The Perfect Blend? Face to face and e-learning in public safety leadership

6th Annual national Blended Learning Conference
Sydney, 12th 13th March, 2014

Victoria Herrington

It's a great pleasure to have been invited to speak to you today. And I hope to learn a lot from the other excellent presentations that are on the agenda.

Today I want to talk about the blended learning approach that we take at the AIPM, and offer it as an example of one way that we are mixing and matching our teaching and development to suit the context in which our course participants find themselves in.

I'll start with a bit about the AIPM, and then give a brief overview about public safety leadership development that we engage in.

I'll concentrate then on one specific suit of programs that we run, which are the graduate certificate in applied management and the graduate diploma in executive leadership. These are nested programs and can be best regarded as our core business, although that in itself might be a debatable point that we can talk about later.

So I'll talk about our blended approach in the context of these programs, and then share with you some findings from a recent evaluation we undertook.

I want to conclude by revisiting my initial conceptualisation of blended learning, consider whether the approach we have is the perfect blend after all, and note in particular the competing demands of professional development and tertiary education against a public sector backdrop of ever diminishing budgets.

Who are the AIPM?
The Australian Institute of Police Management (AIPM) is the national common police service in Australia, and the peak body responsible for the training of police and emergency service leaders in Australia, New Zealand and into the Pacific. We answer to a Board of Control, which is composed of all the police commissioners of Australia and New Zealand (i.e. nine), and services many more agencies from as far afield as the UK, US, China, Hong Kong, the

Pacific (including the Solomon Islands and PNG), and covering agencies as diverse as fire, ambulance, police, volunteer public safety, regulatory agencies and oversight agencies.

The AIPM is administered by the Australian Federal Police (AFP), and we are all AFP employees, but we maintain an identity as little Switzerland, and provide a neutral space for developing and established leaders from a range of places to share their experiences and contribute to the collective learning environment.

So our primary objective is to contribute to the advancement of the public safety and emergency services professions by delivering a range of applied management and leadership development opportunities, and increasingly we have a viable research function allowing us to support the material we present in our programs with tailored empirical research.

Public safety leadership education
A quirk in our programs is that they are all industry sponsored and funded, which means that the people we get on our programs have been sent to us by their nominating manager and their tuition is paid for by their employer. This has implications for the way we structure our programs, as I'll talk about later.

We have a suit of programs at the AIPM: The aforementioned graduate programs that I have mentioned; a graduate certificate in applied management and a graduate diploma in executive leadership. These are regarded as our tier 1 or core programs

We also have a range of tier 2 programs, which are short, non-accredited programs that are designed to fulfil a particular need. Some of these are bespoke, and designed for a particular agency, or around particular issues, such as counter terrorism, or supporting women in leadership positions.

We are also involved in administering more wide reaching industry strategies, including a non-award development strategy for very senior police in preparation for them to be the next commissioners and deputy commissioners in Australia and New Zealand. This strategy is also a blended approach, and if we have time I want to share a little of its approach with you, because I think it embodies our thinking about blended learning beyond the mix of face to face and e-learning modules that I will be substantively talking about today.

And for completeness I should also note our tier three programs that tend to leverage off the AIPM's capacity to be a well-appointed and neutral convening space for agencies to address some of their own needs, including senior retreats and strategy planning meetings.

As I've already indicated I'll concentrate on our graduate programs, as that is what I have been asked to do in the first instance, and if we have time I'm happy to discuss some of our other blended approaches afterwards.

A blended learning approach

So in the context of our two graduate programs, the grad cert and the grad dip, we blend learning through mixing and matching traditional face to face programs with what was called distance education in old money, but I gather that this is now more appropriately referred to as e-learning.

The grad cert is comprised of 4x 8 point subjects; and the grad dip is comprised of an additional 4x 8 point subjects. In the grad cert, 2 of those subjects are face to face, and 2 are e learning; in the additional 4 grad dip subjects, 1 is delivered face to face and the other three are completed via e learning.

So we blend a mix of three face to face subjects and 5 e-learning subjects across the programs.

Why?

Well I think there are two strong rationales for this approach, and for anyone working in the public sector and with a professional audience of course participants, the fact that time and money rate a mention will not be a surprise.

The two are linked, of course.

First, and most obviously, there is reluctance for organisations to 'lose' staff for long periods of time to take part in full time education, and as such delivering the full program face to face is not feasible and breaking the program into shorter and sharper segments is the best way for us and our stakeholders.

Moreover this, perhaps unintendedly, but significantly nonetheless, puts the onus back on the course participant to complete their e-learning segments in their own time, or structure

their day to day work around this study. Thus whether by accident or design, the "cost" of the education is shared by the organisation and the individual. And I actually don't think this is a bad thing, although it does cause us some problems that I'll get to in a minute.

