

# INVESTIGATIVE SKILLS EDUCATION PROGRAM: INNOVATION IN POLICE EDUCATION

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## A. INTRODUCTION

Policing is a challenging and complex occupation that requires continual professional development. Police officers must have a diverse skill set and knowledge on topics including criminal law, investigative skills, and risk effective decision making. Recent trends within police organizations such as high rates of attrition, increased recruit hires, the frequency of joint police force investigations and the complexity of criminal law have added additional challenges to policing. As a result, police organizations have had to reexamine the methods by which they educate their officers in order to be responsive to these challenges. This paper will describe the trends that have created challenges for policing in Alberta and will examine the Investigative Skills Education Program (ISEP) that was developed as a result. ISEP is a standardized provincial education program that incorporates investigative competencies in a blended learning model (online and classroom learning) with a comprehensive curriculum that utilizes adult education methodologies and a constructivist approach to learning.

## B. TRENDS THAT LED TO CHANGE

### 1. High Attrition Rates

From 2002 to 2009 police organizations, like other industries in the province of Alberta, struggled with employment trends that saw an

increase in the number of employees eligible for retirement. Statistics Canada (2004) states that the aging Canadian population resulted in a shrinking workforce. This employment trend was further compounded in Alberta by a booming economy and lucrative job market that resulted in police officers retiring as soon as possible, or in some cases resigning, in order to embark on a second career. A similar retirement rate and hiring trend occurred throughout the province and created organizational gaps in relation to mentorship, experience levels and educational opportunities. Educational resources were concentrated on training new hires leaving less opportunity for ongoing professional development. Additionally, there were fewer experienced officers in active service to pass along practical knowledge and provide mentorship and coaching. For example, from 2006 to 2009, the Edmonton Police Service hired 712 new police officers in order to keep up with attrition (Edmonton Police Service Recruiting Unit, 2010). In 2009 there were 1,447 police officers in the Edmonton Police Service, meaning that almost 50% of all sworn members had less than three years of policing experience (Edmonton Police Service and Edmonton Police Commission: Annual Report to the Community, 2009, p.30). The effects of this mass hiring will continue to be felt in police agencies for several years as the officers hired within this time frame advance in their careers either through ►

- ▶ promotion or transfer to specialized investigative areas where even more complex knowledge and skills will be required. This trend will continue as Statistics Canada (2004) estimates that the number of people eligible for retirement could reduce the workforce from 67% to 57% by the year 2025.

## 2. Failed Investigations and Increased Police Liability

The level of complex investigative knowledge required by police officers continues to increase as they advance in their career and move from one specialized area to another. Failure to provide adequate education continuously throughout the span of an officer's career may result in prohibitive financial costs associated with inadequate investigations leading to case dismissals or wrongful convictions. Thus, a lack of training could have serious consequences for officers, police organizations and the community. New case law has set a precedent of increased liability for failed investigations. In the *Hill vs. Hamilton-Wentworth Regional Police Services Board* (2007) decision, the Supreme Court of Canada stated that police can now be held liable for negligent investigations. Therefore, the need for competency-based, standardized training had become more imperative than ever.

## 3. Standardization of Investigation Skills in the Province of Alberta

Addressing the need for a standardized investigative educational program meant taking into consideration the geographical challenges of implementing a province wide curriculum. Alberta is a large geographical area that encompasses 661,848 square kilometers (National Geographic: Travel & Culture, n.d.). Twelve municipal police agencies, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and the Solicitor General and Public Security Sheriffs all provide law enforcement services. Alberta's large land mass presented challenges in ensuring that all officers had access to standardized training regardless of their location in the province or the size of their police agency. It was also noted that having multiple police organizations in one province meant that officers were working on inter-agency

investigations when criminals crossed jurisdictional boundaries. In an attempt to overcome these challenges, a comprehensive provincial curriculum for investigators using both online and classroom delivery was developed.

