experiential learning theory, Molly et. al. (2015) proposed four reasons to implement service-learning

- (1) To link academic learning outcomes to meaning through service;
- (2) To enhance student engagement through experiential education;
- (3) To improve social and personal development; and,
- (4) To strengthen communities.

Ultimately, strengthen and serving communities is the main facet of policing. Therefore, police preparation might benefit from incorporating service-learning methods into college or academy training (COPS, 2015).

Research Question

The one overarching research question was paralleled with each of Kolb's four stages to explore the **experiences, observations, conceptualizations, and experimentations of service-learning** among rookie police officers?

Participants

A comprehensive "target" sample consisting of 359 rookie police officers from SMPD who qualified from an eligibility questionnaire to voluntarily participate in the study.

- Hired after 2015,
- Attend college at any time,
- Took criminal justice classes in college,
- Had a service-learning experience, and
- Willing to be interviewed.

Procedures

For the 10 that responded to the eligibility questionnaire, 8 officers qualified and were interviewed. The interview questions paralleled Kolb's 4 phases of experiential learning cycle.

Analysis

After each interview, the study participant reviewed, provided correction, and approved their transcripts.

The interview transcripts resulted in thematic analyses.

Findings

The emerging themes were:

- (1) Rookie police officers focused primarily on volunteering for youth and community organizations;
- (2) Altruism and enjoyment results from their experiences;
- (3) Rookie police officers connect with and grasp the ideals of service;
- (4) They are grateful for their transformative experiences, and
- (5) Rookie police officers continue to serve in capacities to which they were introduced during their college-based service-learning experiences.

Interpretation

Because no other studies have researched service-learning post-college in any occupation including policing, the results of this study

- (1) fills the gap in service-learning shared post-college
- (2) results of this study might provide valuable information to police reform, police practices in de-escalation and community enrichment.

Limitations

Potential limitations for a curriculum plan to be implemented in field training include:

- (1) Time to learn about service-learning;
- (2) The implementation as a requirement, and
- (3) The ability of rookie officers to engage in reflections.

Recommendations

Alternative approaches UOF:

- Agencies have a critical review of UOF policies;
- Effective use of body-worn cameras
- Center on cognitive and behavioral skills set in police academy and recruitment
- Train police for proactive vs reactive.

Recommendations for project consist of

- Integrating service-learning components within field training curriculum plan;
- Devise a well-planned instructional curriculum development with police academy training.

Future research:

- Broader study of limited agency personnel;
- Educated more on service-learning towards emergency personnel; and
- Cast study from quantitatively perspective.

Social Change Implications

Service-learning opportunities for police officers hold promise for training officers to de-escalate and positively manage volatile situations especially within our current climate.

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