

# **Intelligence versus biff: Modern police defensive tactics training in action**

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## **Abstract**

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, police work is far more complex and intellectually demanding (Lanyon 2007). However, a technical, skill-based focus is the impetus for traditional defensive tactics training: best suiting those who are physically strong. Changes in recruitment (e.g., increasing age of recruits, number of female recruits, the fitness level and slighter build of recruits, and occupational health and safety legislation) necessitate a review of defensive tactics training. Action research was undertaken to study an approach that focused on the development of police trainees' initiative, teamwork, communication and flexibility, with the aim of augmenting trainees' capabilities in problem solving and decision-making.

## **Introduction**

This paper gives an overview of an action research project undertaken with police recruits involved in learning defensive tactics. The reason for this research was to involve recruits in evaluating and refining a different approach to police defensive tactics training. The philosophy of this approach is the intelligent application of unarmed techniques using the minimum amount of reasonable force necessary to secure control. Central to the training is an emphasis on duty of care and the adoption of an intelligent, ethical, and disciplined application of force in situations where officers are unable to deploy weapons.

The review and instigation of a different training regime for defensive tactics training was prompted by a number of factors including more female recruits, greater range of ages from 18 up to 55 years (Lynch 2005), lower levels of fitness and slighter body build of recruits, and a need to reduce the potential for injury and complaint.

Forty seven police recruits participated in the research over 12 months. In addition to evaluating and refining the training, the changes to the training aimed to engender an educative intent: moving from doing defensive tactics based on impulse, reaction and physical strength to doing based on thinking, communicating, making effective decisions, and justifying actions.

## Background

A snapshot of the changing nature of policing, its models, police training and a comparison of martial arts and police defensive tactics training establishes a backdrop for the research.

Policing has become far more complex, challenging, wide ranging and intellectually demanding in response to a number of global, social, economic and political agendas (Lanyon 2007; Lynch 2005; Murray 2006; Ransley & Mazerolle 2009; Rowe 2008). Despite populist views and media representations of police fighting crime and using force (Rowe 2009), the reality of policing is service provision involving fighting and preventing crime, using force when necessary, maintaining public order, and accounting for the provision of a public service (Rowe 2008, pp.8-13). In order to respond to the dynamic and complex nature of policing, Lanyon (2007, p.107) asserts that police need to move from the status of 'artisan' to professional.

This assertion can be further understood through a comparison of the traditional and contemporary models of policing respectively (Lewis 2007; Murray 2005). Policing is regularly characterised as an 'authoritarian', 'quasi-military', 'insular and defensive culture', which operates as 'a craft/trade' with emphasis on 'physical attributes' (Lewis 2007, p.149). However, a compelling alternative exists in the depiction of policing as a professional, 'open and consultative culture' that values a 'democratic management style' with emphasis on 'problem-solving' and 'intelligence', or the thoughts that guide action (Lewis 2007, p.149). While a shift from a traditional to contemporary model of policing is proposed as an imperative, in practice, Murray (2005) questions the jurisdictions' commitment to a contemporary model, suggesting that a traditional model, with emphasis on command and control, has been ever-present. It has just resurfaced with legitimacy post 9/11.

The definition and models of policing raise questions about the nature and quality of police training generally, but also how defensive tactics training has been perceived, designed and facilitated. Before examining police defensive tactics training, a brief overview of police training will help to set the scene. Kratcoski (2004) reviewed Australian and international police training and found that it concentrates on the rudimentary aspects of law enforcement at the cost of the higher-order conceptual skills. Kratcoski's (2004) findings are supported by studies of police training that reveal the predominance of a pedagogical, didactic approach to training (teacher-centred, 'chalk and talk'), as opposed to an andragogical approach (adult learning, learner-centred) (Birzer 2003; Birzer & Tannehill 2001; McCoy 2006; Marenin 2004). A pedagogical approach represents a narrow focus on content and behavioural learning that 'reflects a search for certainty and control of knowledge and behavior' (McLaren 2007, p.196). Within the context of defensive tactics training, such an approach does not develop students' depth and breadth of knowledge and their skills in decision

making, problem-solving and critical thinking (Birzer & Tannehill, 2001; Ortmeier, 1997, cited in McCoy, 2006; Marenin, 2004; White, 2006).