**“ LACK OF TRAINING COULD HAVE SERIOUS CONSEQUENCES ”**

## C. INVESTIGATIVE SKILLS PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

### 1. Identifying Competencies

“A competency is defined as, what a person is required to do (performance), under what circumstances (conditions), and to what level of competence this is to be done (standards)” (Edmonton Police Service, 2010b, p.8). The first step in the program's development was identifying the competencies of a criminal investigator. A task analysis and critical trait approach were utilized in determining competencies (Dubois, 1993). The task analysis was a compilation of tasks, processes and responsibilities associated with criminal investigations. The critical trait approach method identified the behaviour, skills and methodologies that distinguished a superior investigator from an average investigator (Dubois, 1993). ▶

► This data was collected through focus group interviews with subject matter experts, investigators at all ranks, supervising officers and stakeholders in the investigative process such as crown prosecutors, defence lawyers, and various support staff personnel. Fourteen main investigative competencies were identified as detailed below:

- Ethical Decision Making
- Note Taking
- Risk Effective Decision Making and Case Management
- Criminology
- Crime Scene Management
- Interviewing Victims and Witnesses
- Source Handling, Search Warrant Drafting
- Photographic Lineup
- Report Writing, Court Testimony
- Judicial Administration
- Structured Interviewing: Suspects.

Through the focus group interview task analysis, it was noted that these areas remained important throughout a police career, but the “level of competence...(standards)” (EPS 2010b, p.8.) increased in proportion to an increase of specialization or authority. For example, officers participating in ISEP began by learning to take basic comprehensive notes in their notebook. As they gained more skill and experience and advanced to the next levels of ISEP, more complex dimensions were added to note taking such as confidential human source information. Eventually, investigators learned to utilize a complex file management system with task logs and investigative summaries for investigating serious crimes such as homicides. For these reasons, a multilevel program was developed where the standards of each competency increased level to level. As a result, officers worked through each level of the program, first gaining fundamental competency, then went back to the field to apply this new knowledge before returning to the program at the next level for more complex skills and knowledge.

## 2. Adult Learning for Police Education

The curriculum development stage of the Investigative Skills Education Program began by recognizing that “all teaching and learning systems should be built on two foundations: the needs of the intended students, and the learning outcomes of the course or program” (Davis, 2004, p.98). Having successfully identified the learning outcomes of the program as detailed in the previous section on competencies, curriculum designers focused on learner needs. The needs of the students were addressed in ISEP through the development of a program that provided meaningful practical learning in a social setting that mirrored the policing environment. “Adults want to be able to take what they learn back to their job or their personal life and use it as soon as possible” (Edmonton Police Service, 2010, p.3). The ISEP program endeavoured to provide officers with opportunities to discuss key concepts and principles, and engage in student centred practical exercises to help improve their investigative skills.

## 3. Constructivism and Problem Based Learning

While Davis (2004) outlined two key foundations of adult learning, Herman Goldstein suggested that police training methodology needed to be improved. The importance of constructivism in police training and education was significantly influenced by Herman Goldstein (1990) who recognized that effective policing consisted of the proper recognition and research of ‘problems’ and the planning to try and solve those problems in real world conditions. According to Jonassen (as cited in Karagiorgi, & Symeou, 2005, p.24) constructivism creates a learning environment where students actively engaged in the construction of their own knowledge by linking new information to what they already know with the help of more experienced peers. Additionally, learning does not occur in isolation but within a social group that includes elements of authentic real world conditions (Karagiorgi & Symeou, 2005). Under these conditions, learning has real meaning for the student and can be applied more readily to similar situations that occur in the future, outside of class. ►



## ► D. BLENDED LEARNING MODEL

### 1. Online Learning

The choice of online learning as a component of the Investigative Skills Education Program provided solutions to a number of challenges related to delivering a province wide education program. The online material was completed prior to classroom instruction, thereby providing officers throughout Alberta with a uniform base knowledge before they entered the classroom. Delivery of this precourse instruction via online learning also reduced the number of hours each officer spent in the classroom. This allowed more class time for constructivist learning activities and reduced human resource hours lost to classroom learning. As of 2008, eighty-three percent of Canadians have access to the Internet (Miniwatts Marketing Group, 2010), therefore ISEP was not concerned with accessibility. Additionally, distance education provided learners with "... flexibility in program structure to accommodate their other responsibilities, such as full-time jobs or family needs" (Howell, Williams, & Lindsay, 2003, para 1). Finally, the online learning courses became a resource for future knowledge reference for officers when they returned to their workplace.

## E. INVESTIGATIVE SKILLS EDUCATION PROGRAM

### 1. Structure

The Investigative Skills Education Program is comprised of four distinct levels. Each level is designed to provide the skills and knowledge required for an officer's corresponding competency. This method allows each officer to acquire investigative knowledge, apply that knowledge in the field to gain experience, and return to the program for further learning. Each level of the program contains instruction on each of the 15 investigative competencies through online modules. Officers complete the online modules in predetermined groupings of four or five then participate in classroom learning. In the classroom, officers apply what they have learned online to a simulated investigation with the assistance of an experienced police investigator who takes on the role of a coach or mentor. This learning model provides them with an opportunity to discuss, collaborate and problem solve with other officers from across the province. The use of retired officers as an in-class resource and coach, allows for a direct transfer of knowledge and experience to a larger group of less experienced officers.

