

E-Learning and Online Education :
Implications for the Future of Law Enforcement Training

By

James Leal
Newark Police Department

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The Command College Futures Study Project is a FUTURES study of a particular emerging issue of relevance to law enforcement. Its purpose is NOT to predict the future; rather, to project a variety of possible scenarios useful for strategic planning in anticipation of the emerging landscape facing policing organizations.

This journal article was created using the futures forecasting process of Command College and its outcomes. Defining the future differs from analyzing the past, because it has not yet happened. In this article, methodologies have been used to discern useful alternatives to enhance the success of planners and leaders in their response to a range of possible future environments.

Managing the future means influencing it—creating, constraining and adapting to emerging trends and events in a way that optimizes the opportunities and minimizes the threats of relevance to the profession.

The views and conclusions expressed in the Command College Futures Project and journal article are those of the author, and are not necessarily those of the CA Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST).

E-Learning and Online Education: Implications for the Future of Law Enforcement Training

Introduction

E-education and e-training is becoming more and more prevalent. By 2005, more than 3.2 million students were participating in online learning at institutions of higher education in the United States.¹ According to a Merrill Lynch research report, e-learning is estimated to grow annually by 54% (from \$9.4 billion in 1999 to \$53.3 billion in 2003).² That said, the next generation of officers is growing up in an e-education world with a completely different set of expectations about their training environment.

The Millennial Generation consists of those born between 1978 and 2000. They are the first generation in a global society with a far greater prevalence and reliance on technology.³ As interactive technologies and online social networking continue to grow, so does the gap between classic learning and online learning styles. As Baby Boomers retire and leave the profession, will it signal the death of conventional eight hour training days filled with lecture and hands-on instruction? Can our profession meet the competing training demands of multiple generations in the workforce? The fact is that the transition in the private sector and military began many years ago and a number of law enforcement agencies are already starting to realize the benefits of e-learning formats. Can e-learning supplant traditional law enforcement training or will astute police executives find a way to effectively blend traditional and online learning formats in a manner that benefits everyone?

Generational Impacts

The new generation of young adults will be looking for no less excitement and diversity in training than they have experienced at home and school while growing up. According to a recent article in Police Chief Magazine, “90 percent (of this new generation) use the internet and almost 90 percent believe that e-mail and other electronic means of communication help workers (as compared to 67 percent of boomers and less than half of seniors).”⁴ Certainly, technological developments are rapidly changing the way people learn and think about learning and training. One of many challenges that law enforcement will face is keeping pace with these technological expectations.

In recent studies, Millennials have been shown to expect technological experiences and the younger they are, the more likely it is that they have used the internet for school, work and leisure. They will expect online learning with interactivity, multi-media experiences, and rapid access to information.⁵ Millennials characterize ideal training as fun, flexible, and collaborative. Palm, iPod, PSP, Blackberry, downloadable videos, webcasts, screencasts, blogs, wiki’s, virtual classrooms, 3-D interactive video games, computers, and the internet are just a few of the many technologies used in e-learning, and all play a part in creating a knowledge-dependent global society.⁶ While many of these transformations may be beneficial to the future of law enforcement training, they do not come without a number of questions and challenges that need to be explored and addressed.

A Little History about E-Learning

E-learning as we know it has been around for ten years or so. During that time, it has emerged from being a radical idea - the effectiveness of which was yet to be proven - to something that is widely regarded as mainstream.⁷ E-learning offers attractive uses for learners of all ages and of various interests and needs. Younger pupils enjoy its multi-media games and fun activities in acquiring very basic literacy skills, while older students use its endless informational resources for preparing homework, assignments and examinations. Millions of people also use e-mail and participate in chat groups and other formats of telecommunication as learners and in their social and working lives.

