

Challenges of E-Learning in the French Police Nationale

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Abstract

This paper aims at studying the shortcomings and strengths of the French Law Enforcement administration in the use of E-learning with a focal point on the Police Nationale. The evolution of law enforcement knowledge, techniques, and materials, and even regulations and professional recommendations make continuing education for the Law enforcement professions more essential than ever. Despite the extraordinary rise in digital technology in the training and education field, the French Police Nationale refused for a long time to take the turn of digital progress in the training it offered to cadets but also to experienced officers on the grounds that it was inefficient and approximative in the completion of Police Training. Reputedly monolithic and hard to modernize, the Law Enforcement system in France was reluctant if not closed to the idea of using a tool they saw as unprofessional and unserious. The COVID-19 pandemic shattered their certainties. Unable to give in-person trainings but having to ensure the continuity of curriculums, the French Police Nationale training department had to think out of the box. Facing reluctance, mistrust and sometimes lack of skills from its agents, a cumbersome process ensued for the administration with the construction of a new online training structure, the hiring of new digital experts and education-specialised civilians and the funding for new digital tools to implement quality courses. New training ideas emerged with these new recruits and new tools. Soon, major e-learning projects were achieved, among which the cadet-training curriculum and the national language program are now the best examples.

Keywords: e-learning, innovation, pandemic, challenges, police training

Introduction

The evolution of law enforcement knowledge, techniques and materials, and even regulations and professional recommendations make continuing education for the Law enforcement professions more essential than ever. The extraordinary rise of digital technology in our societies has simultaneously changed the amount of information available, the forms of education and the means of accessing this knowledge. (Hubackova, 2015)

E-learning, which is the absolute emblem of this, has become indispensable because of all the advantages it makes available to learners but it is also because of the population it is or will be aimed at, generation Y (1980-1995) or Z (1996 and onwards), who are deeply rooted in the digital world through their lifestyle and communication habits (Hargittai, 2010).

E-learning consists of “the use of new multimedia technologies of the Internet to improve the quality of learn-

ing by facilitating on the one hand access to resources and services, and on the other hand, the exchanges and collaboration at a distance (European Commission, 2001).

It adapts the training offer to demands that face-to-face training is struggling to meet, by these spatial and temporal, conceptual and also generational issues.

The aim of this paper is to assess the e-learning techniques and, to list their advantages and disadvantages, to verify if possible, the benefits in terms of knowledge acquisition and the evolution of practices regarding law enforcement training as a whole. The relevance and efficiency of e-learning in the training arsenal choice will also be discussed with regard to challenges encountered by trainers and trainees alike.

The methodology is a desk study analysing the figures and comparing practices in a pre- and post-pandemic context. It primarily focuses on cadet training and more specifically on language training within the Law Enforcement training program in the aftermath of the first Covid surge.

E-learning and the Police Nationale: context

The advent of digital technology in our daily lives, initiated at the end of the last century, has brought about major changes in all areas, and in particular in education and training systems. With the emergence of new teaching platforms, came enhanced strategies for the implementation of e-Learning projects and the adoption of ICT by new generations have contributed to its development.

The main advantage of e-learning is lower training costs and a massive distribution channel for companies and universities. A decisive opportunity to increase exchanges with foreign countries and to significantly their international influence. (Camilleri, M.A. & Camilleri, A.C, 2017)

Yet, despite the undeniable possibilities of e-learning, France like many countries, was reluctant to develop e-learning as a recognized method of learning whether in its national education system or at a university level. The Law Enforcement agencies followed the same path, preferring using the same face-to-face academ-

ic courses, unable to modernize their training system (Mailfait, 2002). The lack of trust in the technology itself and the perception that a distant trainee was a lazy student were unmovable hurdles to digital progress.

The Police Nationale in particular, before COVID, relied mainly on in-person courses. The idea that a police course could not be performed without physical presence was running deep in the decision-makers' minds within the administration. Curriculum builders and trainers were content with the activities they offered - and had always offered - to the learners and kept on preaching the same philosophy. E-learning was therefore perceived as unnecessary but also as a frivolity from the young generations. This monolithic perception of education first stemmed from the fact that for a very long time, the French Police administration had neglected the importance of training (Mailfait, 2002) disregarding the possible innovations that might have led to a faster and more efficient training of cadets and higher officers alike.

The effect of this inability to dynamise its training before Covid finds an echo in the DFD (Division de la Formation Digitale) survey, which counted only 30 online modules (DFD Survey, 2020) on the Police Learning Management System (LMS) platform by the end of 2019. A ridiculous amount of modules that clearly reflected the lack of interest from trainers who were repeatedly discouraged by the indifference of their decisions-makers. Likewise, considering the figures of learners' attendance on the LMS, the detachment from trainees was obvious, as they were not thrilled by the linear aspect of pdf-based courses uploaded on the platform. Only 10% of police officers, cadets, and higher officers had - by 2019 - attended a course on the LMS (Division de la Formation Digital: DFD Survey, 2020).

