



Article

Powerful Learning in Compact Packages: Impact of a Short Blended Intensive Program on Police Students

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Abstract

This empirical study examines the effectiveness of learning in a short-term, cross-cultural operative communication training course for police students from five northern European countries. The in-person course is strongly experiential, with a mix of theory and practice. It is based on the Community of Inquiry framework, which focuses on social, cognitive, and teaching aspects in collaborative (usually digital) learning environments. Some of the practical scenarios employ professional actors. Reflexivity is a central element; it is aided by the use of body cameras and mobile phone footage in practical scenarios. The study uses data from questionnaires (three student cohorts, 75 responses) and focus groups (one cohort, five focus groups). Evaluation of the course suggests the presence of transformative learning, which was surprising given that prior research has tended to focus on longer-term programs. This paper does two things: it introduces the course as a best-practice example in vocational training, and it makes a theoretical contribution by suggesting that a short training course informed by Community of Inquiry principles can lead to transformative learning.

Keywords: Community of Inquiry, Transformative learning, Experiential learning, Short-term exchanges,



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Introduction

Many police services in northern Europe require trainees to complete a Bachelor's degree, involving both academic study and a period of on-the-job training (typically six to twelve months). A constant complaint by students in many disciplines is that the theory they are taught lacks practical application (Rantalo et al., 2015). This is especially so with police students, particularly with respect to social-science and soft-skills subjects: simply put, police students often do not see their point. Yet police work occurs in an increasingly challenging context. The contemporary era is characterized by a fluid, dynamic social landscape, rendering turbulent circumstances for police work (Bauman, 2012). At the same time, the accelerating pace of change contributes to social alienation and atomization (Rosa, 2020), making it ever-more important for prospective police officers to acquire the necessary skills to navigate contemporary challenges effectively, whilst allowing for the development of worldview, personal growth and professional development. With police legitimacy under scrutiny across the West, soft skills (e.g. communicative competence) have never been more necessary. One set of essential skills is around procedural justice, which has been shown to increase public trust in, and satisfaction with, the police, which in turn contributes to police effectiveness and legitimacy (e.g. Canales et al., 2025; Donner et al., 2015). With these three factors in mind – student complaints about a theory-practice gap, the usefulness of procedural justice, and the increasingly-complex context within which the police operate – police educators from five northern European countries established a short, international, practice-oriented operative communication program.

Research on learning outcomes in study-abroad and exchange programs tends to focus on long-term exchanges and their influence on increased cultural awareness and sensitivity. Dwyer (2004) uses longitudinal data to investigate the impact of (various periods of) study abroad. In her article, she concludes that, “well-planned, intensive summer programs of *at least 6 weeks duration* can have a significant impact on student growth across a variety of important outcomes” (p. 161, our emphasis). She notes that the effect of shorter programs, of one to five weeks' duration, is unknown. Only in the past decade or so has there been growth in research on shorter programs, with literature emerging on program design, as well as more nuanced findings on the effects of short-term exchanges, which are frequently beneficial. For example, Strange (2017) links study abroad and experiential learning to transformative learning (TL); about which more shortly. A recent study by Tran and colleagues (2024) does address the impact of short-term study abroad on program specific learning, but this subject-specific focus remains rare in research concerning study abroad, apart from programs focusing explicitly on language acquisition or international business. Indeed, database searches (e.g. EBSCO) that *excluded* such terms returned no results.

This article, based on a detailed case study, adds new ideas to the emerging literature about how carefully designed short-term exchange programs using Community of Inquiry (COI) principles can bridge the theory-practice gap. It proceeds as follows. The paper starts by briefly outlining COI and TL. It then describes the specific context of the course, before documenting its evaluation. The final sections present the findings and discuss their implications, before reflecting on their meaning for theory and practice.

Community of Inquiry

Garrison and colleagues (2000) developed the COI framework from research exploring text-based computer conferencing for educational purposes; that is, *online* teaching and learning, though Garrison (2023) emphasizes that it is not limited to the online environment. Rather, it can be applied in contexts such as flipped classrooms and blended learning. COI is influenced by researchers such as Vygotsky (1986) and Piaget (1970) – who emphasize the importance of active, reflective, and collaborative learning – and assumes that (social) reality is socially constructed. Three elements (“presences” in COI terminology) are necessary for effective learning: cognitive, social, and teaching. When these are well-integrated, they create a dynamic and supportive online community that enhances the overall learning process. Table 1 summarizes COI’s core concepts.

