



Emergency Planning College Position Paper

Number
June 2016

5

Teaching And Learning In Civil Protection: The EPC Approach

Mark Leigh
Faculty Director
EPC



Emergency Planning College Position Papers

At the EPC, we use Position Papers to define, for the guidance and information of the practitioners and partners we train, our institutional standpoint on good practice in resilience, emergency and crisis management.

They are free downloads from the Knowledge Centre on the college website. As such they are a part of our Public Programme and a pro bono service to the resilience community.

Please note that, whilst they represent our current understanding of good practice and will always be consistent with relevant and formal published guidance, doctrine and standards – they are designed to complement – not replace – formal government guidance. As statements of good practice they do not imply direction or mandate from central government. When they refer to specific products, models or methodologies (used to translate doctrine into practice) this does not constitute CCS endorsement or recommendation of the same.

As with our Occasional Papers, which have more of a discursive nature and purpose, they are peer-reviewed and subject to rigorous quality assurance to ensure that they will contribute effectively to the needs of practitioners and the customers and partners of the Emergency Planning College.

Teaching And Learning In Civil Protection: The EPC Approach

Some time ago the Emergency Planning College re-invented itself. We made a deliberate decision to modernise our teaching and change the ways in which we help resilience professionals learn and develop themselves. Note the choice of words there; they are chosen with care and we will talk about how and why in a moment. But before that, we would like to share the main lessons we have learned from our experience as a provider of professional education in civil protection, during a period of relentless change. We believe this has given us a unique understanding of multi-agency resilience and the development needs of the practitioner community, as well as an understanding of how to design effective learning events that meet these needs in the ways that practitioners like to learn.

From this, we have derived a set of broad principles to guide our work and underpin the learning we support. Collectively, they give the EPC what we see as a distinctive and particular 'house style'. There are, of course, volumes that can be written on the techniques of teaching and learning. In this paper we only address the EPC's core principles, which are distilled from our own experience with the practitioner community. It is an EPC Position Paper because, like the others in this series, it defines how we go about our business in the delivery of professional education.



Learning Should Be Inclusive

Civil protection is inherently a multi-agency business. It is, and should be, based on partnership, consensus and equality. This multi-agency ethic must be genuine – an intellectual and instinctive 'default setting'. It isn't just something that we pay lip service to and it isn't a presentational "overlay". In partnership working no one should be along for the ride, or because it is politically correct to acknowledge them or because they "might just be useful".

We never forget that our response mechanisms are co-ordinating groups, led by chairpersons and not by commanders. But multi-agency working is not just a constitutional and legal requirement; it is the best way of working and the best (if not only) way of dealing effectively with really complex challenges. And is there any other type of challenge in civil protection today?

Most of us come from single-service backgrounds. Our experience tends to speak for itself – if it is relevant and recent. But a learning provider's genuine level of understanding of the multi-agency environment should never be assumed or taken as read; it is a mind-set, and it doesn't always follow naturally from even extensive single-agency experience.



Learning Should Be Participative

Our approach is learner-centred. Active, participative learning is both more fulfilling and more effective. It really is as simple as that. However, it does need trained and very skilled facilitators to make it really work. It is, in fact, a very demanding way of teaching – so facilitators need to be very carefully selected and developed.

The required skill-set has three basic parts: subject matter expertise, direct (and recent or current) professional experience and the ability to teach effectively in a participative style. It goes without saying that a passion for the subject and a personal commitment to continuous self-development are absolute requirements. A complacent facilitator is usually a poor facilitator.

So, facilitating participative learning – at least to the standard we demand – is a skill that has to be learned. Sometimes (and even with experienced trainers) the teaching styles they learned in other training contexts are not the most suitable for multi-agency, participative learning.



Learning Should Be Pragmatic

Naturally, learning in civil protection must be informed by the relevant legislation, doctrine, guidance, regulations and the like. But its focus must be on the pragmatic requirement to get the job done, to the highest standard possible with the resources available. Learning must be solution-oriented, so that the individual can go back to the workplace armed with a new toolkit - of skills and knowledge that will help them make a significant difference straight away.

This implies the need to practice with ideas and skills, reflect on the various ways and means of doing our work, share and refine thinking with one's peers and be energised by the possibilities of applying new learning.

So learning should be pragmatic in purpose and flexible in approach, with no room automatically given to doctrinaire or traditionalist perspectives. Learners aren't that interested in "how it's always been done" or in "how it used to be done". They want to know how it can be done by them today to face today's challenges.

This doesn't mean a "year zero" approach. Accepted practice is there for a reason. After all, the tried and trusted is rightfully compelling. But does it mean that practice must be constantly re-evaluated to ensure its contemporary relevance in times of

change. And civil protection has been undergoing sustained and quite radical change for some time now.



Learning Should Be Shared And Respected

Learning needs a no-fault environment. Learners have to be confident that they can experiment with ideas and approaches and share their thoughts and experience with their peers on a level playing field of mutual respect, discretion and courtesy.

Critical reflection is very important and it only really flourishes in a non-judgemental and free-thinking environment, where it is recognised that there are few simple solutions and very few standard ones. This takes us back to the idea that the multi-agency approach needs to be an instinctive mind-set and a genuine commitment. Trainers' credentials in this regard should be challenged and need to be proven.



Learning Provision Should Be Underpinned By Thought Leadership

Some providers in the training market trade almost exclusively on their past experience. By this we mean that their subject-matter expertise stopped developing when they ceased to be practitioners. Experience can go out-of-date, so whilst it can have huge value it is not enough for the long haul and it is not enough on its own. When they are not current practitioners, we expect our facilitators to be current activists in the profession – leading (visibly) in the development of thinking and practice and engaged with the evolving professional narrative of resilience.

This might mean (for example) publishing, researching or facilitating personal development through leadership in professional forums and similar working groups. We see these as behaviours that allow trainers to stay current by re-interpreting and using their experience to inform an understanding of today's issues – which are the ones most relevant to learners.



Learning Provision Should Be Subject To Rigorous And External Quality Assurance

There is more to quality assurance in learning than “happy sheets” and the usual verbal commitment to excellence. QA regimes need to be designed and managed by expert professionals. They also need to be externally verified. Ask this question of your next training provider ... “Which competent authority validates you, your courses and your quality systems?” Accreditation is very important, but it is primarily for the individual. What really counts for the organisation is assurance. That comes from third-party validation by a competent authority.

In the case of the EPC, this is by the Cabinet Office Civil Contingencies Secretariat. This is important on two levels. First, they are the UK government’s national competent authority on civil protection. Secondly, external verification and assurance of any kind is very rare in the world of civil protection training. Furthermore, our assurance by a third party, which happens to be the national competent authority, is actually unique.



Helping Resilience Professionals To Learn And Develop Themselves

These are the words we used in the first paragraph and by now you will know what we mean by them. Facilitators are informed guides, who are there to take learners on a journey towards greater understanding, so that they can equip themselves with the means to make a difference in their work.

In other words, learning is something we facilitate with our fellow professionals – not something we do to them.

We haven’t mentioned cost yet and it would naïve to assume that this isn’t a big factor in anyone’s choice of training provider. But if the quality of learning is to be judged by its effect, then in times of financial constraint and limited resources, smart organisations should invest deliberately and strategically in their primary asset. That is their people.