The pandemic as a game changer

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and containment in several countries around the world, education systems were severely disrupted. New e-learning resources had to be adopted to ensure continuity of education and teaching. In this article, we will take a closer look at the new situation and how user-feedback can help you adapt to this sudden change.

This unprecedented shock disrupted the lives of nearly 1.6 billion pupils and students in more than 190

countries on all continents. School and other learning space closures affected 94% of the world's school-going population, and up to 99% in low- and lower-middle-income countries. (Himberg, K. 2021)

As a result, e-learning tools, like many digital tools, could serve different educational purposes:

- Connecting educators and learners in different locations
- Accessing information and environments not always available to individuals or institutions
- Supporting the continuing professional development of educators in an accommodating setting.

Many schools and learning spaces had to close in response to the global health crisis and education systems had to adapt quickly to ensure continuity of education.

Ensuring educational continuity during school closures became an international priority. Many turned to digital technology, which led to the development of the e-learning sector. Distance learning literally became the only efficient go-between during the pandemic (Vidal, 2020). As the figure above shows, countries favoured a variety of distance learning methods. In areas where Internet access was limited, learning was achieved through TV and radio broadcasting and the distribution of printed materials.

Police academies had to apply the same principles and give up their previous way of thinking. The change brought by the pandemic was short of an earthquake for Police Training. The necessity for a remote way of learning became paramount as police officer trainings could not be postponed and solutions for continuity had to be found overnight.

For many in the education and training sphere, E-learning was a logical and easy option because already effective. But for the *Police Nationale*, and because of the lack of anticipation, a quantity of challenges arose.

Challenges regarding e-learning

The study we carried on showed that challenges that emerged during the pandemic are still a hindrance today when implementing an online course but also when taking a course. They are described in subsequent sections.

Challenges for trainers

- Use of technology

The technological challenges of e-learning can be considered as key technological and pedagogical research area. Trainers who are new to an LMS platform can be reluctant to implement courses on such a tool. The amount of work needed to create and implement such a course often acts as a deterrent for trainers who gave in-person classes all their lives.

- Lack of learner engagement and motivation

Not every online learner is going to be 100% committed to the e-learning experience. They may be distracted, busy, or simply unmotivated. We live in an age where attention is at a premium and learners have access to more information than they can consume. All of these hurdles prevent them from actively engaging with online learning programs.

- Staying up-to-date with modern technology

Every year welcomes new tech tools, gadgets, and software that you can use to improve e-learning delivery methods. But, with so much digital transformation, it can be hard to tell which new learning technology is worth the investment.

- Designing e-learning courses for different generations

Learning content isn't one-size fits all. Our audience is now made up of four different generations — Baby Boomers, Gen X, Millennials, and Gen Z, which can make it challenging to create generic e-learning experiences for all, since each generation has its own traits and needs (Moore, Jones & Frazier, 2017).

- Balancing tight e-learning budgets

E-learning projects always come with limited budgets. In fact, most will be restricted to limited financial resources, so being creative to work with what you've got becomes an obligation. Before starting any e-learning project, the trainer may have to draft a detailed budget that includes all expenses and make sure to have a realistic estimate of what the project is going to require.

- Finding the perfect e-learning authoring tool or learning platform

Choosing a new e-learning authoring tool or LMS can be a challenging process. There are so many e-learning authoring tools and learning platforms to choose from and so little time. The main difficulty resides in dedicating the right amount of time for the selection of the right tool.

Challenges for trainees

- Equipment

The lack of proper equipment for trainers at home is the main reason why e-learning can be challenging. Some trainees do not have a computer or possess too old an equipment to make the platform work. Even from their workplace, French Police officers can be hindered by out-dated computers or machines limited by security protocols.

- Familiarity with digital tools

Although new generations are generally very comfortable with computers, older officers are sometimes reluctant to work on PCs and find the process of studying on the internet cumbersome and unproductive. They easily give up in front of a tool they are not familiar with. The police administration quickly realises that

"the online environment presents challenges for many academic staff who increasingly require higher levels of technological competency and proficiency on top of their regular academic workload." (Gillett-Swan, 2017)

- Lack of in-person teaching

Some people need classroom contact and only learn when in a real classroom with another human being. We are human beings and as such, socializing is paramount in our own psychological construction (Grundmann, 2018). After two years of COVID, the need for real life interactions became even more fundamental.

