

What do police recruits learn from acting in scenarios?

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### **Abstract**

This research analyzed the learning outcomes of police recruits acting as victims/suspects during scenarios as part of the new JIBC Police Academy curriculum implemented in 2016. Self-debrief reports from junior recruits were analyzed using a qualitative approach to determine what these recruits believe they have learned through role playing in scenarios for senior recruits.

#### Key findings:

- Recruits develop behavioural skills, tactical skills, communication skills, teamwork skills, and proper body positioning from acting in scenarios;
- Recruits are tacitly learning from the mistakes and success of their senior cohort in a stress free environment;
- This portion of the new JIBC police academy curriculum is effectively contributing to recruits developing their knowledge and skill in the Police Sector Council (PSC) Constable Competencies.

#### Recommendations

This research revealed that the new curriculum successfully achieved its goal to promote learning through integration of junior recruits into senior recruit scenarios as a part of a competency-based educational approach. Based on the findings, Block I recruits should continue to participate as actors for Block III scenarios.

Keywords: Police training, JIBC Police Academy, Scenario, role-playing, competency-based educational approach, Canadian policing

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### **Introduction**

As a starting point to their police career, municipal police, transit police, and tribal police recruits from the province of British Columbia are required to attend the Justice Institute of British Columbia (JIBC) Police Academy Recruit Training Program. In 2016, the JIBC Police Academy redesigned the delivery model of recruit training curriculum to a new program aligned with the principles of competency-based education. Previously new recruits, known as Block I recruits, would only participate in 2 scenario days where 6 recruits would rotate through 6 scenario stations and paid actors were brought in as subjects. As part of the new delivery model, in addition to participating in more regular scenarios responding to calls, the Block I recruits are also participating in scenarios where they play the role of victim or subject for the senior recruits (known as Block III recruits). “Current society demands law enforcement officers give more attention to being guardians of the community than warriors” (Rosenbaum, D. P., & Lawrence, D. S., 2017). The intent of this format is to help recruits to develop an appreciation of police tactics and experience the perspective of a member of the public. Following each scenario day, recruits complete a self-assessment debrief form and answer a variety of questions about their learning experience, their performance, and what they would have done differently. The research described in this paper analyzed what one class of Block I JIBC Police Academy recruits identified as the key learning points from their experience as actors in scenarios.

### **Background/Significance of this study**

The effectiveness of Canadian public policing remains largely unknown because of chronic underfunding of policing research (Griffith, 2014). The deficit of knowledge in Canadian police training is correlated with the absence of up-to-date research. According to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Public Safety and National Security (2014), over the last three

decades, the capacity to do police research in this country has been dismantled due to the lack of funding. This project explores the effectiveness of the JIBC Police Academy curriculum by understanding what recruits identify they are learning from acting in scenarios. The research in this project is a critical step forward and will contribute to filling the gap in existing Canadian police training literature.

### **Purpose of this study**

The purpose of this research is to determine the effectiveness of using Block I recruits as actors in Block III scenarios as a teaching and learning tool to develop policing skills in junior recruits. Using data from practical scenario debrief forms to examine what Block I recruits identify they have learned from their roles as actors will provide insight into how interacting with the senior recruits contributes to knowledge and skill development in junior recruits.

### **Research Question**

What do police recruits learn from acting in scenarios?

### **Literature review**

#### Role-playing training model is an effective method for recruits to learn de-escalation skills

According to by Oliva, J. R. et al. (2010), the demonstration and practice of de-escalation skills is highly present in a role-playing setting. The authors suggested that participating in role-playing is an effective learning method for recruits to:

- Explain the dynamics of a crisis event;
- Utilize appropriate active listening techniques;

- Differentiate between open-ended and closed-ended question;
- Identify behaviours that should be avoided when attempting to de-escalate a crisis situation. (Oliva et al, 2010)

“One of the most crucial skills that an officer can possess when de-escalating crisis is his or her ability to effectively communicate with others” (Oliva, J. R., Morgan, R., & Compton, M. T., 2010, p. 19). Although this article establishes the benefits of role-playing as a police officer, the design of recruit training at the police academy also focuses on the benefits of role-playing as a subject in scenarios. In the context of de-escalation, experiencing different de-escalation strategies as a subject should increase awareness of their impact and effectiveness.