For many, the e-education lifestyle has become the norm. Today, e-learning mainly takes the form of online courses, although it may also involve simulations, video role plays, video games, internet books, e-labs, discussion boards, and forums. Universities and colleges frequently use software companies to manage and coordinate their learning programs such as WebCT, Blackboard, and Desire2Learn.⁸ The changing demographic of the student population, and the more consumer/client-centered culture in today's society has created a climate where the use of student centered learning is thriving. E-learning is characterized not only by greater autonomy for the learner, but also a greater emphasis on "active learning," something very desired by Millennials.⁹ One recent example of the popularity of corporate sponsored training video games is a custom online game created by Atlanta's *Persuasive Game* for national ice cream franchise Cold Stone Creamery. The game teaches portion control and customer service. In the first week it

appeared on Cold Stone's intranet site, 8,000 employees downloaded the game.¹⁰ Other companies such as Cisco Systems and Canon have started using similar video gaming programs to teach everything from setting up a wireless network to repairing a copy machine. In each case, corporate trainers are finding that young, media-savvy employees are using the games to grasp and retain sales, technical and management skills. "Video games teach resource management, collaboration, critical thinking and tolerance for failure."¹¹ A consideration for those pondering the impact of e-learning versus traditional techniques is that workers who train using these programs have shown a 5% to 8% improvement in their training scores compared with older training techniques.

Traditional versus Online Learning

One of the many challenges law enforcement agencies will face is weighing the different expectations of the new generations against the feasibility and effectiveness of e-education and e-training in our realm. As is typical in government, we are many years behind the private sector, and even the military, when it comes to the use of e-training. According to Jan Myyra, Online Training Coordinator for the California Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST), the acceptance of e-training by the law enforcement community was slow; however, this trend is rapidly changing as more agencies are asking for online formatted versions of perishable skills and advanced officer training.¹²

POST currently offers some online courses for continuing law enforcement education and

has had discussions regarding its uses in the basic police academy. One example of POST's e-learning effort is the online "learning portal." Police officers recently participated in Law Enforcement Response to Terrorism (LERT) via this online training tool. The feedback from participants was excellent, with comments such as: "You should have more courses online, it's a great and very easy way to learn," "This course allowed me to complete my daily work schedule and to complete the course during my down times," and "Very well done, the interactive training works well for us 'hands on' kind of people and I like the fact that I could do it on my own time without traveling anywhere or sitting in a room for 8 hours."¹³ This type of feedback regarding e-learning is very typical. In fact, a recent study by Skillsoft discovered that 87.5% find e-learning easy to use; 93.5% enjoy the course; 73% think it's interesting, and 98% would recommend it as an effective form of learning.¹⁴

Law enforcement agencies are not completely out of the loop. There are a number of agencies that have started to experiment with virtual, interactive scenario based training or mobile training. The military has been using video based interactive training and testing for several years now.¹⁵ Their outcomes with virtual simulation based training are pretty impressive and, in some cases, have supplanted almost all conventional training methods due to a combination of cost and effectiveness.¹⁶ The Air Force, which is regarded for its information technology and technological training prowess, signed a long term deal with Skillsoft for information technology e-learning and has had great success with this training thus far as well.¹⁷ This makes perfect sense when you consider the fact

that our kids are growing up with a heavy diet of video games from almost the time they are born. Since many of the virtual designs are multi-player and internet distributed, it could provide law enforcement a number of cost effective training opportunities.

Academies and police agencies could use gaming technology for various training scenarios such as tactical, driving, and decision making situations, which would also be far more appealing to the newest generation of recruits. Many police departments got their first taste of virtual/simulation based training by purchasing or using the “FATS” (Firearms Training Simulator®). For some, this was a good experience, but for others, it proved to be less effective. If you compare the first generation of “FATS”, however, with the latest generation, which is far more interactive and realistic, it is clear that technological advances have made it a much more viable training solution. Stephanie Gardner, author of *Preparing for Nexters*, concludes that as we design curricula, it is important to consider the framework of the latest generation of learners. We must remember that they have been exposed to multimedia entertainment since the time they could hold a controller. They expect to be entertained as they learn. To hold their attention, we may need to consider having traditional lectures comprise a smaller part of the overall curriculum. Active-learning experiences, such as role playing, do not intimidate these learners and may help them improve their communication skills in negotiation, mediation, counseling, and consoling.