Table 1. Summary of the Community of Inquiry framework’s core concepts

Core element	Description
Cognitive Presence	Extent to which participants in a Community of Inquiry can construct meaning through sustained communication. Highlights the importance of critical thinking and reflection in the learning process, allowing learners to engage deeply with content and ideas.
Social Presence	Ability of learners to authentically project their personal characteristics into the COI, presenting themselves as ‘real’ people. Authenticity is crucial for fostering a safe, trusting environment, where participants feel comfortable engaging and sharing their thoughts.
Teaching Presence	Design, facilitation, and direction of both cognitive and social processes to achieve personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile learning outcomes. It underscores teachers’ role in creating a conducive learning environment and guiding students through their educational journey.

Note: see <https://www.thecommunityofinquiry.org/coi>

The COI framework has become a cornerstone for research into online learning (Stenbom, 2018). Inevitably, it has attracted critical scrutiny. Annand (2019), for example, criticized COI for its tendency to overlook wider societal demands. Among the limited number of studies exploring COI in *physical* contexts. Zou and Zhang (2022) have made a notable contribution, suggesting that applying COI theory in face-to-face environments can help educators optimize course design and implementation. Ariati, Pham and Vogler (2023) have validated the use of COI in such environments. It has also shown itself to be effective in blended learning. In their study, Liu and colleagues (2021, p. 3642) found that, “the COI-based learning community enhanced students' satisfaction and perceived learning gains by promoting purposeful communication, active learning and teamwork.”

As Dempsey (2017, p. 47) suggests, COI provides "opportunities for perspective transformation as [learners] are confronted with the subjectivity of the knowledge of the learning community while [simultaneously] receiving a context in which to resolve the ensuing cognitive conflicts." This description underscores the potential of the COI framework to create an environment where learners not only engage with new ideas but also confront and resolve the cognitive conflicts that arise when their existing beliefs are challenged. In sum, the COI framework provides a solid structure for fostering critical reflection and dialogue, leading to a transformed perspective. The literature therefore suggests that, by incorporating these elements into short-term blended learning international courses, educators can create an environment conducive to perspective transformation, enabling students to not only acquire knowledge but also undergo meaningful shifts in their understanding and worldview. Given police students' tendency to not see the point of theory, COI seems a promising basis for teaching in the police context.

Transformative learning

The Operative Communication course (OCC) was conceptualized to catalyze deep individual learning of the course content (following Jonathan-Zamir et al., 2022). Feedback from the course's first iteration suggested that TL may be occurring, even in such a condensed training program. This influenced how we subsequently evaluated the course, which we did by surveying students, in order to ascertain the potential for TL within a condensed program and to gain a more profound understanding of the modes through which TL may emerge.

TL refers to a profound form of learning within individual frames of reference, resulting in deep, persistent changes in the way a person experiences, conceptualizes, and interacts with the world (Mezirow, 2018); though the mechanism through which this occurs is not fully understood (Howie & Bagnall, 2013). The present state of TL theory is characterized by differences in emphasis between North America and Europe (McClain, 2024). In North America, TL is characterized by a metatheoretical approach, which positions it as

a *theoretical framework* for investigating various forms of profound adult learning (Hoggan, 2015; Mezirow, 2018). In Europe, by contrast, the emphasis tends to be on either TL's reflexive, social and societal practice, or its individual yet also systematic nature (Zhu et al, 2023). Breton (2018), for example emphasizes phenomenological, hermeneutic, narrative and biographical perspectives on the examination of underlying assumptions. Regardless, in his comprehensive literature review, DeSapio (2017) proposes three theoretically informed approaches which govern the TL process: problem-based learning, story-formed learning and connectedness. All three aspects are present in the OCC. The framework was originally developed for longer programs (e.g. Friedman, 2022; King, 2009). Nonetheless, we perceive no theoretical barrier to TL being achieved in short programs. To our knowledge, no peer-reviewed studies have explored TL within collaborative, short-term blended intensive programs based on COI theory and involving partnerships between more than two international universities.

Context: The Operative Communication Course

The European Union's Erasmus+ program introduced Blended Intensive Programs (BIPs) in 2021. In 2020, a northern-European national police university (Edu1) started developing the OCC as an *annual* BIP, together with police education institutions (Edu2-Edu5) from four other northern European countries. Three of the institutions are Nordic. Students come mostly from these institutions, with a few from "Other" (institutions which do not regularly participate). Each course has ~25 participants¹. The OCC first ran in 2022 and has repeated annually since then, fine-tuned following student feedback. Teaching staff are interdisciplinary, and bring both academic and practitioner perspectives. The program language is English, which is non-native for all participating institutions. The focus of the OCC is communication and procedural justice.