#### Role-playing program are effective to increase behavioural skills

This study published in the Police Chief Magazine analyzed the outcomes of the Chicago Police Department new Quality Interaction program (QIP) on a randomized control trial of 142 recruits. The study emphasized how task are performed during encounters, and how officers can communicate and make decisions in light of crime. The QIP follows a similar approach to the JIBC police academy new curriculum about the participation of recruits in scenarios. According to Rosenbaum, D. P., et al. (2017, “The program appears to have been effective at increasing respectful and reassuring behaviour during role-playing encounters” (p. 4). Recruits in this study were more inclined than control groups to engage in behaviours that are desired, and Rosenbaum, D. P. et al. (2017) finally recommended that training should incorporate scenarios, role-playing and simulations.

#### Participating in scenarios builds teamwork and leadership skills

The knowledge of a police officer is not a matter of a simple data dump, effective training is aligned to the reality of the policing function, providing information is a relatively fast process,

but learning requires a different approach (Haberfeld, M.R. et al., 2012). In *Police Organization and Training: Innovations in Research and Practice*, Haberfeld, M.R. & al., (2012) suggested, “Properly conducted, problem-based, learning-promoted collaboration builds teamwork skills and develops leadership abilities through cooperative work group experiences” (p. 22). Teamwork and leadership skills are deemed to be qualities that are not teachable in a classroom, therefore “Training/education programs should be delivered using a variety of methods, including distance training, team and group learning, case studies, and scenarios as well as residential training” (Haberfeld, M.R. & al., 2012, p. 19). In order to accept, remember and use new information such as working in a team, recruits need to be able to place it on their own reality map. Participating in scenario helps recruits assimilating the theories they learn in class.

#### Scenarios are the best way to simulate stressful situations and gain the proper skills set

A study by Andersen, J. P. et al., (2016) compared two “SWAT” teams to examine simulated physiological stress response in real-world law enforcement scenarios. The study suggested that the physiological stress experienced by officers during realistic scenario training was similar to the level of stress encountered by active-duty police officers. “High realism scenarios provide officers the opportunity to experience how physiological arousal may impact the outcome of the encounter, and second, officers are afforded the opportunity to learn to perform optimally in spite of high physiological stress responses.” (Andersen, J. P. et al., 2016, p. 5). Physiological arousal experienced in classroom-based training was not significantly correlated with high realism training or real world encounters (Andersen, J. P. et al., 2016). Recruits not only learn from acting directly as police officers during scenarios, “Classroom audio exposure to critical incident training may prove useful as an important first step in the process of advanced skill development. Indeed, researchers studying mental imagery and audio exposure to critical

incidents have reported improvements in performance among police recruits during a critical incident simulation” (Arnetz, et al., 2009). This would suggest that participating in scenarios as actors or victims would also help recruits to develop advanced skills.

#### Simulations can help recruits learn how to interact and gain confidence

Stanyon, W. et al., (2014) addressed three questions about simulation training for encounters with subjects with mental illness: To what extent can simulations be used as a tool to educate police officers about mental illness and how to respond effectively in interactions with individuals with a mental illness? To what extent do simulations enhance police officers’ confidence in their ability to interact effectively with people with mental illness? To what extent do police officers find simulations (a) easy to use, and (b) reflective of reality? In this research, officers stated that simulations helped them to learn how to interact properly, “Officers described the simulations as engaging, and they appreciated the multiple interactive media and the ability to choose options in their responses to the scenarios presented” (Stanyon, W. et al., 2014, p. 60). They found scenarios to be a good way for all of the participants to acknowledge the importance of building rapport. “Officers also indicated they gained confidence through their on-the-job experiences and the ability to learn from their mistakes and each other” (Stanyon, W. & al. 2014, p. 62).