On one hand, e-training creates much more flexibility and usefulness than standard classroom or location-based training. For example, graveyard (midnight shift) officers

would no longer need to adjust hours and days off to accommodate training days. This is an important factor when considering the cost of overtime and the geographical dispersion of officers. Training can be done at home, in a car, or at the station. One must consider the potential cost savings for instructors and instructor update training as well. Currently, most departments spend thousands of dollars trying to maintain the skills of certain personnel to train others. These trainers and their departments assume the burden of any liability associated with the training.

On the other hand, responsible law enforcement executives must ask themselves if video based or online training is realistic enough to replicate live (traditional) training scenarios. Many argue that it really depends on the format. Some training lends itself to a virtual or gaming format while other e-learning formats simply involve online reading and comprehension followed by questions and answers. The latter seems especially useful in non-traditional but mandated training topics, where local instructors may be hard to find.

Gaming formats certainly have appeal to the emerging workforce, who not only easily adapt to change, but desire new experiences and have a “what’s next” mindset.¹⁸

Stephen Johnson, author of *Everything Bad is Good for You*, argues that the same skills exercised in modern pop culture are useful in the modern world and also correlate with the type of intelligence measured by IQ tests. As generations grow up more engaged in behavior that exercises this type of intelligence, their IQ scores rise. He asserts that this may be an explanation for the “Flynn effect,” which describes a global rise in the average

intelligence quotient (IQ).

Regardless of the format, e-training is rapidly gaining momentum in the law enforcement community, and the reality is that in addition to its many upsides, the cost savings and need for cities to continue to exercise caution in budgetary decisions is going to drive its marketability. The question is how will it fit into your department's annual training plan? The answer lies not in a definitive choice between traditional and e-based learning, but rather as a blend between the two.

Impacts of E-Learning on Law Enforcement

The impacts of e-education and e-training are numerous. As noted, there appear to be numerous cost and flexibility benefits at first glance. There will be a growing expectation and need for us to adapt our training plans around this learning methodology as newer generation officers come on board. Any discussion of e-learning and e-education, however, must also include many potential negative impacts as well.

E-education students are usually taught as individuals, not in groups, and are separated physically from both the teacher and other fellow students. In some cases, groups of students are taught by a distant teacher, mainly in the framework of teleconferencing and other broadcasting media. How will this lack of interaction impact an officer's interpersonal skills? While this direct access and lack of interaction may be preferred by "Millenials," one of the negatives already being discussed regarding this generation and the impact of e-education is the lost art of communication and ability to develop and

sustain relationships. Millennials are characterized as lacking life experience, people skills, and “dog fighting” skills.¹⁹ Ubiquitous computing, otherwise known as pervasive computing, describes a convergence of advanced electronic - and particularly, wireless - technologies and the Internet. Pervasive computing devices are not personal computers as we tend to think of them, but very tiny - even invisible - devices, either mobile or embedded in almost any type of object imaginable, including cars, tools, appliances, clothing and various consumer goods - all communicating through increasingly interconnected networks.²⁰ E-learning programs such as Blackboard and WebCT lend themselves to pervasive computing. The ability to obtain learning anywhere and anytime may be very convenient and cost effective. “The challenge will not be how to learn, but how to use learning to create something more, to communicate.”²¹ Many police organizations, though, may lack the appropriate infrastructure and resources to utilize the full potential of e-education. To integrate electronic media more fully into learning processes, a restructuring of our operations will be required. These efforts will take time and money. Weighing costs against needs and potential gains will be the challenge.

