Force Options Simulators: An Underutilized Training Tool

by Dave Blake

The Force Options Simulator (FOS) is an interactive high definition video device which allows for the use of replica laser devices to engage in force response simulations. The FOS has been empirically proven to be effective in: (1) developing firearms accuracy, (2) developing decision-making skills, (3) fostering community relations, and (4) police performance research (bias, priming, perceptual distortions). In fact, the FOS is one of the most academically researched tools in the law enforcement context. Through reading over one hundred FOS-related research articles, I've come to the conclusion that the simulator is an underutilized and somewhat misunderstood training tool. Based on research, I wish to present an evidence-based model for future training using the simulator with the hopes of increasing proficiency in an area often overlooked (articulation).

Training Methods

Before we dive into recommendations for change; I think it's important first to discuss the learning objectives and current training methods typically seen in the FOS. From my experience, a typical FOS class begins with a PowerPoint on constitutional law and then asks students to experience three or four scenarios which conclude with the instructor asking, "what did you see, what did you do, and why?". The force responses are often objectively reasonable, but student articulation doesn't often meet the high level of professionalism expected for courtroom testimony. Therefore, I've concluded the opening lecture and debrief methods currently employed provide little value for long-term memory retention and schemata development.

Also, consistency can be a problem between FOS instructors as some focus on tactics, others on proper firearms skills & accuracy, while others (like me) are concerned mostly with a legal justification for the force response. Please don't infer any criticisms; the FOS has many training applications, and all are important parts of the equation. However, FOS training is infrequent, and there are modules of training unique to tactics and firearms skills outside of the FOS. For that reason, I opine the FOS is particularly useful for applying and then articulating reasonable force; with the latter being an area of severe deficiency. Therefore, it seems intuitive to focus FOS learning objectives toward skill sets which are not a central in other training blocks but scream for recurring attention. However, meeting any proficiency goal requires instructors to understand the learning environment and the students to develop best practices in achieving those methods.

Research

With better training procedures in mind, I discovered Canadian researchers Bennell, Jones, and Corey (2007) had applied a concept known as Cognitive Load Theory to FOS instruction and developed several recommendations that may be beneficial. Cognitive Load Theory addresses the limited amount of mental resources a learner can apply towards the material/task and is divided into three categories; intrinsic, extraneous, and germane loads. Intrinsic load refers to the inherent difficulty of the topic; extraneous load relates to the method in which material is presented, and germane load relates to the internal resources devoted to acquiring schemata in long-term memory (our goal). In general, our instructional goal should be to manipulate intrinsic load into manageable pieces while decreasing extraneous load and increasing germane load for optimal learning.

I reached out to one of the authors, Professor Craig Bennell who during our conversations provided the following quote; "Use of force simulators can play a

significant role in the training of front line officers, but these simulators need to be used appropriately. For simulation training to have a real impact, we have to acknowledge that learners (especially novices) have limited processing capabilities. By recognizing this, we can develop instructional techniques that enhance learning and promote the transfer of skills/knowledge from the training environment to the street."

Professor Bennel's statement struck home, and I considered a way to incorporate the science into the FOS training method. I synthesized the academic literature with my FOS instructor experience to provide an evidence-based FOS training method intended to enhance learning. It's worthy to note; the proposed method has similarities with Ken Murray's style of conducting Reality Based Training in which a pause is used during instructor recognized decision-loops (OODA-loop). I have used this method hundreds of times and believe it enhances learning.

Recommendation

The following is an evidence-based recommendation for FOS training formatted to the learning objective of students responding correctly to resistance and articulating reasonable force.

*To start; DO AWAY WITH THE POWER POINT LECTURE! Use the FOS to teach the same material while exposing students to what you want them replicate. For example, the first scenarios should be instructor facilitated with student observers. Keeping reduced cognitive load in mind, instructors will pause the scenario at key points of interest; such as describing the reasonable suspicion (RS) or probable cause (PC) that is present. RS/PC are an essential point of articulation as **the platform** from which a justifiable force response begins. The progression and pause points are strictly up to the instructor but should be specific to the learning objective and also include appropriate legal justifications and policy points. One other point to consider in this facilitated discussion is what happens after the video ends? Everything from*

securing the scene and medical care, through officer rights and responsibilities, to administrative investigatory procedures are all useful and overlooked areas of FOS training (generally).

Subsequent scenarios will expand toward student-centered articulation at the instructor created pause points in the scenario. Once the FOS instructor is satisfied with the learning, students may engage in full scenario participation. However, the pause is still in play at key points. The student can articulate learning objectives minus the mental stress of time compression and perceived threat. Pauses are also useful when students perseverate (e.g.: verbal drop the gun x 10); an indication of high cognitive load affecting performance. We want students to learn and retain; therefore decreasing the cognitive load (stress) will often allow the student to provide the correct answer to a problem without experiencing a failure within the scenario. Once a student determines the correct response, press play, and let them have a successful learning experience (e.g.: Germane load/schemata development). Once students demonstrate proficiency in both practical application and post-incident articulation, then they are ready for full scenario run-trough's minus the pause.

Conclusion

In summary, this base-building method of teaching allows for low intrinsic and extraneous load while providing a high germane load for long term memory storage of the learning objective. The student's full attentional resources are focused on the learning objective instead of those goals being lost in the dynamics of the scenario. It's important to note that this training method is linearly variable between novice and veteran, personality traits, and scenario difficulty. It is likely new recruits will require more time in the initial phases of training than veterans. Instructors will need to pay close attention to their students to determine how intensive or which steps of this method they apply. Also, these recommendations are not intended to remove the student from the benefits of stress inoculation – rather just taking smaller steps to get there.

Before closing, I want to introduce the concept of training decay. Based on the academic literature, a focused training session once every year or two does not equate to optimal proficiency. Studies have shown learning deteriorates quickly for psychomotor skills; and when not refreshed periodically, those skills can be a lost. However, there is little information that tells us just how much initial, and refresher training is enough for long term proficiency, and that is something law enforcement needs to investigate as a matter of officer/public safety. **ILEETA**

References
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