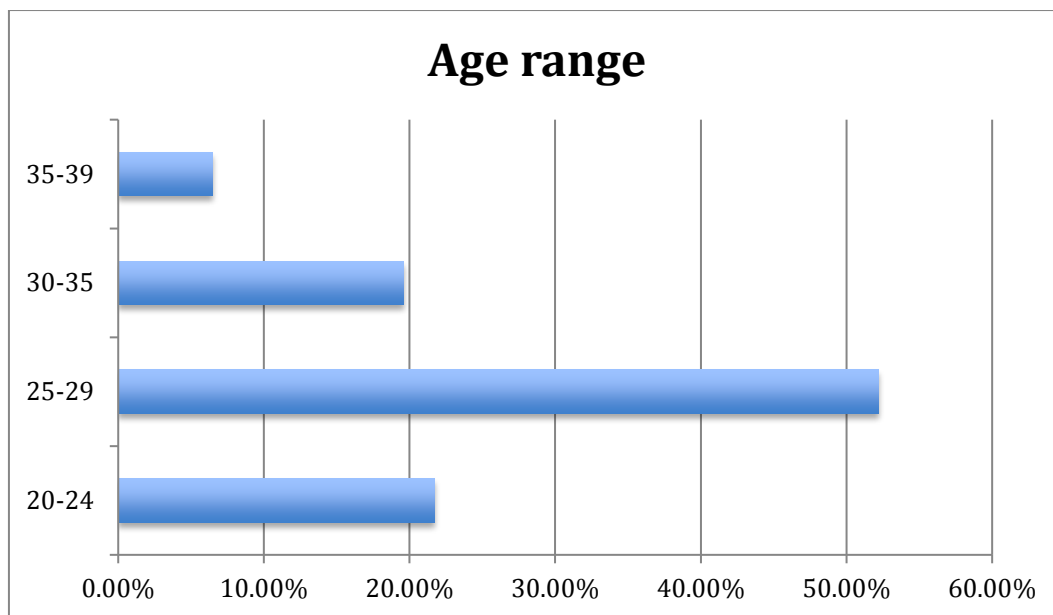
### **Research Design**

The research design used a qualitative approach to analyze the recruits’ answers to what they identified they had learned from being an actor in scenarios. According to Cohen, L. et al., (2018), “Qualitative data analysis involves organizing, accounting for and explaining the data; in short, making sense of data in terms of the participants’ definition of the situation, noting



patterns, themes, categories and regularities” (p. 537). The philosophical assumptions prior to the data collection were that recruits acting in scenarios would develop skills in some of the core constable competencies: adaptability, risk management, ethical accountability and responsibility, stress tolerance, interactive communication, teamwork, organizational awareness, written skills, problem solving and decision making. In order to complete this study, the student-researcher obtained ethical approval from the Justice Institute of British Columbia Ethics Review Committee: file # JIBCER2018—04-PRLA (see form I in the appendices).

The targeted population for this research was the 48 Block I recruits from Class 154, which consisted of recruits from departments in the province of British Columbia. Class 154 was composed of 30 males and 18 females (see figure#1) between the ages of 20 and 39 years old, with the majority of recruit between 25 to 29 years old (see figure#2).



**Figure #1: Age range of police recruits in Class 154**

## Gender

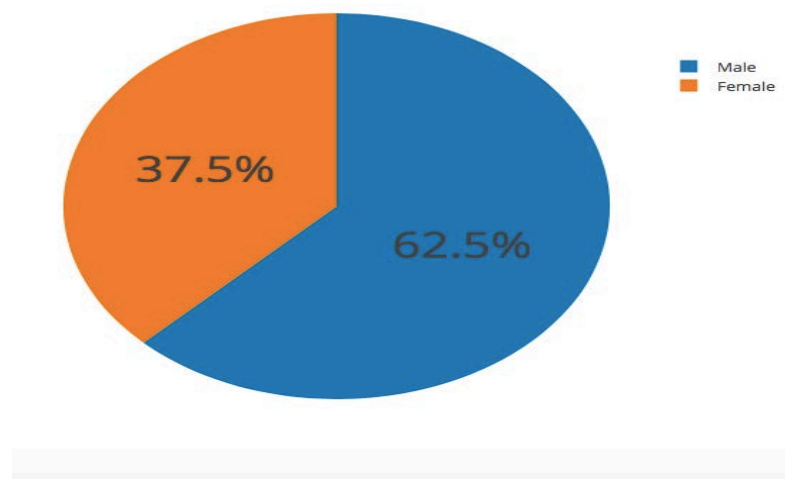


Figure #2: Gender disparity in Class 154

After each scenario day in weeks 1, 2, 3, 4, and 11, recruits completed a debrief form. The JIBC Police Academy Program Manager provided the researcher with redacted debrief forms after removing recruit names and other identifying information from the body of the text. The answers to the question “*What was your most important learning point when you were an actor in a call? Why?*” were analyzed using the NVivo version 11.4.3 software to group the data into “nodes”. The nodes were organized according to common themes that emerged from the data and the number of references for each common theme was registered. Five common themes emerged from the analysis (see figure#3): Behavioural skills (72 references), Communication skills (52 references), Tactical Skills (67 references), Teamwork skills (18 references) and Body positioning (23 references).