Third with participants drawn from agencies across Australia and further afield, a residential program is the only approach that would work for the face to face modules, and this allows participants to learn from each other, informally throughout the course, in a way that would not be possible with a day program where people dispersed at the end of the course – which links in with the 70:20:10 philosophy that I'll talk about in a moment. I'll also return in a minute to the other benefits of residential programs for this cohort in particular, in a moment as well.

So why don't we run the whole program online?

Well this is perhaps the other blended learning dynamic embedded within the AIPM approach, and the blend we have to achieve between formal education and professional development. Our graduate programs serve two ends: they provide a route to qualification, but that route is built around the need for professional development of staff that for some has little to do with academic qualifications. Now, we believe that the best route to professional development, and indeed formal education, is through a 70:20:10 approach, where 10% of learning comes from classroom based formal education; 20% comes from mentoring, coaching and sharing experiences; and 70% is based on learning through doing in the workplace, which may include engagement in stretch projects, acting in higher duties, exposure to experiences through secondments etc. So a significant element of the 10% we do at the AIPM is preparing participants to better learn from the 70% that they are responsible for in the workplace, and to facilitate some of the 20% through providing a multi-agency environment in which to share experiences in the classroom, and beyond during the face to face elements. This element of the learning would be more difficult to achieve in an online space, and whilst there is support for this from the jurisdictions it is a core element of what we do.

So what are the pros of such a blended face to face and e-learning approach? Well I think I might have covered off on some of these already:
It's a win for the jurisdictions because they only 'lose' their people for 3 weeks for the grad cert and 2 weeks for the grad diploma.

The online subjects also act in some ways as a *flipped classroom* approach, allowing us to pre-load information with students so that this can serve as a backdrop for informed discussions in the classroom. Being able to digest the pre-load subjects in a face to face context is also really important for our cohorts, some of whom have not had previous tertiary education experience, and may not have engaged in formal education for 20+ years. As a group then, being able to dissect some of the learning with peers and teaching staff, and see the 'theory in action' is an important part of the learning process for this group.

On that note and in further support of the blending of a professional development approach alongside a tertiary education, I think it is important to note that 'teaching' leadership as we do at the AIPM is much more than gaining a greater appreciation of a range of theoretical backgrounds, and being given a set of personal skills – including reflection – that may or may not help one in their leadership. It is based on experiential learning from leadership in action.

We draw heavily on the notion of case in point teaching that has developed out of the Harvard Kennedy School, and we use the classroom as a microcosm of the workplace, where leadership battles are being won and lost, where leadership interventions are needed, where courage needs to be displayed to do this, and where one exposes oneself to the same sort of risks that are characteristic of dealing with the sorts of challenges and dynamics that leaders face in their workplace day to day.

- So is someone dominating the conversation and taking the group down a rabbit hole? What are you going to do about that?
- Is someone reverting to their comfort zone and unwilling to consider options beyond their own experience? What are you going to do about that?
- Have you had an epiphany about the way you interact with others and how that is reflected in your leadership style? What do you want to do about that, and are you courageous enough to share that learning with the group?

There are a lot of pros associated with a blend of this sort, that allow us to achieve our mandate of professional development within a tertiary framework.

There are also, of course, several cons.

Key amongst these is that we are a hostage to the success of the professional development elements of our courses. It is not unusual to hear participants leave the face to face programs talking of the course being *life changing* and the follow up evaluative work that we

have done is testament to the fact that many people do make significant and sustained changes to the way they operate as leaders, and human beings. Thus many enrol in our graduate programs specifically for the face to face elements, with no intention of completing the e-learning segments and therefore the course. Some of these people already have tertiary qualifications, so may or may not see the value of this award for themselves. Others however do not have tertiary qualifications, but are not motivated to gain them either, which may be a product of their career success to date without them, or more pragmatically an inability to commit the time required to complete the e-learning modules by virtue of their more pressing professional and personal commitments.

This is compounded by the fact that few of the sponsoring agencies have anything akin to an accountability mechanism for participants that attend courses, and there tends not to be any organisational sanction for not completing the program. This is easy to understand in the context of busy operational environment, and following up on someone's study is not a high priority for public safety organisations. And may not be a high priority for the individual too, particularly if they feel they have already gained what they wanted out of the program, and have a hectic operational life to deal with. All of which is a long way of saying that our blended approach, as opposed to face to face only, means we have a reasonably high attrition rate.

Another con is a bit more reflective, and internal to the AIPM. Because of the success and visibility of the face to face elements of the program, the e-learning side of the house has had less attention than it might. I'm being completely frank, but in the past the subjects had tended to be a bit more *set and forget*, and until recently all of the marking was contracted out as well so there was little internal visibility about the way these subjects were working in practice, the challenges faced by students, and the need to maintain an engaging and well scaffolded learning environment. Couple this with the often non-academic predispositions of our clientele, and you'd be forgiven for thinking that people completed our programs *in spite* of us, rather than because of us.