Given the limited time available, teachers decided to focus on one area, and to promote students' critical reflection. This is because reflection is both a crucial skill for police and a particular weakness for trainee police officers (Rantalo et al., 2015, p. 184). Mastering skills without the ability to reflect on the "why" of the skill would lead to police being unable to adapt to and learn in new situations; a crucial weakness, given the context within which the police operate. The OCC is designed to create a supportive environment for students to reflect on their communication skills. Table 2 outlines the 2025 OCC structure; Annex 1 provides the full program.

¹ Edu1 students are on home ground. However, the OCC course is international in nature and is conducted in English, so all students are effectively working in an international context.

Table 2. Outline of the annual Operative Communications course

Timing	Course component
Ten weeks before the course	Teaching staff meet to finalize OCC planning; location varies.
Two months before the course	Students receive a package containing practical information, learning outcomes, course schedule, and contact information for the other students in each “international patrol unit”. Instructions for assignments that must be delivered before an online meeting. Assignments are designed to force students into contact with each other, sharing personal (not private) and professional information. Prompts on Edu1’s digital learning platform to promote student interaction before the online meeting (e.g. impromptu quizzes based on the student assignments).
One week before the course	Online student meeting. Students are in discussion rooms with their “international police patrol unit” for the first time. Teaching staff attendance encouraged.
Sunday, before in-person week	Evening social event, with team-building activities.
Monday; first full day	Assigned seating within ‘patrol groups’; preventing national ‘cliques’ forming.
During the week	Short lectures and practical scenario training; ratio of 1:3 (theory:practice). Ambiguous scenarios with professional actors; patrol groups prepare their own scenarios. Guided, informal reflection, also based on body-camera recordings. Informal and organized social activities in the afternoons/evenings.
End of program	Anonymous evaluation and guided group evaluation

The program consists of alternating days of short lectures and intensive scenario training, accompanied by group and individual reflection exercises. Student-groups complete active patrol scenarios with professional actors, as well as devising their own scenarios for other student-groups to role-play. Such

experiential learning activities are rooted in principles of problem-based learning, story-formed learning and connectedness (Anastasiadis et al., 2020). Problem-based learning was enacted through assignments involving group work, and active scenario training with actors. Students wear body-cameras in some of the scenarios, to further facilitate reflection and they were encouraged to use mobile phone cameras when watching other students. All recordings are strictly confidential and for internal use only. The principle of story-formed learning was shaped through short lectures, such as on police legitimacy. Students also learn from each other's varied national experience. The principle of connectedness informed course design through the frameworks of both procedural justice theory and the COI. The program aims to precipitate deep, stable changes in the way participants experience, conceptualize, and interact with members of the public, based on the framework of procedural justice theory. Having sketched the OCC, the paper now moves to its evaluation.

Method: Program evaluation

Participants initially appear to be a representative sample of the population from which they are drawn, as their surface-level characteristics are congruent with those of police students in their home countries. First, participants had a range of backgrounds: some with work experience before joining the police; others without. Second, women and men participated in approximately equal numbers. Third, a minority had an immigrant background. Fourth, most students were in their 20s, though the range extended to early 50s. However, participants are *not* representative. This is because they were triple-selected. First, they had to be competent and comfortable in the English language. Second, only some of those linguistically-eligible students actually chose to apply for the OCC. Third, police training institutions selected applicants for the OCC based on factors such as academic ability and, arguably, expected ability to competently represent the sending institution. Our findings are therefore impossible to generalize. On the basis of many years' teaching experience, we speculate that OCC participants are more likely than average to be engaged and reflective, and to be open to learning from different cultures. More cogently, however, our research is well-suited to uncovering actionable insights that can improve student learning.

We evaluate the OCC each time the course runs. Feedback from the first iteration suggested that transformative learning may be occurring, so we began administering a tailored survey to evaluate subsequent iterations. The data presented here were gathered in the context of three course iterations (2023-2025). Participants were at different stages in their studies, from first to final year; almost all had undergone periods of practical police experience.

Table 3. Research participant characteristics. Percentages rounded to nearest whole number.