## F. RESULTS

From March 2009 to July 2010 approximately 845 police officers from twelve out of the fourteen police agencies in the Province of Alberta participated in the Investigative Skills Education Program (Gagnon, 2010). These agencies ranged in size from approximately 15 members to over one thousand officers, and were located throughout Alberta. The need for a competency based program was apparent as exhibited by one officer who indicated that they could have used the training earlier in their career. "This was good solid usable ►

▶ information...should have been available sooner!" (ISEP, 2010, para 1). Officers also indicated that the content was beneficial and they would apply their skills immediately in the field and in their future investigations (Lepatski, 2010). The officers also felt that the constructivist methodology and the presence of experienced peers were important for a meaningful learning environment. "The program allowed students to figure things out on their own. The teachers would check and see how things were going and redirect if needed" (Lepatski, 2010, p6). The results also indicate that the officers had an increased confidence in their investigative abilities. "I will leave the course more confident to utilize warrants, do bail packages, and complete better overall investigations." (ISEP, 2010, para 1). Officers also gained self-awareness and were able to identify their skills that required further improvement. "This module is a very important one to me as I need to improve on my note taking. I will be more aware of the information I need to include in my notebook." (ISEP, 2010, para 1). Another officer stated that "The content made me realize my shortfalls, but better yet, ways to correct and improve the shortfalls." (ISEP, 2010, para 1).

**“ THE BLENDED  
LEARNING  
MODEL REDUCED  
GEOGRAPHICAL  
BOUNDARIES ”**

## G. CONCLUSION

ISEP has already begun to alleviate the challenges identified earlier in this paper. The blended learning model reduced geographical boundaries and ensured that all learners arrived in the classroom with the same level of knowledge. Online learning also reduced the amount of travel time and time spent in the classroom thus allowing for a greater number of officers to be educated in a shorter period of time. The online learning allowed the classroom time to be focused on constructivist activities and also provided a resource that officers could access at any time. The constructivist methodology, which included an experienced peer as a coach, capitalized on the knowledge of a few experienced officers to teach hundreds of less experienced officers. The constructivist approach also provided officers with practical learning and an opportunity to try new skills in a classroom environment that mirrored the field. Identifying and teaching the core competencies of investigations ensured that the program was addressing the skills and knowledge officers required to effectively manage investigations throughout their careers. Finally, ISEP provided consistent, standardized education for all police officers in the province, giving them the same competencies and investigative methods when engaged in inter-jurisdictional investigations. The standardized curriculum of ISEP continues to ensure that all citizens in Alberta receive the same exemplary level of policing. ▶



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## Blended Learning: a brief overview

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### *Introduction*

Blended learning is a popular training method that combines traditional classes with online learning. It is a popular form of training in organizations that require on-going training of their employees. Many organizations such as the Edmonton Police Service are implementing blended learning because it mixes classes and online instruction. Garrison and Vaughan (2007) praise this type of instruction because it mixes traditional values of education while meeting the demands of the twenty-first century. According to Garrison and Vaughn (2007), “Blended learning is a coherent design approach that openly assesses and integrates the strengths of face-to-face and online learning to address worthwhile educational goals” (p. X). The research project will show how blended learning helps teach officers the skills, knowledge and abilities to improve their investigations. To do this the social constructionist worldview is a necessary requirement to fully understand the participants’ experience. Creswell (2009) says social constructivist researchers should rely on the participants’ view of the phenomenon being studied. Participants develop their own subjective meanings and the researcher must look within the complexity of their views rather than deductively inferring a single meaning. Consequently, we will collect data and by way of qualitative content analysis, we will look for dominant themes.