This research and experience has prompted significant changes to how learning occurs and is perceived within the organisation. Through formal learning programmes and on-the-job coaching, police trainers are encouraged and supported to adopt andragogical approaches. Underscoring these approaches is a more holistic notion of competence including 'functional competence' (skill), 'cognitive competence' ('knowing what' *and* 'knowing why'), 'personal competence' (values and knowing how to behave), 'ethical competence' (standards of practice), and 'metacognitive competence' (learning to learn, reflection) (Cheetham & Chivers, 1996, pp. 25-28; Chivers, 2007, p.642). This represents a shift in thinking and practice from competence as 'functional...and task oriented', which is typical of the definition and application of competence in Australia (Guthrie, 2009, p.18), to a competence that has the essential ingredients for effective professional practice through the development of 'personal', 'ethical', and 'meta-cognitive' competencies (Cheetham & Chivers, 1996, pp. 25-28; Chivers, 2007, p.642).

Moving from training and learning to defensive tactics training, historically, police defensive tactics training programmes have sourced techniques from a diverse range of martial arts (e.g., Aikido, Taekwondo, Jujitsu, Judo, boxing, Brazilian Jujitsu, and Krav Maga). A comparison of martial arts training and police defensive tactics training reveals a number of discrepancies. In martial arts there is a reliance on strength and one-on-one training. However, police regularly work in teams and are confronted by single and multiple offenders. A focus on a regime of fighting on the ground does not suit police whose work occurs in many and varied environments, often with hazards (e.g., broken glass, crowds). Martial arts techniques are designed to deal with one attack and one defence. Experience shows that knife attacks commonly involve multiple strikes, and attacks are often frenzied. Techniques that require time and repetition to learn and are not easily recalled under stress, do not equip police to effectively meet current demands. A crucial factor is that martial arts techniques were not developed within the context of designer drugs and the risk of fluid exposure. The influence of martial arts on police defensive tactics training has seen an emphasis on impulse, reaction and physical strength, which essentially reinforces perceptions of masculinity.

Against this background, changes have been made to defensive tactics training. The underlying philosophy is intelligent policing involving thought, communication, problem solving and decision-making. The objective is the peaceful resolution of the incident with no injuries to any party, and the means of achieving this objective is through scenario based training and the application of teamwork, communication, conflict resolution, commitment, problem solving, decision-making, duty of care, and respect. Above all, the trainers wanted to bring reality to the training.

## **Action research and ideas-in-action**

Education is one of a number of disciplines in which action research has been extensively and effectively used to improve the quality of educational practices and outcomes (Kemmis & McTaggart 1988; Stringer 2007). It provides a methodical process to investigate and review not just problems, but everyday issues and practices (Stringer 2007, p.1). It aids in developing a deeper understanding of particular practices and, when necessary, assists in identifying specific and appropriate solutions, rather than adopting a “one size fits all” approach (Stringer 2007).

Central to the action research process is a simple but powerful framework of ‘look, think, act’ (Stringer 2007, p.8). Woven through this framework is a cycle of continuous ‘observation, reflection and action’ (Kemmis & Wilkinson 1998; Stringer 2007, p.9). A fundamental feature of action research is the acknowledgement of the ‘social, cultural, interactional, and emotional factors’ that influence and impact upon situations and individuals’ actions (Stringer 2007, p.9). Observation, reflection and consideration of a range of factors were constant features of operational skills training practices; evident in the trainers’ mantra of “think, feel, talk, act”. So action research made sense. The trainers were critical of traditional approaches to police defensive tactics training. They were committed to deepening their understanding of the defensive tactics training they had introduced and the recruits’ experiences and learning in order to improve practices within both training and work contexts.

Decisions were made to conduct the research with two groups of recruits as a means of triangulating and verifying the results of the research. One group of recruits started at the beginning of the year and the second group started mid-year. The research was conducted over 12 months with a total of 47 recruits. Similarities were evident in the profiles of the two recruit groups and their responses to the first questionnaire. In outlining the action research approach and phases of the research, any reference to data, with exception of that which was elicited from the first questionnaire, will be inclusive of the two groups.

