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Closing the Gap Between What We Teach and What They Do

by Jeff Johnsgaard

C Concepts Without Application

I believe ILEETA members are leaders in research-informed police training. We regularly attend conferences, share research, and push forward the principles of adult learning, motor skill acquisition, and decision-making. But here's two questions we can't ignore:

How are these concepts being applied in your department's training?

Are the principles being documented to ensure institutional durability?

I am lucky to be regularly engaging with LE trainers across North America and I see the same pattern: more trainers are starting to be able to speak the terminology: *spacing effect*, *retrieval practice*, *representative design*, but when I watch them teach or when I look at their lesson plans and multi-day training design, they do not reflect the best way to use those principles.

When I see trainers that are mastering the 'art of application', they are doing so based on individual adaptations they have come up with. But the way they learned to adjust and tailor their design and delivery does not live in a lesson plan in any deliberate and systematic way. The result?

- When that trainer leaves, the **improvements leave** with them.
- Skills go back to looking good in class but **don't show up** on body-worn camera.

The problem is there is no '**institutional durability**'. If better design isn't embedded in the curriculum, it depends on personalities and individuals, not teams and systems. A system will endure, and an individual will only be beneficial if they do not ever pause or stop.

Conducting A Curriculum Assessment

I suggest two parts to a curriculum assessment. One is how the lesson plan is written (learning objectives,

materials, assessments) and the other is examining the design, layout and the information in the lesson plans. Do they contain research-grounded principles for great adult and motor learning?

A curriculum assessment isn't about increasing hours, budgets, or complexity.

It is also not about blowing up your content or design, it is about working inside your departments constraints and resources to see what research-informed shifts can make big differences to officer learning. I think of it as a way of making every existing training hour more effective for the learners.

When you apply the most relevant research-informed principles to your current program, you can:

- **Improve skill retention** so officers act effectively months later, not just test day.
- **Enhance decision-making under pressure** by integrating judgment into training.
- **Reduce legal and reputational risk** with defensible, documented design choices.
- **Build training that survives turnover**, ensuring progress isn't tied to one instructor.

The ILEETA community already values research-informed training. The next step is ensuring that research-informed principles are **designed into** your lesson plans and your layout design.

Three Principles That Make Immediate Impact

I use a 25-point research-grounded checklist for my curriculum assessments. Here are 3 Key Principles I have seen consistently produce significant results.

1. Feedback Quality & Timing

Why It Matters: Schmidt & Wrisberg (2008) show that too -frequent feedback creates dependency. Officers may perform well in training but falter without a coach's voice. I believe the end point of all feedback is to create the

ability for the student to be able to self assess, diagnose and correct. The feedback ultimately lives intrinsically in each officer.

How to Apply: I use an acronym I first heard from a trainer in Toronto (embarrassingly, I cannot recall her name): “WAIT – Why Am I Talking?” Can I get the point through to the student in any other way? And, if I do need to talk, am I ‘pushing’ by telling or ‘pulling’ by asking? Pulling with well formed questions helps the student learn to self evaluate.

2. Progressive Variability

Why It Matters: Shea & Morgan’s (1979) work shows that once fundamentals are stable, adding variability like different lighting, terrain and suspect behaviors help force officer adaptation which builds flexibility. Officers who are more flexible and adaptable have been shown to perform better in real world environments.

How to Apply: Begin with predictable drills, then add realistic elements and changing conditions over time. Make sure you start with the central, contextual information present. For example, with firearms, make sure you have the elements present for the legal pointing or use of a firearm. Have the information present that has the person consider foundational skills like when to get their gun out, when to start shooting and when to stop. They ‘choose’ to do the skill based on this information even if there is no initially competing information present.

3. Priming & Boosting

Why It Matters: Research in cognitive psychology (Tulving & Schacter, 1990; Roediger & Butler, 2011) shows that *priming*: activating relevant knowledge before learning, prepares the brain to receive and organize new information more efficiently. *Boosting*: briefly revisiting material after initial learning then reactivates memory traces, strengthening retention over time.

How to Apply: Before teaching a skill, give officers a quick preview of the cues, goals, and context they’ll encounter. After the session, schedule short, spaced “boost” sessions, even five minutes can refresh key points, either later the same day or within a week to help to lock in the learning.

Boost by asking questions and “pulling”, rather than telling them what they “did up to that point” and allow them to mentally work to recall it.

Final Thoughts

By completing a curriculum assessment, not just a lesson plan format check, you end up ensuring far more defensible documentation. I believe if it’s not documented, it did not happen!

ILEETA exists to connect educators and trainers with the best tools for the job. You have made the commitment to continually self assess and strive to offer better training. Now make sure your curriculum design and lesson plans reflect that belief and help ensure all your hard work will be continued when you are gone.

If you have any questions on how I apply research-informed concepts to training or design, please email me or meet up at the 2026 conference!

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About the Author

Det/Sgt Jeff Johnsgaard (Retired) is the founder of **Training On Purpose, By Design**. His focus is the application of research-grounded principles to improve officer performance. This is done in several ways including hands-on trainings, lecture demonstrations and a robust 25-point curriculum design assessment. Email: Jeff@OnPurpose.Training web: www.OnPurpose.Training