Participating institution	Number of OCC participants, (2023/2024/2025)	Responses to questionnaires			Number, focus group / interview, 2023 (29 total)
		2023	2024	2025	
Edu 1	15 (5/5/5)				3
Edu 2	14 (5/5/4)				4 (3 in a group, 1 separately)
Edu 3	14 (5/4/5)	27 (of 29 =) 93%	25 (of 26 =) 96%	23 (of 24 =) 96%	0
Edu 4	11 (5/2/4)				3
Edu 5	14 (5/5/4)				5
Other	11 (4/5/2)				2
Total	79	75 (= 95% response rate)			17 (= 59%)

The course is evaluated on the final day of the OCC, and the questionnaire is a revised and shortened version of King's (2009) *Learning Activities Survey*, developed in consultation with her (see Annex 2). It was necessary to modify the original survey, not least to remove questions that were not relevant to our research context. Additionally, the 2023 cohort was invited to participate in focus-group discussions. These occurred approximately eight months after the course concluded, because that temporal distance was sufficient for participants to be able to reflect on its longer-term impact, whilst not being so distant that participants had become impossibly dispersed. All but one of the discussions were conducted by the same researcher, in English. For pragmatic reasons, meetings were held virtually. Students from one country were unavailable; here, we conducted a single interview instead, not in English. Discussions were recorded and transcribed. All responses were anonymized. We remained mindful, throughout, of the possible pitfalls of conducting and presenting research in cross-cultural and linguistic contexts (Clark et al., 2017).

Given that our aim was to explore students' perceptions of the effect of an intensive short course, we chose to undertake a reflexive thematic analysis of the transcribed data (Braun & Clarke, 2019), rather than alternative options, such as narrative or discourse analyses. This is because we were interested in understanding and making sense of students' common experiences, in the context of non-native English expression, and we judged a reflexive thematic analysis to be most appropriate. Ours was an iterative, data-led approach. The analysis proceeded as follows. In the first step, each researcher reads the transcripts independently, leading to a series of independently-generated codes. In a second step, the

researchers met to discuss their codes and to group, “...previously identified categories into more general, conceptual classes” (Spiggle, 1994, p. 493). The final step was to iteratively make fine-tuning adjustments. We remained mindful throughout the risks inherent in interpretative research and the need to ensure that trustworthy analysis (Clark et al., 2021). To this end, we were phenomenon-driven (Ter Wal et al., 2026), being led by the data rather than imposing our preconceived ideas onto them. The next section summarizes the questionnaire results, before presenting the qualitative data.

Results

We begin this section with an overview of the most relevant numerical results of the questionnaire. These are summarized in Table 4. The section then presents themes from the narrative responses to the questionnaire, before turning to the themes that emerged from the focus group discussions. The present section is followed by a discussion of the findings.

The questionnaire results suggest that students tend to feel that they benefited greatly from the course. Given the small numbers there is little sense in conducting regression analysis, ANOVA or other statistical analyses. We therefore use the data purely to draw general conclusions about students’ experiences. Despite being from different countries, respondents came from comparable home institutions. For example, although students frequently self-reported as reflecting on their actions and their studies in general, when asked about their experience of the course, they tended to not indicate substantial questioning of themselves or their roles. Indeed, although they tried out new roles and responded that they reflected on the course content and learning, students did not generally question their previous beliefs or role expectations. In general, students valued the more active elements of the course, seeing the role-playing exercises and the group-work as more substantial elements than the more abstract aspects. The similarities and perspectives are unsurprising, given the nature of the course, and police students’ action orientation (Brunsson, 2002). The OCC seems to have offered a safe enough space that students were generally willing to try out new roles. Interestingly, nearly half of respondents can identify a moment in which their role expectations were changing, and around two-thirds of students came to the realization that their role expectations had changed during the course. Furthermore, examining the narrative responses of those who responded that their role expectations had *not* changed, many said that the course had nonetheless provided new perspectives, or that some *other* aspect than role expectations had changed. Three examples from narrative responses in the questionnaire illustrate: “not my role expectation changed, but my expectation about communication;” “My perception of the roles didn’t change as much as my perception of how to perform my role;” and “I feel that the [OCC] is contributing to the cementing of my values and is motivating me to use myself fully to develop myself and my values to practical work.”

Table 4. Abbreviated summary of student questionnaire responses. Scale 1-6 (1 = not at all/totally disagree; 6 = fully part of the learning environment/totally agree)

Question	Average, 2023-2025 (79 responses)	Standard deviation, 2023-2025	Average, 2023 (28 responses)	Average, 2024 (25 responses)	Average, 2025 (26 responses)
To which extent have the following been part of your experience in the [OCC]: Subject-related conversations	5.3038	0.9386	5.1786	5.16	5.5769
To which extent ...: Group-work	5.4177	0.8260	5.3214	5.2	5.7308
To which extent ...: Roleplay related to cases	5.4557	0.8442	5.3929	5.4	5.5769
I had an experience that caused me to question how I normally act	3.9747	1.5523	3.7857	3.8	4.3462
I thought about acting in a different way from how I would normally act	3.7595	1.6030	3.7857	3.56	3.9231
I tried out new roles so that I would become more skilled, comfortable or confident in them.	4.8734	1.1477	4.75	4.68	5.1923
I tried to figure out a way to adopt new ways of acting	4.6582	1.1755	4.4643	4.48	5.0385