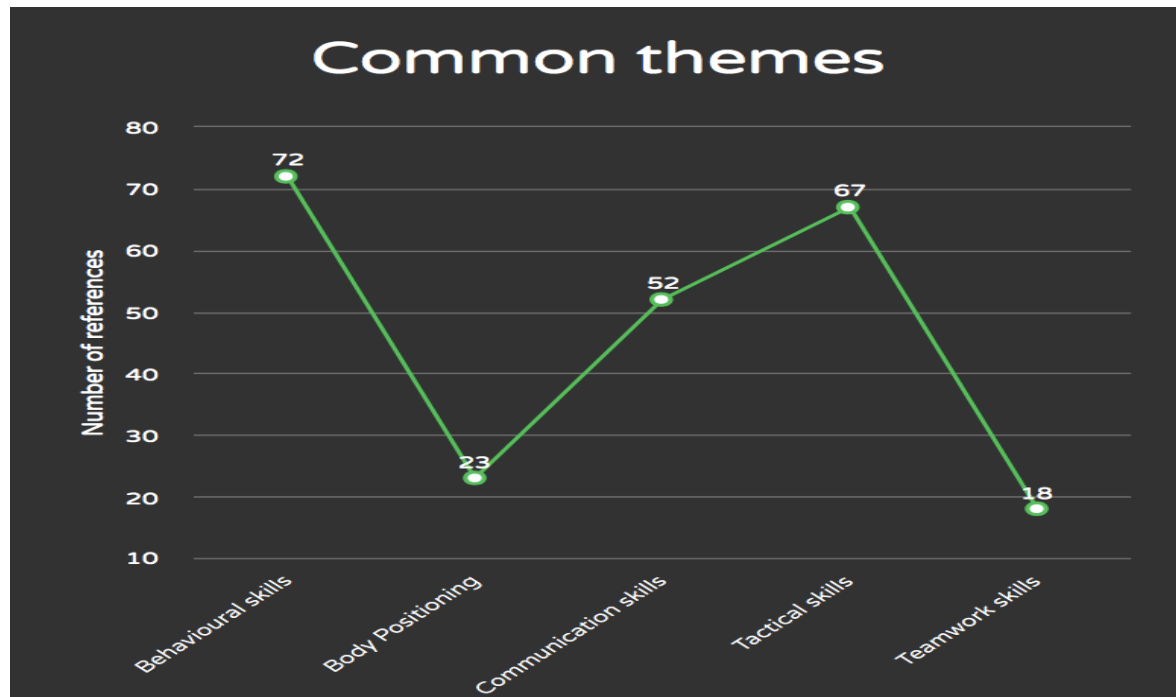


Figure #3: Number of references

### Behavioural skills

The most common theme recruits identified as a learning point was behavioural skills with 72 references. Recruits primarily stated they learned the importance of the initial officer's presence and attitude when responding to a call by seeing their senior cohort interacting with them during scenarios. The recruits observed the fine balance between being authoritative, adapting their approach and building relationships from the Block III recruits. Recruits stated, "The most important thing I realized as an actor was that the block 3 constables were primarily focusing on building trust and good rapport. The block 3 contact and covers were very kind, respectable, and genuinely seemed like they just wanted to chat with us, casually, with no hidden agenda. They were clear and concise as to why they stopped suspect #1 and myself at the bus stop. They focused on building a good relationship with us, so that in turn, we ended up giving

them our name.” and, “Observing how the officers had to completely change their approach to the call depending on the actor's reactions. Being able to adapt to the situation was key to getting a successful outcome.” Recruits also stated that they realized the importance of showing empathy during the intervention, stating, “This scenario showed me that having empathy as an officer is very important. It helped to de-escalate the situation very quickly and get the female to tell them she was feeling suicidal” and “From acting in a call the most important learning point for me was the experience as the victim’s friend and the emotional state that contacts may be in when we will be dealing with them as officers. This directly pertains to the level of empathy we must ensure that we exude during interviews with victims. I consider this to be the most important learning point because I will utilize it in future interactions with civilians and victims with whom I come into contact.”