## *Literature Review*

Education has evolved since the early 1900s. The first use of radio education can be traced back to 1920, students were taught by listening to the “school on air” program (Garrison & Shale, 1990). New media have opened up the potential to transform the learning environment for the better (Garrison & Vaughan, 2007). Similarly, like the advent of “school on air”, blended learning uses communication technologies that expedite the transfer of knowledge. The blended learning environment is not just to supplement in-class activities, it transforms the way students learn. The Edmonton police have created a comprehensive blended learning program called the Investigative Skills Education Program (ISEP). The program is comprised of five levels including a mastery level. The officer’s progress improves their investigative skills throughout their career. Presently, the blended learning program is thought to be effective because from a police trainer’s point of view it combines efficiency and tests applied knowledge. However, the literature on blended learning has been one-sided and focuses solely on institutional benefits. The perceived benefits are informally observed, and there isn’t any empirical evidence to support the findings. The literature does not contain any evidence about students’ marks or improved performance at work.

### *What is Blended Learning?*

Blended learning can include electronic lecture notes, additional readings, hyperlinks, charts, graphs and handouts (Picciano, 2006). Another course will combine online learning with classes and as a result students only attend the lecture for two hours instead of three hours (Picciano, 2006). There is no one formula to describe blended learning, but Schooley (2005) points to three aspects of the blended learning models that



are consistent. The use of online learning may overlap with classroom instruction (Schooley, 2005). The characteristics will vary between the participants, instruction, interaction, learning approach and instructional leader (Schooley, 2005). In addition, Picciano (2006) suggests that the blended learning will replace class time, and stated “This definition eliminates certain forms of stand-alone media such as videotape, CD-ROM, or DVD that might be used solely in a face-to-face course” (p. 97).

### ***Benefits of Online Learning***

Within the Edmonton police, training materials are available for officers to study 24 hours a day, seven days a week. This accommodates the officer’s work schedule. Completing materials online also reduces the amount of class time, which reduces the amount of time officers are off of the streets. Officers can also learn at their own pace. This is a direct benefit in the blended learning model (Schooley, 2009). Also, the opportunity for learners to review the material and answer any new questions whenever they like increases the chances for success.

Classroom time is spent on group work activities that are not easily replicated online. The most compelling evidence that blended learning is a successful approach is the ability to maintain some instructor presence. A purely online course lacks sufficient socialization (Akkoyunlu, & Soylu, 2008).

### ***Can Online Deliver Effective Training?***

Online learning is often compared to traditional classroom approaches. However, the literature suggests that online classes are as effective as regular classes. Schooley notes “Outside of subject areas where face-to-face interaction is necessary, recent

research indicates that no significant differences exist in the effectiveness of learning through classroom, online, or self-study” (2009, p. 3). The literature describing the pedagogical benefits has evolved and “most of these studies indicate that online learning is perceived to be at least as effective as classes” (Picciano, 2006, p.99).

Schooley points out that the effectiveness of blended learning is directly related to the course quality (2009). Her statement is supported by research conducted by Tallent-Runnet. The study concluded that online instruction is as effective as classroom instruction and quality online instruction will translate to student learning (Schooley, 2009).

### *Limitations of Literature*

There is data on the effectiveness of online instruction, but the literature is limited when it comes to capturing adult students’ perceptions of blended learning. For example, Macdonald’s study “received 48 case studies from 37 educational institutions in 17 countries” (2006, p. 34). The survey showed how different post secondary institutions were implementing blended learning. Unfortunately, the majority of literature is focused on how organizations implement blended learning, not how the learners perceived the materials or constructed new knowledge. Another study entitled “ Students’ perceptions of a blended web based learning environment” by Chandra and Fisher (2009) appeared to be promising. The topic directly linked the students’ perception and the blended learning environment. However, the demographic in the study is ages 10-13—not adults.

## *Conclusions*

The blended learning model is gaining attention but little is understood of its effectiveness. This is due to institutions simply trying to meet budgetary concerns as opposed to effective teaching. As a result they are not collecting sufficient data on students successfully mastering the material (Piccianno, 2006). While research in this area is new, many organizations are making the assumption that they are utilizing the best of the traditional classes and online communication technologies. Many of the conclusions are indirectly inferred, what is needed is more direct empirical evidence to determine how the blended learning environment helps learners learn.

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## BLENDED LEARNING - TEACHING OFFICERS INVESTIGATIVE SKILLS

## BLENDED LEARNING - T OFFICERS INVESTIGATI

### Research overview

The research project will explore the learners' perception of the blended learning environment.

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### Research method

- Five officers will write about their perceptions and experience in a blended learning environment.
- The entries will be collected and organized into three categories (classroom, online and blended).
- Then by way of content analysis the researcher will identify emergent patterns and themes.

### Research design

- Constructivist worldview.

How does the blended learning environment help teach officers investigative skills?