The theme of an intercultural learning community was common in the narrative responses. “It’s good to see other cops from different countries and take notes from them. You can solve a case in different ways.” And: “Reflected and open my eyes to see new ways and more awake to see other signs, be more aware of my awareness,” or, more simply, “The stories of how they do things back home inspired me.” In short, therefore, the questionnaire results suggest that students value the course and gain substantially from it, not least because of the community that develops each year. Note that the survey provides insight into

students' perspectives at the end of the course, not a before-and-after test of changes or a generalizable dataset. Note also the possibility of social-desirability bias, not least given the emphasis on reflection during the OCC. For these reasons, we considered it necessary to conduct a series of focus group discussions, as outlined above. We can summarize the themes that subsequently emerged under three headings: improved self-confidence; transfer to home context; and changed awareness.

Improved self-confidence

First, the course helped many students to become more self-confident, in both themselves and their interactions with the public. The following quote summarizes this perspective:

I feel that the week helped me more trusting in myself, trust in how I am ... I was like this before, but the course gave me even more reason to just trust myself. (Student 4)

Enhanced self-confidence was evident when students discussed what they had learned. Some students spoke generally; for example, "You learned something and then you went out and tried it, and things really stuck with you this way" (student 6), or "Well, I practiced what we did over there but then in real. And it actually worked really well" (Student 12). Others were more explicit. One student, for example, mentioned the confidence gained from making sense of their actions:

It's the why behind the question. Why am I doing this? And that's procedural justice. And I feel that a lot of colleagues have only been told the what or the how, and not the why. ... And the course that you offered us, was basically: why do you do what you do? Okay, you are going to portray dominance here, but why do you portray dominance? Why do you want to be likeable? So not only just what and how, but especially why. (Student 13)

The following exchange between students illustrates the interplay between the learning from the course and the confidence that resulted:

Student 6: I've thought about it quite often. Just in the first week when we got home I was working and I found myself using a lot of what we learned. And just two days ago I was using it again, so I am aware when I'm pulling out things from [the toolbox] that we learned at the course.

Student 7: Yeah, ... and also like I got more (clarifies term in native language) confidence in communicating with people.

It was important that learning occurred in a safe space that enabled experimentation and mistakes. For example, Student 1 said, "you got to know the people in your group, you got a little bit close to them, so it was a safe space for the practice." Student 5 would agree: "...I didn't fail (laughter), so there is reason to think that I did okay who I am and what I learned from the other people." Moreover, students' gain in self-confidence often related directly to communicating in English. Student 2 expressed it clearly: "I'm not so good at speaking English so maybe it's an impact that now I can handle the cases in real life when I speak English." The following vignette illustrates further.

But there was also a situation where there was someone who was speaking English and I felt really comfortable... since in [OCC venue] we had a lot of trainings where we had to use English language and I felt comfortable doing that and just took over and I knew it was going to work and it did, so yeah. I think I'm more, what's the word, self-confident in doing my work also in English. (Student 8)

Transfer to home context

The second theme we identified was that the learning could be transferred to students' home context. This was not always without comment or resistance, particularly where what had been learned during the OCC was new for student's home context. The following exchange during a focus group discussion illustrates the difficulty that an individual can face when seeking to make changes

It [the OCC] definitely has an impact until now because I'm now working in the riot police and communication is not a big thing here, ... people always want to fight. My colleagues are in the mood that they're more like you should have a strong word and fight back. And I'm not really into that technique. I like to be more respectful and if a person really doesn't work with me then I can still fight. But not from the beginning, that is not my thing. That is something that I learned in [OCC] as well. (Student 11)

Do you feel like you're alone in that, do you get some support from colleagues, or... (Researcher)

I think that some people might feel the same way, but I don't know if they don't want to talk about it ... because our boss tells us to do so ... Yeah, unfortunately it is like that. I think we would reach more if we would be more polite in the beginning. ... sometimes you just have to do what the older people tell you to do because they have more experience, and they know what's best. (Student 11)

Others have had an altogether more constructive experience of implementing what they had learned, as the next story illustrates.

I actually spoke to my sergeant after I came home after one assignment that I felt very confident in communicating towards de-escalation and I felt a lot of pressure from my teammates like they just wanted to get things done...afterwards I spoke to my sergeant and he said "If you feel confident doing this" and he noticed I was doing well, so then he said "Then there is no problem in asking for space to do this", so I feel that's a good thing. ... to have the confidence of the sergeant to do that, well, that helped a lot. (Student 4)

Changed awareness

The third theme is one of long-term changes to self-awareness: some participants reported persistent changes in the way that they approached their own work and role. These changes can be '*outside-in*' awareness (e.g., of how they are perceived when in uniform); a *changed perspective* (e.g., evolved self-awareness) or '*inside-out*' clarification (e.g., putting words to a previously-felt but inchoate impetus). The following quotes illustrate these approaches.

