

MAXIMIZING TRAINING

By Kevan Dugan

How do I find the time for my team to train? This question has persisted for years. Even if department leaders have authorized more training hours for your team, the missions, equipment and required skills that have been implemented over the years may give the impression that available training time is still being outpaced. There are ways, however, to improve the structure and delivery of your training, as well as maximize the training hours you currently have to obtain the most benefit.

Years ago, our colleague Randy Watt wrote an excellent article titled, “Building a SWAT training program,” which was reprinted in *The Tactical Edge* in 2006.¹ If you did not have an opportunity to read it back then, please review it, because this article presupposes familiarity with the concepts of developing a mission list supported by policy, identifying the basic skills to perform those missions, developing the underlying performance standards that outline the conditions under which the task is to be performed and measuring that performance.

To achieve our objective, we first need to be open to a minor paradigm shift as to what training really is. Training is the act of teaching a particular skill or type of behavior, but too often it is viewed narrowly and approached from the perspective of setting up gross repetitive activities with the intent to produce a desired result. For example, consider the delivery of a throw phone to a barricaded individual. Think of how your team would train for this, or how you as a trainer would present this block of training. How have you done this in the past? Is any particular skill being taught, or are you only observing the gross activity, such as their approach, how they cover threats, break the window, throw the item in, and withdraw to a covered position, and then you call the next group of officers into the scenario to do the same thing?

While thinking about how you would present this block of training, do you:

- Incorporate any adult learning methods?
- Utilize the principles of training taxonomy?
- Differentiate between team/squad/individual tasks and skills sets?
- Integrate challenges?
- Reinforce mental models through “automaticity”?

Each concept has its place in learning, and this article will explore the act of teaching a particular skill or type of behavior and incorporating it into training for maximum benefit.

ADULT LEARNING METHODS

Adult learning methods differ from the methods used to teach children, because adults already bring much experience to the classroom as well as the ability to synthesize past experiences to create something new. In the late 1960s, Malcolm Knowles came up with six assumptions in relation to the adult learner.

1. *Adults are internally motivated and self-directed.* They need to know the reason for learning. As adults, we have busy lives and need to know we are not wasting our time on something that has little or no value to us. Do not assume that all of your officers know why a new skill is being introduced or why a long-held operational methodology is being changed. A simple explanation up front can quickly focus the group on the skill and not on a speculative, emotional reaction to why they are doing it.

2. *Adults bring life experiences and knowledge to learning experiences.* They draw upon these experiences to help

them learn. This is especially true with the veteran officer. Most teams will have a mixture of experience levels, and the knowledge base will not be equal across the spectrum. A more experienced officer contributing insight to less experienced officers can enhance their learning of the subject. However, also be aware that prior experience can bring biases and suppositions. In this case, you as an instructor may need to break through those biases before learning can occur.

3. *Adults are goal-oriented.* They need to be responsible for their decisions about education, planning and evaluation of instruction. They need to know that the information that is being given to them can be immediately useful. Helicopter insertions may be of value to the officer (something that falls under the first assumption), but since a department has no helicopter and it is unlikely that one would be available quickly when needed, an officer has no immediate use of this skill. Evaluating the need for the training you conduct will avoid the misuse of precious training hours.

By involving other officers in the planning of the training, they will assume shared ownership of it. These officers will also draw on their experiences to shape the training, which enhances shared mental models throughout the team. And

remember to critique the training event. If the officers know that their evaluation of the training is not only valued, but expected, then they will be more sensitive to the conduct of the training as well as the overall importance of it to them. Their feedback is an important contribution to the continued improvement of the training environment.

4. *Adults are relevancy-oriented.* Their readiness to learn is closely related to the assumption of a new social role. You have probably heard this comment before: “I don’t need to know that, that’s team leader stuff. I just need to know how to _____.” A training scenario provides a safe environment to change roles for the purpose of increasing cross-disciplinary knowledge. If everyone knows a bit of what other members do and why they do it, this knowledge becomes a force multiplier since it produces shared mental models.

5. *Adults are practical.* As they learn, they want to apply it immediately in problem-solving. They want to move from the classroom mode to a hands-on environment where they can recognize firsthand that what they are learning is applicable and useful in the field.