This has changed significantly in recent years, and we have seen an improvement in completion rates and learning as a result. All of the marking is done in house now, and each e-learning subject has two dedicated subject coordinators who monitor online forums, and act as a central point for questions about the subject. We have reviewed subjects to make them contemporary, and to make the most of our e-learning platform, Moodle, with quizzes and questions designed to get people talking about their learning on line. Were also collecting much better feedback about the e-learning aspects of our courses, whereas

traditionally our improvement feedback loop had tended to be face to face focused. We are also trying to communicate more actively to participants and the jurisdictions that these face to face programs are just one aspect of a graduate qualification. We have done this in simple ways such as changing the name of the residential component of the grad cert from Police Management Development Program (PMDP) – which indicates a stand-alone program – to Graduate Certificate. And we are monitoring the impact that these changes have.

What works at the AIPM?

So I guess by way of a summary, our experience of blended learning at the AIPM has taught is that for our cohorts there is a need for a blend of face to face and e-learning to allow professional development to hang well with tertiary level education against a backdrop of shrinking budgets and a limited tolerance for time away from the workplace.

Face to face

I think that the face to face element of the graduate programs is vital for learning about leadership, and increasing the chances of translating that learning into practice. It may come as a surprise to you, but public safety organisations, and policing organisations in particular, tend to base a lot of their activities on trust, and trust is a hard won thing. And there is no substitute for face to face meeting when it comes to building trust.

And this is particularly important given the context of our programs and the fact that we are asking participants to be deeply reflective about themselves as leaders, and important too when we are asking people to draw on and share their tacit knowledge in order to understand leadership in a public safety context.

In the face to face space we have found that experiential learning works well, and seems to prepare participants well for their continued learning in the workplace. This is well facilitated by case in point teaching that I mentioned earlier, and explicitly values the professional experience that our participants bring to the learning environment. I.E. their tacit knowledge. Our real-world focus of the graduate courses is built on a philosophy of 70:20:10, and our job in the face to face elements of the course is to prepare participants for making the most of their experiences in the 70% of their learning journey.

We have found that in the context of teaching leadership, challenging learners' expectations is also important. If case in point teaching is to work there is a need to shift people away from the expectation of a *talking head* at the front of the room, who is the font of all

knowledge, and a need to encourage a deeper level of reflection and drawing on professional experience and expertise. Now, getting police and emergency service personnel to tell war stories is not a problem. But asking them to reflect honestly about their leadership behaviour, and share their vulnerabilities with their peers is more of a challenge. Which takes us back to trust. We have found that *shaking the tree* encourages this, to the extent that for some aspects of our programs very little structure is given. We have one exercise where at the start of the program a facilitator essentially stands at the front of the room and thwarts all expectations about what a learning experience should look like. When this exercise is debriefed, we find incredibly rich data about leadership, about the use and abuse of authority, and about how one reacts in challenging situations. All good fodder for the reflective sessions that follow.

<u>E-learning</u>
Our learning around the e-learning side of the house is very much a work in progress and we are still understanding the best ways to encourage learning using our online platform. We have found that a key factor in online work is moving time-poor and culturally-outcomes-focused participants away from only completing assignments (and only doing the readings that enable to complete their assignments), to engaging with the subject as a whole. Partly this has been achieved through online comprehension quizzes, greater proactive use of the forum by subject coordinators, and posting must know info online.

In some of our other courses this has meant using technology in creative ways. For example a recent bespoke program designed around operational command utilised the software TripIt to conceptualise the program as a journey. Participants were sent 'tickets' and 'itinerary's on a rolling basis throughout the course, and the 'big reveal' approach kept participants engaged and using the technology throughout. I think there is definitely more we can do in that space. But there is definitely a need to balance the use of technology against the tolerance of our cohorts.

Measuring impact
So I have spent a bit of time talking about our blended learning approach, and you might be forgiven for thinking that this is a load of old baseless propaganda for the AIPM. So I wanted to share with you the findings from a recent evaluation we undertook at the AIPM into our graduate programs.

Any of you familiar with the research literature around police leadership development will know that there is a dearth of evidence supporting its efficacy. This is partly because good

leadership is so difficult to define, and partly I think because gaining access to police organisations to allow researchers to evaluate programs is so difficult. As such evaluations have tended to be snapshots in time, and based on feedback sheets (happy sheets) given out at the end of a program. So to the best of our knowledge our evaluation is the only methodologically robust evaluation of a police leadership initiative in the English speaking world.