### **Tactical skills**

Tactical skills were the second most common theme that emerged from the analysis with 67 references. Recruits were positive in the fact that acting in scenarios helped them to understand how to effectively accomplish police duties during a call. Recruits stated, “the biggest learning point for me was seeing which charges the Block III recruits decided to proceed with during their investigation and the careful process of going through the criminal code to see which charges actually applies to this particular situation” and, “One of the most important learning points that I found was understanding that the offences that are in the *trespass act*, or any other provincial statute has ticketable charges in an appendix in the offence act. Without being an actor and getting to hear the feedback from the block III’s, I do not think I would have easily learned this and feel that I have been getting some useful information from the debriefs of these scenarios.” Some other recruits stated that they learn how and when to use the tools police officers are provided with, stating, “My most important learning point when I was an actor in a call was to slow things down

and gather as much information as possible. When dealing with multiple people who have conflicting stories keep gathering information until the picture becomes clearer. Use dispatch to obtain information, verify ID, check serial numbers, talk to COM” and, “my most important learning point was the importance of writing complete notes and conducting a more thorough search incident to lawful arrest. Advising dispatch of my location AND the occurrence.”

### **Communication skills**

Communication skills were the third most common theme that emerged from the analysis with 52 references. Recruits believed acting in the scenarios helped them to understand how communication can effectively de-escalate a situation, stating, “Interactive communication played a key role [in the scenario], They treated me with respect and showed empathy in showing me that they were genuinely concerned for me and why I was acting in this way. The reason that this was so helpful was that it showed me that there are different roles and approaches that the officers can take while responding to calls and they did not have to always take a single, authoritative approach. In this case, the calm, empathetic approach de-escalates the situation effectively, and was more appropriate” and, “it was a learning opportunity to see how the Block III recruits handled their initial contact with me. This confirmed the importance of techniques to de-escalate (and prevent re-escalation) such as speaking in a calm voice, providing validation, and showing empathy/concern.” Recruits also learned how communication could help them to gather more information for their investigation. Recruits stated, “I learned to always remain patient and take the time to speak with people, the “policing language” used to build rapport from the block III recruits and their strategies to illicit information from a consensual encounter. They were not rude or aggressive which turned the scenario into a positive police interaction,” and, “The most important learning point I learned from being an actor in a call is that communication can be

imperative in building a relationship with a client in order to gain compliance from them.” Finally recruits learned the importance of using plain language, stating, “I realized that as an actor, it is important for the officer to break things down and talk slowly, when the subject is affected by alcohol. Slow things down and use plain language is key for officers when dealing with subjects like this. As an actor, it was good for the officers to break things down and take it one step at a time. I’m going to try and use this to be sufficient with my impaired calls.”

### **Body Positioning**

The fourth most common theme that emerged from the analysis was body positioning with 23 references. Recruits identified as a learning point the body positioning Block III acting police officers were engaging to control a suspect or to preserve the officer’s safety. Some of the statements from the recruits were: “I also learnt about officer positioning (Contact/Cover). Initially the officers were situated in a triangulation position but were extremely close to me, making me feel that I had an obligation to stay where I was. This will help me become more aware of my positioning during consensual encounters”, “My most important learning point was seeing the movement of the contact and cover in response to the way I moved. For example, when I began to pace, they responded and moved in order to contain the situation and maintain a line of sight to their partner” and, “the most important learning point I received was officer safety considerations during a three-person scenario with only one cover officer. I was able to see how people were able to position themselves, and use environmental barriers to separate the subjects, while maintaining sight of the other officer.”

### **Teamwork skills**

The fifth most common theme that emerged from the analysis was teamwork skills with 18 references. Recruits were able to perceive the abilities from the senior cohort to effectively work

in team. Recruits stated, “I also noticed the contact and cover roles switched between the two officers during the duration of the scenario. When one officer was busy talking to me the other officer jumped on the radio in order to confirm my identity”, “it was a good learning point when both the contact and cover officers took time to speak to each other before coming to a conclusion. I often feel the need to make decisions right away when in scenarios. It was a good learning point to know that you can always take a step back and talk to your partner about the various options when possible” and, “I noticed the importance of collaborating information with the cover officer to gain the most accurate story of the situation. This allows for the correct party to be arrested and to mitigate any confusion.”