### **Look: Observing and identifying ideas-in-action**

The first phase started in week one of each of the recruit courses and involved gathering initial data from the recruits using a questionnaire. Data elicited included: gender, height, weight, age; whether they had witnessed violence; martial arts experience; feelings about learning defensive tactics; current skills to deal with violent situations; physical qualities they believe were needed for defensive tactics; preferred gender of partner; how they expected to perform; and what they expected to learn. Table 1.0 provides a summary profile of each group.

Table 1.0

Recruit Course 1		Recruit Course 2	
Ages	Numbers / Gender	Ages	Numbers / Gender
19-24 yoa	12 F, 3 M	19-24 yoa	12 F, 2 M
26-34 yoa	8 M	26-34 yoa	8 M
42 yoa	1 M	48 yoa	1 M
Weight	Numbers / Gender	Weight	Numbers / Gender
46 kg-76kg	11 F	46 kg-69kg	10 F
83 kg	1 F	70 kg-85kg	2 F
74 kg-82kg	8 M	70 kg-85kg	9 M
84 kg-88kg	3 M	86 kg-99kg	2 M
99 kg	1 M		
Height	Numbers / Gender	Height	Numbers / Gender
155cm-166cm	9 F	155cm-169cm	10 F
168cm-178cm	3 F	170cm-179cm	2 F
165cm	1 M	160cm-169cm	2 M
168cm-178cm	6 M	170cm-195cm	9 M
182cm-192cm	4 M		
Witness violence	Numbers	Witness violence	Numbers
Yes	18	Yes	17
No	6	No	6
Feelings	Numbers	Feelings	Numbers
Nervous / uncertain	20	Apprehensive / nervous	10
Pumped / confident	2	Confident	2
No response	2	No response	1
Martial arts	Numbers	Martial arts	Numbers
Yes	18	Yes	17
No	6	No	6
Physical qualities	Prioritised	Physical qualities	Prioritised
Strength / endurance	1	Strength / endurance	1
Speed / agility	2	Speed / agility	2
Skills	3	Balance / coordination	3
Mental strength / attitude	4	Technical skill	4
Health / fitness & confidence	5	Health / fitness	5
Coordination	6	Reflexes & mental attitude	6
Voice & height	7	Courage & confidence	7
		Power & voice	8

Table 2.0 gives a snapshot of some of the recruits' responses to three questions: preferred gender of partner and their expectations in terms of performance and learning. These questions have been chosen because they provide insights to recruits' perceptions of gender in relation to defensive tactics and policing, their expectations of the training, and their level of confidence as they commenced training.

Table 2.0

<b>Gender / Age</b>	<b>Preferred gender of partner</b>
F 19	Prefer a male partner because "Males are stronger and more able to defend themselves and others."
F 19	Prefer male partner because "It would be good to have a male and female partnership for different perspectives on situations."
F 21	Prefer male partner initially because "I'm slight build and feel that I'd like the reassurance of a strong, burley man next to me."
M 19	Prefer a male partner because "Although women would be just as able to protect themselves, it just makes sense that males are physically stronger so it would be easier and would make me feel safer."
M 21	Male or female partner because "Same training therefore it should not matter."
F 24	Prefer a female partner, "although not really fixed as long as whoever I work with, I felt confident with."
M 33	Prefer a female partner because "There are violent women in the world and I would be apprehensive about hitting a female."
M 34	Prefer a male partner and "If I had to choose he would be 180cm tall and weigh over 90kg."
	<b>How expect to perform</b>
F 19	"Poorly."
F 19	"Probably not so good at first, but I'm a fast learner."
F 22	"A little hesitant and uncertain."
F 23	"Not really sure. Hopefully confidently and backing my decisions."
M 19	"Very well, I hope!"
M 23	"Clumsily."
M 33	"Confident. There isn't much I haven't already seen."
M 33	"Maybe above average. I think I can work my way through a lot of scenarios."
M 34	"Reluctant to go aggressively into a situation until I use the equipment and am comfortable."
M 42	"I am really looking forward to these sessions as I know I need the skills and it will give me the confidence to do the job."
	<b>What expect to learn</b>
F 19	"How to defend myself and others if in danger."
F 19	"How to act and react. How to problem solve and communicate effectively."
F 22	"Proper techniques."
M 19	"How to protect myself and how to take care of dangerous criminals and apprehend them."
M 29	"How to use my strengths and weaknesses to my advantage."
M 34	"Increase my confidence."
M 33	"How to fully defend myself and be able to calm all situations."
M 42	"To be in control, to be able to get a positive result and to keep everyone safe."