- Lack of motivation

When working from home, learners are easily distracted from their computer. Whether their kids or their daily chores, they always find another activity

if the online course is not captivating enough. Motivation has to be triggered through interactive activities and reachable learning outcomes. Whatever the learner's profile, game-based activities are often a good tool against boredom and lack of motivation

Evolution of Law enforcement training: a new strategy

The tsunami that was COVID created a shockwave in the training spheres of the Police forces in France and in Europe. Training departments faced the hard reality of the uselessness of their teaching method in that particular context.

Already before COVID, Police training departments had an LMS platform (Moodle) that they did not (or seldom) used. From the start of the pandemic, the realisation became clear. All courses had to be implemented and e-learning was the only way to convey knowledge and assess students.

Fundamental questions were then raised:

Was the existing platform powerful and efficient enough to hold future activities and courses?

What software was available to implement attractive activities?

What courses could be offered on the platform?

And above all: which students would be targeted by these online courses?

Within the French Police Nationale, a Digital Training Division (DFD) was created within the "Sub-directorate of training and exams (Sous-direction des Méthodes et de l'Appui)" in order to monitor that new necessary aspect of Training. The necessity for civilian experts in the field of training and e-learning techniques became pressing.

Teachers from the French National Education system were hired as trainers to support the need for training specialists. In parallel, Online education and e-learning experts were also called upon to set up the organisation of an online Police curriculum on the national level. But this took time.

In the meantime, the first and most important issue was to resume the training of future cadets. It was then decided to create online classes on all the subjects that were not operational proper regardless of the previ-

ously settled calendar. In-person operational courses (shooting practice, self-defence, anti-riot techniques etc.) would be left for later when COVID-19 would have subsided.

Whether from a lack of time, imagination, or skills, the first courses offered by trainers on the *Police Nationale* LMS platform (E-campus) were a list of copy-pasted typed lectures the student could only read and memorize, assessed by a quiz or two. Interactivity was not considered. Likewise, learning outcomes were not clear and the pedagogical progression absent.

Quickly though, with the help of newcomers and the will among trainers to improve trainees' experience, courses became more and more structured and aimed at meeting clearer outcomes designed in respect to a relevant taxonomy. A coherent learning process led to an obvious and efficient choice of activities. An issue remained however, how could the learner get fully involved in the process.

The answer seemed obvious. Courses needed more interactivity. With the pandemic and the dire need to develop online applications, new software became available to create a number of interactive activities. Along with authoring tools such as Storyline, Rise 360, H5P, useful websites (learningapps, genially, classflow etc.) but also game-based applications (mentimeter, slido, kahoot), learning activities became much more interactive, enabling the learners – here academy cadets - to get involved and be more active in the learning process.

The after-COVID period resumed in-person courses. It was indeed a relief for numerous trainers and trainees, from a social point of view as well as an educational one. However, the possibilities offered by e-learning during the pandemic opened a new way of teaching. The challenge then became to be more flexible and give the learners new opportunities to learn, whether from home or from the academy.

Blended Learning therefore became the best option in giving the learners a flexibility that did not exist before (Belur & Bentall, 2021). Being able to study self-paced lectures from home and get practical courses (or operational skills) during in-person sessions. Not only did it become obvious for trainers and trainees, but it also convinced a formerly reluctant Police administration.

Not only cadets but also experienced Police officers could now attend virtual classes when they had time, between shifts and from their workplace, allowing a more cost-effective and less time-consuming training program for the Police administration.

Conclusion

With the COVID-19 pandemic, the French Police administration reacted quickly with a new e-learning offer, bringing along experts and teachers with another view of what Police training should be. Modernizing its training process took some time but it clearly understood the necessity of such tools for the new generations of cadets arriving at the academy.

In the meantime, the administration realised the financial and organisational benefits of such online trainings for Police Officers who worked shift and could not, before, attend a training, except by taking some days off from work.

However, hard habits die hard, and the Police administration is still reluctant to fund e-learning material and useful (if overly expensive) web software that could improve trainers' creativity while enhancing the relevance of courses for trainees.

Because of the various and cumbersome challenges, the temptation was hard from the Police administration to resume all in-person classes, but the benefits of online classes prevailed. While operational skills still rely on practical in-person classes (self-defence classes/ shooting range drills and others) for obvious reasons and despite recent applications' interactivity, a growing number of online sessions are opened on the French E-campus every day, showing the way to a new way of teaching within the French Police.

Keeping in mind that Police work is a field job, the operational practical skills are a large part of the curriculum and cannot be transferred online unless virtual gaming is one day put into the equation. In any case, the French police adopted a new teaching balance. Blended Learning has become for the French Police what some authors would call the "new normal" in course delivery (Norberg, p. 207), thus enabling the learner to combine self-paced theoretical study and in person practical classes, probably achieving the most important modernization of training in the past 20 years.

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