Outside-in awareness:

For me it was about becoming more aware of the uniform that we are wearing and that the civilians that we talk to during our shifts. They see our uniforms first. ... That was something for me, that I wasn't really aware of. (Student 14)

Just today when I was on a case ... I was thinking about the dominance thing they taught us. The civilian was sitting on a bed and X was standing next to him, and X is a pretty big person so I actually thought about it today, I saw the difference. It's the little things like that that come to mind. You notice that "ahhh - this is what we learned in [OCC]". (Student 1)

Changed perspective:

What I learned was not to be prejudiced, because I thought that I was the person that was not prejudiced, and then I learned that I was, because I thought that my way of acting was the best. (Student 15)

Inside-out clarification:

I see lots of justice on the streets, but sometimes I am missing the part of procedural justice...So we fine someone, but it is not being done in a procedural way. For me though, I have had this course...It's like you have that gut feeling... but now I can explain my gut feeling of what is going wrong. (Student 13)

Many OCC participants reported long-term effects on their thinking and behavior. The following vignette nicely captures the impact on behavior, in a situation where the speaker is acting without supervision:

When we had the course, I had not been working like on the streets yet. And after the course I did. And then I had this thing on the street where I pulled a man over. And he was peeing in a bottle while he was driving. And he said it had to do with medical reasons and stuff like that. ... I have a lot of patience. ... But then I noticed like in this conversation... he kept on going and going. It was just not getting anywhere. ... Anyway, I thought maybe I should try to be dominant, because we also practiced that in [OCC]. Because I felt that I wasn't earning respect being patient. So, then I was dominant. But not as dominant as I did with [student Y] in [OCC]. Because that was really extreme... [laughs]. But just a bit more dominant as usual and it turned out really great, because after I did that, all of a sudden, the man just stopped with... well everything that he was saying. And he was just like "okay" and he accepted it. And he also accepted that I was giving him a fine and he was being more, uhm, polite as well. So yeah, that was for me a nice, ... [laughs] accomplishment and experience. Because you know, I learned it in [an OCC exercise] and then there was a practical situation where I... Well, I practiced what we did over there but then in real. And it actually worked really well. So... yeah... that is something that reminds me of over there and I still use it now sometimes. (Student 12)

Some evidence for transformative learning

Before turning to a discussion of the results, we note that there is some evidence of TL occurring. Students experienced profound learning in the OCC, through situations that promoted reflection whilst challenging them, in an engaging manner. The profound impact of the course was evident in the focus group discussions eight or more months after the OCC concluded. For example:

Procedural Justice taught us ... the more we learn to respect the "why" or to tell the "why" or perhaps to ask the "why" the more procedural justice you get. And the course that you offered us was basically: why do you do what you do? (Student 13)

Moreover, one of the factors contributing to students' overall experience was the balance between theory and practical elements, both in the structure of the course itself, as well as in the melding of theory and practice in the teaching team. This enabled students to learn intellectually and experientially.

I don't remember a bad or boring lecture. I feel every one of them was really relevant. And what I like was the balance between the lectures and the activities...You learned something and then you went out and tried it,

and things really stuck with you this way. (Student 6)

I felt that the difference between the fields of study of the teachers - everybody had what seemed to be very good knowledge of their fields. The [nationality] guy and hands-on police work and the [nationality] guy like a scholarly look on things and then we could with the exercises try it out and see how it tried out. (Student 7)

Finally, we note that students clearly identified developing strong personal connections within a sort of “police family,” arguably making trust easier to attain and enhancing the trust aspect of COI. The following quote illustrates:

I told some of my friends when we came back that I feel I could have been on the job with any of them [the other students] and it would have been no problem, even if I had met them that day and there was just full trust... (Student 6)

To summarize the course evaluation and focus group data, OCC participants generally valued the course, learned a lot from it, and retained much of their learning over time. Moreover, the course structure facilitated long-term learning. Finally, we note that the data suggest the presence of TL. This was not the main focus of our research, but is nonetheless an interesting finding. Evaluation indicated five elements of the course that resonated with TL theory (see Table 5). First, the program concentrated on the process of identifying the unfamiliar within the presumed familiar, a strategy which resonates with a compelling message in terms of DeSapio (2017), as well as the first phase of a disorienting dilemma. Second and third, the OCC focused on fostering trust between students and faculty from the outset, as well as on facilitating peer-to-peer learning scenarios. These two elements align with the concept of connectedness (DeSapio, 2017). Fourth and fifth, theory was applied immediately following its introduction, in conjunction with space within the schedule for reflection and “digestion”. These two elements resonate with communicative learning and critical discourse in conjunction with the key actions in relation to content reflection, process reflection and premise reflection (Mezirow, 2003). We therefore simply summarize the data here, returning briefly to it in the Discussion.