### **Think: Reflecting and testing ideas-in-action**

The second phase involved further questionnaires at weeks seven, 13 and 20. Week seven involved a defensive tactics exercise in pairs, week 13 was a single person exercise (one offender, one recruit), and a small group exercise (three recruits, one offender) was conducted at week 20. Whilst these exercises are formatively assessed (i.e., as part of the instruction/learning phase), there is a requirement that recruits perform to a particular standard before they can proceed to the next exercise. If not, they are given further development and the opportunity of repeating the exercise. The final exercise is summatively assessed

(i.e., final assessment result) and involves four recruits and at least two offenders. On each occasion, the recruits completed two questionnaires, one before each exercise and the other immediately after the exercise. The first questionnaire elicited their concerns going into the exercise, their physical condition, and how they expected to perform. The second questionnaire focused on: their immediate feelings and responses to the exercise; their perceptions of their performance; what occurred that was unexpected and how they handled that; the knowledge and skills they applied from other units within the curriculum; whether and how gender (own and partner's) was significant; what they had learned; and areas for further development.

The recruits' responses to the various exercises and their learning confirmed the trainers' assessment of the recruits' performance, concerns and progress throughout the research and training. For example, after the single person scenario (second exercise), the recruits' feedback indicated a marked increase in confidence and a reduction in the level of fear, apprehension and uncertainty. Many recruits expressed an eagerness to learn more and to engage in more scenarios.

### **Act: Implementing and evaluating ideas-in-action**

The training involved the use of scenarios, based on actual incidents or common situations encountered by police in the normal course of their duties. For example a scene in licensed premises with two offenders, to a situation requiring arrest, through to dealing with multiple offenders in a disturbance. Whilst scenario training is not a new and different concept, the difference is in how the scenarios are conducted. A concerted effort has been made to adopt a more holistic approach and integrate learning from other units in the curriculum such as communication and conflict resolution, operational skills, the application of the force continuum, and legislation in relation to arrest, public order and custody. A pivotal function of the training is to maximise confidence, by replicating uncertainty with the aim of reducing and/or minimising the impact of uncertainty, fear and hesitation, which, when maximised, can result in ill-considered decisions, inappropriate action, and potential injury and complaints. As mentioned in the introduction, the philosophy of the training is the intelligent application of unarmed techniques using the minimum amount of reasonable force necessary to secure control. Central to the training is an emphasis on duty of care and an intelligent, ethical, and disciplined application of force to situations where officers are unable to deploy weapons.

The learning is staged with the initial focus on developing individuals' physical and technical skills so that they can be active contributors in a team; "not passengers". Following this, team tactics are emphasised because the majority of police work involves team work. Each training exercise: is operationally sound, based on operational experience; aims to increase recruits' confidence; enhances the value of the individual while emphasising the effectiveness of

teamwork; maintains safety; and is constantly reviewed and changed to achieve better practice.

The first exercise in pairs (two recruits, two offenders) is set in a bar. The officers are called to deal with two people refusing to leave licensed premises. This exercise involves pushing, shoving, talking and some physical restraint. It aims to build recruits' confidence and to engender support and cooperation as a pair. The second exercise is conducted in the gymnasium and involves one offender and one recruit. The recruit is called to arrest a person who is behaving violently. The scenario is controlled and the recruit is given access to back up at an appropriate time, but the aim of the exercise is to show the recruit that she/he can survive a violent situation on her/his own. Then the third exercise has three recruits and one offender. The situation involves an offender who has a mental health diagnosis and who is in possession of an edge weapon. Unlike the previous exercises, this one is conducted outside. The final exercise centres on a large, disorderly group at an outside venue, and involves four recruits and two or more offenders.