6. *Adult learners need to be respected.* You should take an interest in who your students are and acknowledge the

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depth of their experiences. Even though you are the trainer, it is important to regard them as an equal. It is also the proper thing to do. Create an environment that always encourages them to express their ideas, reasons and opinions.

LEARNING STYLES

If you have attended any type of instructor development course, then you no doubt discussed the three learning styles: *visual*, *auditory* and *kinesthetic*.

Visual learners do so by looking, seeing and watching. They will be the ones at the front of the classroom, and they learn best from visual displays. They often take detailed notes during lectures. On average, we retain 10 percent of what we see.

An auditory learner does so by listening and, strangely, by speaking as well. They learn best through lectures, discussions and brainstorming. Written information doesn't carry much meaning for them. On average, we retain 30 percent to 40 percent of what we see and hear.

The kinesthetic learners do so through experiencing, moving and doing. They like the hands-on approach. They will be the ones who have trouble sitting still for a long time and become distracted because of their need for activity. On average, we retain 90 percent of what we see, hear and do.

We all are capable of learning through each method, but one is usually dominant. It would be beneficial to you to pay attention to what styles are exhibited by your individual team members and be sure to incorporate all three methods into your block of instruction.

TAXONOMY

Bloom's taxonomy (Chart 1), first created in 1956 by Dr. Benjamin Bloom, identified cognitive domains of educational activity. In the mid-90s, Lorin Anderson, a student of Bloom's, updated it as it appears here. As you follow the pyramid up, it moves from basic knowledge toward higher levels of thinking. Following are some examples of students' skills in our field at each level:

Remembering – Can they remember and recall rules of covert movement, hand signals, special tools and equipment?

Understanding – Can they explain or describe an NFDD, the difference between OC and CS, dynamic entry, or slow and deliberate movement?

Applying – Can they use a technique or tool appropriately?

Analyzing – Can they distinguish between the different parts of a team task, such as delivering a throw phone, setting up a perimeter, and choosing a direction on a covert search in a home?

Evaluating – Can they justify a decision like UOF, or entry methodology, negotiation tactic, or make a choice between alternatives?

Creating – Can they develop a new lesson plan, offer a solution to a barricade problem, etc?

As you can see, even a veteran officer will start out at or near the beginning of this pyramid if a new skill is being introduced. They, too, will need to progress through the various stages. While they may get to the top sooner than less experienced officers because of past experiences, they still

Chart 1

BLOOM'S TAXONOMY



Benjamin Bloom headed a group of educational psychologists who developed a classification of levels of intellectual behavior important in learning in 1956. During the 1990s, a new group of cognitive psychologists, led by Lorin Anderson (a former student of Bloom), updated the taxonomy to reflect relevance to 21st century work.

need to advance through each stage. I stress this point for a reason. Don't be fooled into believing that these experienced officers have retained the newly acquired knowledge based upon the outcome of a scenario that you presented to them, since they can arrive at a good outcome through chance. You must look at the process through which they arrived at the outcome. Testing them and asking them questions is the only way to ensure that they understand and can apply, analyze and properly evaluate what confronts them.

These questions should be built into your training program not only for new skills, but also for skills and behaviors that they already know. Your training program should be designed to continually challenge your officers, new and veteran alike, and move them toward higher levels of thinking. By creating an environment in which questions will be asked, knowledge will be tested, and experiences and opinions shared, you will move the team toward the shared mental models that well-disciplined teams have.



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TEAM AND SQUAD TASKS AND INDIVIDUAL SKILL SETS

Breaking down a team or squad task is a logical starting point for an instructional block. Think about what activities you would list under *team*, *squad* and *individual* task categories.

- A team task could be: Apprehend the suspect in accordance with SOP, law and team policy; coordinate the actions of the tactical and negotiation units to achieve an overall strategic objective; conduct a seamless replacement of patrol members on the perimeter.
- A squad task could be: Develop and carry out a surrender plan; develop a contingency plan if suspect tries to go mobile; develop an arrest plan; establish containment to prevent escape; deliver chemical agents into a structure; deliver a throw phone to a specific opening.
- An individual task could be: Weapon manipulation, breaking and raking windows, giving proper verbal commands, UOF decision-making.

A task should be broken down into its component parts before you begin to construct a training block. While time-consuming, the good news is that you will most likely only need to do this once.