Table 5. Factors influencing transformative learning in the operative communication course

Transformative Learning element	Detail: Example from the OCC
Uncovering the unfamiliar in the assumed familiar	Students assume that there is a uniform police culture, then discover that, in fact, police methods for de-escalation reflect different local or national police cultures and histories.
Building trust between students and students and faculty as early and quickly as possible	Team-building activities, repeated statements that learning will occur through discovering differences, proximity of teachers ready to catch potential tensions between students and to work through this with them.
Creating peer-to-peer learning situations	This is an explicit part of the course design.
Acting on theory immediately after theory is presented	Example: Learning “dominance theory” and immediately applying it through role-play.
Perspective transformation in terms of Mezirow (2003; 2018): through communicative learning; providing room in the schedule for reflection and “digestion”	Both structured reflection time, and informal reflection time are key to promoting the process of evolving and changing one’s perspective.

The paper now discusses the lessons that our evaluation contains for both the further development of the OCC and for other training exercises.

Discussion

In this section, we discuss some of the implications of our findings for theory and practice. We begin with the observation that COI principles can be fruitfully employed in short courses with a significant in-person component. This finding contributes to the COI literature and paves the way for more designers of short courses to draw on COI to enrich their programs.

Theoretical considerations

It was not our starting expectation that the OCC would precipitate TL, given the brevity of the course. However, our first course evaluation suggested that this might nonetheless be happening. It is for this

reason that we used a modified version of King's (2009) questionnaire and remained alert to the possibility of transformative learning in our analysis of the focus group data. Our experience with the OCC suggests that TL can indeed occur in as little as one week if the following conditions are met. First, the course consciously creates a "community of inquiry" (Wenger, 1998). Second, there is sufficient preparation (e.g. advance engagement). Third, it has highly focused learning goals. This aligns with Tran and colleagues' findings (2024, p. 890) that, where TL in a short-term bilateral international exchange was also present, it, *"helped expand students' discipline-specific knowledge, develop a more ethnorelative perspective, and thus deepen their self-understanding ..."*. Our finding contributes to the literature, as extant work on TL has assumed that a significantly longer timeframe is needed. It may be that other conditions also permit TL in shorter courses; further research could usefully investigate this question.

Our own experience provides further evidence of the COI framework's relevance in physical learning spaces, particularly in short-term international programs. In these intensive courses, the 'presences' described by the COI framework – cognitive, social, and teaching – are essential for fostering effective learning environments. Of particular importance is *Social Presence*, which involves the projection of participants' authentic selves into the learning community. In short-duration courses, such as those in the OCC, students have limited time to build trust and establish interpersonal connections. The authenticity created through social presence becomes crucial for creating a safe and supportive learning environment.

Open questions

Our findings provide intriguing possibilities for further study. The data indicate that even short courses designed following COI principles can promote deep and persistent learning. The use of experiential learning is implicit in COI theory, and emerging research supports the importance of experiential learning, especially in short-term international courses (e.g., Luxton et al., 2022). Intriguingly, our findings suggest that COI and TL are congruent with each other, in both theory and practice. Mezirow places great emphasis on critical reflection, dialogue and engaging with and reflecting on diverse perspectives for TL (Mezirow, 1985; 2003). These are also key elements in COI. As Dempsey (2017) discusses, trust is central to the effectiveness of social presence and is a crucial element of both COI and TL. Future research could usefully draw on the concept of swift trust and temporary groups (Meyerson et al., 1996; Schilke & Huang, 2018). Moreover, the COI framework seems well-suited to promoting the types of reflective and critical thinking that underpin TL, suggesting potential for future course development in a range of areas.

The potential implicit tension between student satisfaction and reflective practice (Pirrie & Day, 2019) was absent from the OCC. Perhaps this is because students were essentially partners in co-creating elements of the course (promoting agency). Maybe it is because the OCC contains no testing, and thus no pressure on

the students to ‘perform’ (see Anastasiadis & O’Brien, 2019). It could also be because student satisfaction has not, “become the prime measure of quality” (Pirrie & Day, 2019, p. 489) in police education, as it has in much (but by no means all) of the rest of Europe’s higher education landscape, which has moved progressively towards a student-as-consumer model in the face of neo-liberal expansion (for a cross-country analysis, see Gupta et al., 2025). Naftulin, Ware and Donnelly warned decades ago (1973) of the danger of over-prioritizing student satisfaction, yet it has increasingly become equated with teaching quality. Billsberry (2014) argues trenchantly that the student-as-consumer phenomenon will distort education and lead to a focus on edutainment. Police education may be bucking this trend; a potentially-fruitle area for future research.