Control and safety are paramount. The recruits wear headgear in the first exercise (two-on-one) and padding in the second exercise (one-on-one). Then once each recruit has become more aware of her/his body, the other exercises are conducted in uniform, with full training accoutrements. A referee (i.e., controller and safety officer) is assigned to each role player, and escalation and de-escalation is carefully timed and controlled. The role players use a range of props including FX Glocks loaded with blank and shock knives. The recruits are led to believe the Glocks are loaded with simmunition and expect to get hurt. But this never happens. The purpose of this is to create a level of fear and anxiety.

Each exercise is videotaped in order to give recruits insight to what the general public sees during the incident, and to provide them with more comprehensive feedback to reflect upon and critique their practice. The video recordings are used by the trainers to review and improve training practices in their regular debriefs and planning sessions. In addition, small cameras are concealed on the role player to show recruits how they look to the offender.

The scenarios are designed to expose recruits to low levels of stress in order to develop and assess their problem solving and decision making skills and, with prolonged exposure under carefully controlled situations, to inoculate them against the effects of stress. Placing them under low levels of stress also has the benefit of enabling trainers to identify and rectify faulty decision making and/or excessive violent behaviour.

Throughout the training, recruits are encouraged to reflect on their learning and development by justifying their decisions and actions in each exercise. This involves justification of decisions and actions through questioning recruits at the end of the exercise, but also the completion of specific tasks such as preparation

of a file and/or a use of force report. Again, this integrates knowledge and skills from other units in the curriculum and aims to augment learning.

The recruits' perceptions of the scenario based police defensive tactics training can be appreciated in their feedback. Shifts are evident in how they feel about defensive tactics, from feeling apprehensive, nervous and uncertain to feeling confident to "think things through and to justify use of force" and feeling "satisfied, excited and pleased". The recruits' feedback is positive in relation to the integration and application of complementary knowledge and skills from other units. Regular features include communication, powers of arrest, operational skills (e.g., handcuffs, baton), custody, and public order. In terms of learning, team work, decision making, knowledge and skills, and confidence are evident: "be aware of your partner" and "talk to your partner"; knowing "different force options" and "arrestable offences"; being "positive" and able to "make a decision and act straight away"; and, importantly, having confidence and "trusting myself".

The different scenario-based approach to police defensive tactics training has replaced traditional notions of impulse, reaction, physical strength and masculinity. Instead, it emphasises thoughts, communication, decision-making, team work, and gender neutrality.

A significant measure of the efficacy of a different police defensive tactics training regime is the recruits' positive evaluation of the training and their learning. A '70%' decrease in complaints against police between 1999/2000 to 2009/10 (Porter & Prenzler 2011, p.156) is further evidence of the value of the training. Complaints against police include, among other circumstances, 'alleging assault, unjust arrest or other mistreatment' (Porter & Prenzler 2011, p.152). Whilst the police defensive tactics training is not solely responsible for the decrease, it can be seen as a significant initiative.

## **Conclusion**

'Look, think, act' (Stringer 2007, p.8) and continuous 'observation', 'reflection' (on- and in-action), and 'action' (Kemmis & Wilkinson 1998; Stringer 2007, p.9) are integral features of the operational skills trainers' everyday practices. Their mantra of "think, feel, talk, act" underscores their commitment to continuous reflection and improving their practices.

The trainers designed and implemented a scenario based police defensive tactics training programme that is holistic, committed to developing skills *and* the thought, communication, problem solving, decision making and justification of decisions and actions that support an intelligent, ethical and respectful approach to defensive tactics in policing. They did this against a backdrop of changes to the nature of police work, a contemporary model of policing that focuses on intelligence rather than physical strength and attributes, and shifts in police training from pedagogy to andragogy and a more holistic notion of competence.

Action research was used to evaluate and refine the training programme. Data elicited from the research and more recent anecdotal evidence reinforces the efficacy of adopting such an approach. The philosophy, objective and commitment to a holistic approach to police defensive tactics training, combined with the way in which the scenarios are facilitated to sequence and augment learning, contribute, in major part, to the success of the training. Ultimately, the success is measured by the impact of the changes to recruits' feelings, expectations and behaviour, and a significant decrease in complaints against police (Porter & Prenzler 2011, p.156).

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