### **Discussion**

The intent of this research was to understand what learning points recruits would associate with being actors in a call. It is possible to assume from the data analysis and the literature that the recruits acting in scenarios as part of the JIBC Police Academy curriculum are greatly benefiting. The literature suggested that role-playing participants would benefit from the scenarios. Research has demonstrated that role-playing in training is an effective method for recruits to learn de-escalation skills (Oliva et al., 2010), increase behavioural skills (Rosenbaum et al., 2017), build teamwork and leadership skills (Haberfeld et al., 2012), simulate stressful situations to gain stress management skills (Andersen et al., 2016) and to learn to interact and build confidence (Stanyon et al., 2014).. The findings in this study corresponded to these findings from the literature. There is a strong indication that following their participation to scenarios, Class 154 recruits were able to clearly identify what they learned from interacting with senior recruits. As predicted by Rosenbaum, D. P., & al (2017), recruits made many references to learning officer presence, including when to behave in a more authoritative way and how to show

empathy towards victims. This is an important learning outcome because according to Goleman D. (2004), self-awareness and social awareness are not teachable in a regular classroom setting. Many references also addressed the tactical aspect of policing work. The recruits were positive in the fact that acting in scenarios helped them to understand how to effectively accomplish police duties and use the resources they are provided with such as the dispatch or their partner during a call. A recruit stating “without being an actor and getting to hear the feedback from the block III’s, I do not think I would have easily learned this [applicable charges], and feel that I have been getting some useful information from the debriefs of these scenarios” confirms that policing that participating in scenarios with more experienced recruits is improving junior recruits understanding of police authorities and procedures, and for some, could only be fully understood by being part of more experienced senior cohorts. Recruits also acquired communication skills; as Oliva, J. R. & al. (2010) and Stanyon, W. & al. (2014) claimed, recruits identified participating in scenarios helped them understand how communication can effectively de-escalate a situation. This research finally revealed that recruits were able to observe effective body positioning and how police officers are expected to work in team and therefore would get a better understanding of those aspects of policing.

The key findings of this project are:

- Recruits are developing behavioural skills, tactical skills, communication skills, teamwork skills and proper body positioning from acting in scenarios;
- Recruits are tacitly learning from the mistakes and success of their senior cohort in a stress free environment;



- The knowledge and skills that junior recruits gain from acting in the scenarios of senior recruits effectively contributes development of the key constable competencies required for successful completion of municipal police training at the JIBC Police Academy.

### **Conclusion**

This project provided further knowledge about the effectiveness of the JIBC Police Academy curriculum by exploring what recruits identified they were learning from acting in scenarios. The new curriculum allowed class 154 to acquire several skills and a different perspective that will be useful for their career. The curriculum successfully achieved its goal to promote learning through integration of junior recruits into senior recruit scenarios as a part of a competency-based educational approach. Some limitations in this project are:

- The data collection was limited to a small sample size (one class)
- The analysis of the debrief form was specific to the JIBC Police Academy therefore is not to be generalizable to other academy training.
- The absence of recent literature on the subject in a Canadian context.

Based on the findings, it would be recommended that Block I recruits continue to participate as actors for Block III scenarios. Also, further research should include a larger sample size and a comparison of results between the different classes participating in the reform.

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## Appendix I: Ethics Approval Certificate

**NOTICE OF APPROVAL – ETHICAL REVIEW**

<b>Contact Person &amp; Position</b> Nora Houlahan, Program Manager	<b>Institution</b> Justice Institute of BC	<b>Protocol #:</b> JIBCER-2018-04-PRLA
Student or Co-Investigators & Position: Dominique Cloutier		
<b>Title of Project:</b> <i>What do police recruits learn from acting in scenarios?</i>		
Sponsoring/Funding Agency: N/A		
Institution(s) where research activities will be carried out: JIBC		
<b>Approval Date:</b> January 26, 2018	<b>Term/Year:</b> January 26, 2019	

**Certification:** The above named project has been reviewed by the Research Ethics Board and has been approved as described or has been approved subject to the following modifications.

A blue ink signature of Darren Blackburn, consisting of a stylized 'D' followed by a series of loops and a long horizontal stroke.

**Darren Blackburn, Chair, JIBC Research Ethics Board**

**Note:** This Certificate of Approval is valid for the above term provided there is no change in the procedures or criteria given.