A few years ago, Morgan Keegan and other large financial investment firms projected billion dollar e-education and e-training markets globally.²² These companies were not wrong. Today, the worldwide e-learning industry is estimated to be worth over \$38 billion according to conservative estimates.²³ Virtual networks of colleges and universities became a marker of this new economy. LearningSpace, Blackboard, WebCT, *a·c·e*, Toolbook, Hot Potatoes, are only a few names of a very long list of e-

management technologies that have gained recognition in the international e-learning field.²⁴ While these programs continue to expand there are some negatives as it relates to the public sector. The infrastructure costs for many of these e-learning programs can be quite costly. In the public sector with very tight budgets, an already lacking IT infrastructure, and close scrutiny of public expenditures, the program costs must be closely weighed against the benefits if savings is one of the goals.

Blended Learning Options

When considering traditional versus e-learning, law enforcement professionals and training managers must consider “blended learning” as an option. Blended learning is the combination of multiple approaches to learning. It can be accomplished through the use of “blended” virtual and physical resources. For example, the combined use of technology-based materials and face-to-face sessions sometimes referred to as “hybrid e-learning.”²⁵ While blended learning means anytime an instructor combines two methods of delivery in the instruction, the deeper meaning lies in engaging students of the current generation in teaching methods to which they have grown accustomed. One author in particular describes true blended learning as a mix of learning approaches, (behavioral, cognitive, and constructive), within a holistic learner centered design. It is designed to integrate formal learning activities with informal actual job activities.²⁶

In June 2007, a panel of professionals with specific knowledge or interest in the topic of e-learning met to discuss the issue.²⁷ There was consensus amongst the panel members that online learning has its place in law enforcement. The major trends and events that

supported this belief were increasing mandates for training, increased civil liability, lack of physical training sites, technology driving how and when we acquire knowledge, cost effectiveness, increased public use, and societal expectations. Several panel members felt, though, that an exclusive diet of online learning was not practical for at least ten more years. This conclusion was based on perceived lack of an adequate degree of measurable comprehension, legitimacy of testing currently available, and the current level of realism of virtual training. In each case, panel members believed these factors are improving, and might make increases in the amount of online training more viable in the future. As a result, the consensus of the panel felt that a hybrid model or blend of online and traditional training is where law enforcement training is headed for at least the next 3-5 years.

Based upon numerous discussions and research on this topic, it appears that a blended model, which can involve a mix of simulation, online, and traditional training methods would generally be the most effective for law enforcement in terms of flexibility and cost. A blended training program can meet the contemporary needs of the latest generation of officer, while utilizing some of the critical benefits of traditional methods which naturally lend themselves to “seat of the pants” training, such as Emergency Vehicle Operations (EVOC) and the firearms range.

Conclusion

While only 10% of higher education is currently conducted online and e-training

accounts for 30% of corporate training, expectations are that this number will exceed 50% soon. With more than 100 million Americans taking continuing education and the expansion of the millennial generation entering the law enforcement market, all indications suggest a healthy and growing market for online education. In fact, virtual education is expected to be the mainstream form of education by 2015.²⁸ With demographic changes, societal expectations, increased budget challenges, expanded and diversified training requirements, and greater civil exposure, law enforcement must consider making changes to its learning environment and curriculum. Regardless of how it is used (blended or stand alone), e-education is changing the future of training on a global level. That, coupled with greater availability and development of online programs specifically targeted at law enforcement such as the California POST online learning portal, continued reductions in technology costs and a greater degree of legitimacy and public acceptance will make online learning, to some degree, a necessity rather than an option.

At the heart of the issue will be whether or not law enforcement as a whole can prepare itself to meet the challenges associated with this developing change. As costs for traditional training continue to rise, and budgets continue to shrink, progressive police agencies would be smart to take a leading role in the development of hybrid training programs. Whether through partnerships such as those formed by the military, or through an application of existing e-learning technologies, the result will be a better trained staff and a greater ability to meet the needs of today and tomorrow.

ENDNOTES

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