

Disconnected Training

by Brad Fawcett

The ascendance of online law enforcement training appears to be associated with the economics of policing and the (seemingly monthly) calls for more training to better meet the concerns of identified special needs groups, which typically originate from coroners inquests or public inquiries.

The development of provincial policing standards requires that remote agencies be able to access training without incurring a disproportionate financial burden. Online training might be appealing in that it may mitigate “instructor drift” and differing training materials and delivery modalities across agencies, a concern expressed about conducted energy weapons training, for example.

Commissioner Thomas Braidwood noted that “there is a troubling lack of consistency in provincial law enforcement agencies’ training materials respecting conducted energy weapon use” (*Braidwood, 2009*). Online training appears to offer at least a partial solution to these issues; however,



there are some concerns.

Online training assumes that if participants demonstrate knowledge in some context, then it should be available in all contexts (*Nicholson, 2005*). In other words, agencies assume that an officer demonstrating some knowledge by meeting the

minimum standard on an online course and accompanying exam will be able demonstrate that knowledge in the field. The difficulty is that officers acquire the knowledge entirely out of context with the reality in which they’re expected to apply it.

Also of concern is the issue of inert knowledge in which isolated facts are disconnected from how they can be used to accomplish some purpose (*Nicholson, 2005*). Knowledge, though seemingly available (the agency “trained” the officer and the officer passed the exam), is often not used to solve problems (*Renkle, 1996*). One of the reasons the knowledge required is not accessible may be that it was learned out of context with the operational reality in which it is expected to be used. The officer acquired the information in a sterile, safe environment by watching, reading and viewing a computer screen where the only threat is to ego (officers might be embarrassed if they fail the online exam), which is contrasted with real-world consequences they confront.

An assumption apparently supporting the move towards online training is that officers will recognise and use data present in the environment once they have been trained what to look for. Unfortunately, numerous human error studies have demonstrated that training in data recognition and a person’s ability to recognise and act on it is not supported in the field. This can be seen in “fail to pull” fatalities in which experienced parachutists fall to their deaths even though they have received extensive training on recognising problems and their remedies (typically, using their reserve parachute).

One explanation may be that the parachutist “learned” the skills in a controlled, non-threatening environment (on the ground) and was unable to access the knowledge because it was required in an entirely

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different environment (plummeting through the air) (Leach, 2011).

Research on state-dependent learning suggests that knowledge acquisition should take place in environments similar to which one expects it to be recalled (Weingartner, 1977). Simply stated, state-dependent learning/retrieval refers to impairment in performance when there is a mismatch between physical or mental states at learning and retrieval (Swihart, 1999). Officers acquiring knowledge through online courses in controlled environments without consequences may not be able to access it when it's required during operational activities due to the mismatch between the physical environment where they learned it and the chaotic and uncertain environment in which retrieval is expected.

Online training in areas such as crisis intervention, de-escalation and use of force decision making may not provide knowledge that is accessible to officers when it is most needed. They acquire it while in the comfort and relative security of their department, or worse – their home, with a near-to-resting heart rate and little concern that a wrong decision will result in significant consequences. The environment where they're expected to retrieve the knowledge relative to crisis intervention, de-escalation and use of force decision making stands in stark contrast.

Online training may mitigate concerns regarding instructor drift, access, cost and training standards; however, it should not be expected to provide accessible knowledge and skills that police officers can use in the field. Employing a blended model of knowledge acquisition, one where online information is reinforced and built on in face-to-face training, may mitigate some of the concerns. Agencies should not assume that online training increases public, officer and subject safety, nor does it necessarily provide liability protection due to the incongruity that exists between the emotional, physical and tactical environments of knowledge acquisition and retrieval.

Braidwood, T. (2009). Restoring Public Confidence: Restricting the Use of Conducted Energy Weapons. Victoria: Province of British Columbia. Leach, J. (2011). *Survival Psychology: The Want to Live*. *The Psychologist*, 26-29. Nicholson, S. S. (2005). Exploring Myths about Online Education in Information Systems. *Informing Science Journal*, 55-73. Renkle, A. H. (1996). Inert knowledge: Analyses and remedies. *Educational Psychologist*, 115-121. Swihart, G. Y. (1999). The Role of State-Dependent Memory in "Red-Outs". *International Journal of Law and Psychology*, 199-212. Weingartner, H. M. (1977). Mood-State-Dependent Retrieval of Verbal Associations. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 276-284.

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Uniform policy to include hijab option

The Edmonton Police Service has approved the option for female officers of Muslim faith to wear a police-issued hijab headscarf while in uniform.

The traditional hijab is worn by some Muslim women as an outward expression of religious and cultural identity. It covers the head and neck, but not the face. While there are different interpretations on the meaning and practice of hijab, the EPS respects a Muslim woman's choice to wear the headscarf.

The EPS does not currently have any members or applicants requesting to wear the hijab. However, to be proactive the EPS uniform guidelines have been updated to better reflect the changing diversity in the community and to accommodate the growing interest in policing careers from Edmonton's Muslim community.

The EPS Equity, Diversity and Human Rights Unit (EDHRU) and the Chief's Muslim Community Liaison Committee conducted community consultation and research into how police can be more inclusive and representative in this manner without impacting service.

As there were no police-issued hijabs readily available, the EDHRU, with the EPS Tactics Training Unit developed a prototype with the assistance of a hijab tailor. The headscarf was designed to be simple, unobtrusive and easily removed. After rigorous testing,



it was determined that the headscarf did not pose any risk to the officer wearing it, reduce officer effectiveness, nor interfere with police duties or public interactions.

The hijab prototype met the requirements of Occupational Health and Safety and the professional standards of EPS Dress and Deportment. The EPS Chief's Committee approved the police-issued hijab and the necessary uniform policy changes, which have also been supported by members of Edmonton's Muslim community.

The Edmonton Police Service continues to change with the times, as have a number of police, justice and military organizations in western nations that have already modified their uniforms to accommodate the hijab.

As protected by the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, the EPS considers any special religious or cultural requests by officers or the community, to determine if they meet reasonable accommodation requirements. The EPS responds with a fair, consistent and respectful approach to try to meet these diverse needs wherever possible.

Regardless of race, culture, religion, or sexual orientation, it is important that anyone who has a calling to serve and protect Edmontonians and passes the rigorous recruitment and police training standards, feel welcome and included in the EPS.

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