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Integration Improves Learning Outcomes in Police Academy Training

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A field training officer recently asked, “How come my trainee does not know basic skills that were definitely taught during the academy?” A newly minted police officer’s inability to remember and apply basic skills covered during the academy is cause for concern. Unfortunately, little evidence exists about what strategies work best when training recruits, including what techniques are most effective in helping students retain information and skills acquired during the academy. Reasons why recruits do not retain information likely include poorly developed curriculums, ineffective instructor delivery, and individual recruit ability. Other possible factors likely include the sheer volume of materials covered during basic academy settings (the proverbial drinking from a fire-hose experience) and whether or not overlapping concepts are integrated for reinforcement. Simply stated, basic academy recruits are receiving a significant amount of siloed information at a rapid rate. Hence, is it possible for recruits to forget information learned within a matter of weeks? The short answer is yes.

The Study

The Academy Innovations Research Project, managed by the International Association of Directors of Law Enforcement Standards and Training (IADLEST) and supported by the U.S. Department of Justice COPS Office, evaluated the concept of “integration,” a content delivery strategy that combines disciplines typically taught separately. For example, contact and cover tactics are frequently taught in a defensive tactics or patrol duties lesson. However, contact and cover tactics can be integrated into multiple topics (e.g., field interviews, domestic violence investigations). When integrating content across multiple topics, all instructors must deliver information to be learned consistently.

Traditional/Silo
AAABBBCCC

Integrated
AAABBACCA

The study was designed to determine if content “integration” helped police recruits learn and retain information for longer periods compared to traditional siloed lecture approaches used by many law enforcement academies. The research team used in-person and online instruction to compare learning and retention of core communication skills (e.g., body language, paralanguage, active listening). The curriculum was delivered via traditional siloed methods versus integrated deliveries. The following five U.S. law enforcement training academies participated in the research:

- Baltimore Police Academy
- Collin College, Texas Law Enforcement Academy
- Nevada Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST) Academy
- New Mexico Law Enforcement Academy
- Ulster County, New York Police Academy

Participants were divided into four groups: (1) in-person and (2) online **traditional** groups received one lecture-based communication skills lesson, simulating a siloed instructional experience, and (3) in-person and (4) online **integrated** groups received an integrated communication skills curriculum.

ACADEMY INNOVATIONS
Experimental Design

ACTIVITY	IN-PERSON TRADITIONAL	ONLINE TRADITIONAL	IN-PERSON INTEGRATED	ONLINE INTEGRATED	INTERVAL
Pre-Test & Communication Skills	✓	✓	✓	✓	Week 1
Integrated Persons in Crisis			✓	✓	+30 Days
Integrated Motor Vehicle Stops			✓	✓	+60 Days
Post-Test	✓	✓	✓	✓	+90 Days

Integration...con't

The curriculum consisted of an initial communication skills lesson and two additional lessons, *Persons in Crisis* and *Motor Vehicle Stops*. The *Persons in Crisis* and *Motor Vehicle Stops* lessons reinforced content that focused on applying communication and de-escalation skills in these specific contexts. All participants completed a written pre-test with tests following each integrated supplemental instruction (regardless of whether they received supplemental instruction), and a post-test to evaluate how well they learned and retained information over time.

Results

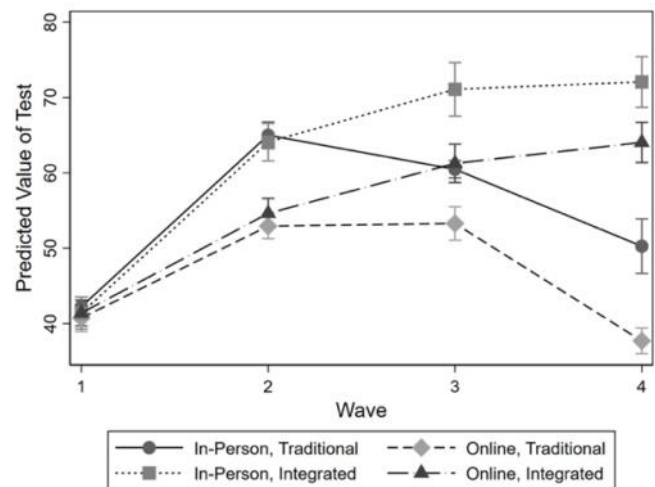
Throughout the experiment's 90-day period, Groups 3 and 4 (in-person and online **integrated**) performed markedly better on written tests than groups 1 and 2 (in-person and online **traditional**). Figure 1 documents the median group performance per test:

Figure 1. Median scores per test

Group	Wave 1 (pre-test) %	Wave 2 (post-test) %	Wave 3 (post-test + 30 days)	Wave 4 (post-test + 60 days)
In-person traditional	47.2	64.2	60.4	51.5
Online traditional	40.5	53.8	54.1	39.4
In-person integrated	42.7	64.4	72.6	72.9
Online integrated	40.4	53.6	59.8	63.8

Figure 2 presents group performance over time:

Figure 2: Group Performance (Median)



The figures above illustrate participants in group 3 (in-person **integrated**) and group 4 (online **integrated**) performed better over time, with the in-person integrated group (group 3) performing best of all groups throughout the experiment. Online integrated group participants also scored higher than traditional lecture groups. Conversely, in-person and online groups that received content via stand-alone, traditional siloed delivery lost significant knowledge over time, starting as soon as 30-days after instruction. The traditional delivery groups performed best on a post-test delivered

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immediately following the initial delivery of lesson content, with student performance declining as the time between lesson delivery and testing increased.

Application

Study results showed that students who received integrated instruction retained knowledge over time, while students who received a traditional lecture and no additional content lost knowledge throughout the trial. The research suggests that using an integrated curriculum enhances a recruit's ability to learn and retain information. Police trainers should consider employing integration strategies to maximize recruit knowledge retention. "Improving Learning Outcomes in Police Academy Training" is the project report that details study results and provides practical integration implementation best practices for use in police instruction. The guide is now available at: <https://portal.cops.usdoj.gov/resourcecenter/content.ashx/cops-r1138-pub.pdf>.

Conclusion

The Academy Innovations Project demonstrated that police recruits who receive an integrated curriculum retain information longer than recruits who receive content in a traditional, siloed manner. With traditional instructional approaches like stand-alone lectures common in police training, the Academy Innovations Project's findings suggest that current police training methods may not fully maximize learning and knowledge retention. From the post-test taken immediately following initial instructions to the Wave 4 test approximately 60 days later, median scores of the in-person traditional group fell from 64.2% to 51.5%, a percentage change of -19.78%. Similarly median scores of the online traditional students fell from 53.8% to 39.4%, a percentage change of -26.77%. These scores demonstrated that, even over a short, 60-day interval, students who received information via traditional instructional approaches lost a significant amount of information. The field training officer was correct to recognize the possibility that recruits taught via traditional instructional means are unable to retain learned information within a matter of weeks. To counter

this knowledge loss, academy staff and other police trainers should apply lessons learned during the Academy Innovations \ Project and consider integrating critical content to increase recruit learning and retention.

Additional information and resources on the Academy Innovations Project, including the practitioners' guide, research publications, and sample integrated communication skills curriculum, are available at <https://www.iadlest.org/our-services/academy-innovations>.

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