In conceptualising our evaluation the first issue we had was how does one measure improvements in leadership. And for that we relied on the Police Leadership Capability Framework. This framework draws heavily on the Public Sector Capability Framework and conceptualised desired leadership under 6 headings:

- Setting strategic direction
- Achieving results
- Building and managing relationships
- Communicating with influence
- Personal drive and integrity and
- policing skills

We developed a questionnaire that was based on these domains to assess self-reported behaviour in each of these. We took measurements before and after the course (70 matched pairs).

We also triangulated this with manager assessments where we could get them, and stakeholder views to assess whether behaviour was happening in practice and being observed in the organisation at a higher level. And we also interviewed former course participants to assess whether there was a longitudinal impact of the program.

We found positive results.

We found a statistically significant positive change in self-reported behaviour post course, that equated to an effect size of 0.54 (which means it is regarded as a large effect), and in the cases where we had the information available, self-assessments were corroborated with managers except in the sets strategic direction and personal drive and integrity domains, where managers rated participants higher than they had rated themselves.

Our qualitative data was also positive, and former students spoke of the longitudinal impact that the programs had, and how their new skills had a compound impact with them better

able to learn from their experiences, and feed this new learning into their leadership as part of an iterative and reflective approach.

We were able to calculate a return on investment based on the data we collected, and whilst the usual caveats associated with ROIs need to be borne in mind, the calculation gave us and our stakeholders a good indication of the organisational benefit that the graduate programs could provide. We found that if the impact of the program held for a year, there was a 164% ROI. If the impact was as fundamental as some of our interviews suggested and lasted the remainder of the participant's career (typically 13 years), then the ROI was as high as 3326%.

Importantly, and very much in support of the blended learning approach, those who completed both face to face and e-learning modules fared better than those who only attended the face to face elements of the program.

We have finalised a report and are just getting final sign off from our Boards before we make it publically available on our website. So if you are interested in knowing more about our evaluation look at the research publications page of our website.

Is this the perfect blend?

This still leaves us with the final question, whether what we do at the AIPM can be regarded as the *perfect blend* for our participants.

I think it would be hubris to suggest that it was perfect. And I think it would be narrow minded to consider the blended approach simply in terms of the mix between face to face and e-learning components.

The AIPM blends professional development with tertiary education; it blends traditional learning about stuff, with experiential learning and practice in leadership; and it blends the realities of engaging professionals serving in leadership roles in public safety agencies with the academic requirements of tertiary study as per the Australian Qualifications Framework and our responsibilities under the TEQSA Threshold Standards.

There are clearly some tensions in there and some of these components compete with each other. Leaders in public safety organisations are, in my experience, time poor and have a limited bandwidth to deal with things they don't regard as important. For some this includes

tertiary education, and for some the focus is much more clearly on professional development. Does the focus on assignments get in the way of professional development, or does it complement it? It will come as no surprise that my thinking is that it complements it, and it allows participants to leverage of a broader knowledge base than just their own experience, whilst recognising the value of this.

I think a broader question, perhaps for the profession as a whole, is whether formal academic qualifications form part of the professionalisation agenda that is underway in policing. Should qualification be a prerequisite of chartered status as it is in the psychology world? Or is policing and public safety always going to be a 'dirty job' where higher education qualifications have little relevance? That is a discussion for the commissioners and ANZPAA of course, but if there is deemed to be value in formal education in the way it is blended at the AIPM, then it needs to be well supported.

Conclusion

So to conclude: I think the blended learning approach at the AIPM has a number of wins and a number of lessons that we need to take on board. And I think key amongst these is that when we are talking about *blends*, we may instead be more accurately talking about various layers of blends – a *trifle* if you will.

Wins

- I think we have a relatively unique and successful mix of professional development and academic study.

- I think we are successfully moving into a space where we make more of our e-learning opportunities

- And I think we are trying to meet the needs of students and sponsoring jurisdictions by offering our programs in a flexible format, insofar as that is possible.

Lessons

Key amongst the many lessons I think we can learn is that our blended model, in order to work, needs to be supported and valued in the context of an incredibly busy operational environment. Does tertiary education work at this stage of a leader's career with all of their competing demands? Do public safety organisations *need* or *want* the graduate skills that

are embedded in tertiary level education, or is professional development at that level sufficient? These are questions that need to be asked, and whilst I have a view, we probably need to get a better grip on what it is about tertiary education that has led public safety organisation to want it in the first place so we can assess if these needs are (still) being met.

I think we can afford to think more creatively about how we at the AIPM further support those that are engaged in tertiary study with us, and part of that is better scaffolding of learning for participants, and more innovative ways of replicating reflective conversations online. We can also do more around providing advice about carving time to do study and ongoing learning, and holding participants to account in ways other than assignments.

But ultimately I think we need to initiate, and be an active voice in, the debate about the value of education to public safety organisations.