Implications for practice

Our work shows the benefits of intensive, experiential training, particularly in cross-cultural contexts, and our work has numerous implications for practice, even for organizations without external funding. First, the kind of learning in our OCC can be replicated in other training contexts. Second, some of the elements can be reproduced relatively inexpensively by incorporating them into existing syllabi and/or training courses. For example, one of the principles behind the practical scenarios was to divide them into “simple scenario, complicated people” and “simple people, complex scenario”. The use of bodycams was a great benefit, and indeed the use of videos from smartphones could be an inexpensive substitute. Third, the interdisciplinary nature of the teaching staff, engaging in team-teaching, was a key element in the OCC and is widely replicable. Fourth, the online meeting in advance – between strangers, before the event – was essential for engendering trust and enabling smooth running of the course from the start; as did creating plenty of space for social interaction. Funding and/or geography may make an international program impracticable: inter-regional training may also be fruitful, especially in larger territories or between linguistically diverse regions. Even interdisciplinary or interprofessional programs may prove fruitful. Provided that participants are not individually or institutionally familiar with each other prior to training and have at least some differences in culture, language and/or legal framework, we suggest that the course principles could usefully be applied.

Indeed, we suggest that our findings could inform practice-oriented vocational teaching, even absent intercultural exchange with different institutions. There are, after all, clear benefits to thoroughly integrating theory and practical application in an interdisciplinary manner. Even if this means increasing team-teaching and introducing more scenario-based exercises at the cost of doubling-up staff teaching hours and reducing the number of teaching hours available to individual students as a result, institutions may find it fruitful to experiment. Moreover, we found it useful to employ professional actors for training scenarios. Not only are they skilled in playing roles; the fact that they are *strangers* makes the scenarios

more realistic, improving learning outcomes. Where budgets do not extend to hiring professional actors, organizations may be able to develop a fruitful collaboration with acting schools.

Conclusion

This paper has presented the findings of our research into several iterations of an international training course, built on COI principles and precipitating TL. Crucially for learning, students had a lot of fun along the way. The OCC is not only a formal course; it is also an intercultural exchange, during which students are exposed to a broad spectrum of collective experience. This provides tools and insights at a greatly accelerated rate, in an intensive and out-of-the-norm experience. As our research indicates, such learning is likely to be persistent. The paper has discussed the methods used, presented the findings from our research and discussed some of the theoretical and practical implications emerging from it. Our work has contributed to both COI and TL, as well as to practice-oriented training, and in so doing has raised several new questions. Before concluding the paper, we now set out two limitations to the research.

The first limitation is that we conducted only one round of qualitative research. Moreover, this was in the form of (digital) focus groups, and occurred only eight months after the event. The reason for all three elements - a single round, focus groups, and only eight months later - was pragmatic. Limited funding precluded conducting more than a single round of qualitative study. Limited researcher and student time meant that one-on-one interviews were not feasible; and the geographic spread of students – even in individual countries – meant that it was effectively impossible to conduct research in person. Furthermore, by eight months after the end of the OCC training, participants were not only geographically dispersed, but also in increasingly different stages of professional development: some had completed their studies and were working and others were still students; whilst still others were no longer contactable. In other words, waiting longer would have made it even harder to conduct the focus groups.

The second limitation is that the single case study presented here was focused only on the police. Case studies clearly have a place in organizational research; they have their own merits, even for theoretical generalization, and permit a range of theorizing approaches (Tsang, 2022). Nevertheless, it would have been useful to conduct research on similar intensive training programs in other professional contexts; especially in areas in which professional identity (the “police family”) is less pronounced.

Given the TL potential, the course can be seen as a form of pilot program, which could inform curriculum development and revision, not only at partner organizations but also across academically-informed police training more broadly. Having said that, it would be useful to conduct a longer-term study – with numerous cohorts and across a longer period of time – to ascertain the breadth and persistence of the effects that we have found. It would also be useful to investigate which elements of COI and TL can be most usefully linked.

Finally, our investigation focused on students: it would be most interesting to investigate the effect of intensive cross-border, intercultural teaching on teaching staff: the effects on them may also be measurable and no less profound than on their students.

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