DECONSTRUCTING A SQUAD TASK FOR TRAINING

Take, for instance, the delivery of a throw phone. That is a squad task. The idea is not to view it as a gross activity but as an interrelated series of individual processes or activities. While your list of component tasks might differ, compare it to the list below.

- Preparation of phone (testing, amount of cord, etc.)
- Use of shield to protect team
- Coverage of threats upon approach
- Break and rake (if delivering through that type of opening)
- Accurately throwing phone through opening
- Long rifle coverage of approach and withdrawal
- Communications
- Approach from cover/concealed position
- Withdrawal to cover/concealed position

Breaking it down to component tasks will ensure that you cover all critical individual tasks that make up the gross activity. It will also make it easier to observe that each component task is being performed properly (according to your previously developed standards of performance).

Now that you identified the component tasks, you can rotate officers through as many different positions as you choose. This allows officers to analyze the process from different positional perspectives and develop a shared mental model of what is required for the gross activity. Just this minor addition to your training directly relates to Knowles' fourth assumption and the analyzing and evaluating stages of Bloom's taxonomy.

Deconstructing tasks into components will enable you to test individual activities through challenges. Have a role player appear at the delivery window. Have him appear at a window only visible to the sniper. Make the throw phone line shorter without the team's knowledge so it doesn't reach to the window.

Are your officers recognizing the changes in the scenario and reacting appropriately? Are proper decisions being made? Are they solving the right problem?

By doing this, the delivery of a throw phone training block will no longer be viewed with a "been there, done that, how hard can this be" attitude. Prior to their next scenario rotation, they will now think more critically about

the delivery of a throw phone and develop contingency plans. After all, this is what our objective is: to develop an instructional block that teaches a particular skill or type of behavior.

The deconstruction of gross activity enables us to closely scrutinize each component while evaluating the outcome as a whole. This is even more valuable in analyzing an operational failure or a suboptimal outcome during an operation. You can focus on each component during training to identify a particular area that needs correction or more repetitions to develop *understanding* and the desired shared mental model.

When you are constructing your instructional block, you should spend time on developing a list of all the possible challenges you can think of incorporating into the scenario block. Choose the ones you want to use from the list and make a note of any additional logistics or training aids you need to make the challenge realistic. Some additional challenge ideas for the squad to face in the aforementioned throw phone delivery appear below.

- Sniper/observer sees someone in window with weapon upon approach.
- Someone appears on porch or at delivery window armed/unarmed and unannounced.
- Someone comes out and releases a dog on team, then runs.
- One of the delivery team members that you select goes down injured.
- Pipe bomb is on ground near delivery window unseen until approach.
- Obstacle blocking delivery which is not seen until they approach.
- Done in low-light conditions.
- Done inside a large structure rather than outside.

The number of challenges that can be developed for injection are endless, all of which test the squad beyond just the gross activity of a delivery. Through challenges, you can maximize a throw phone training block by testing and examining other squad tasks and individual skills at the same time.

You can test immediate action drills, use-of-force decision-making, weapon proficiency, decision-making in general (go/no-go, abort/medics if injury/changing plans/developing contingency plans), communication and more. This can be done with any team task as well as some individual tasks.

ENHANCE TRAINING THROUGH AUTOMATICITY AND SHARED MENTAL MODELS

Automaticity means that a skill or task can be performed with little demand on cognitive resources and can be performed rapidly and effortlessly even under conditions of



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high stress. For example, if your officers shoot often enough that they know every time they come up on target they are ensured of accuracy, they can better employ their cognitive resources for use-of-force or other needed decision-making.

All the components of team and squad tasks are made up of individual skills that are linked together and performed in a linear or concurrent pattern to accomplish a more complex schema. It makes sense then to ensure, through training, that we have automatized all possible individual skills that are capable of such.

What individual skills come to your mind that might fit into this category? If you are thinking about things like accurate shooting, reloading drills and transitioning to another weapon, you are on the right track. We can clearly testify to the efficiency and effectiveness of repetitive training. We see new officers improve their accuracy, decrease the time it takes to transition to another weapon, perform a reload or clear a stoppage. But how often do you incorporate these as challenges into your scenarios?

Let's revisit the throw phone delivery scenario. You have added one challenge, the appearance of an armed subject at the window who is clearly a threat. Your cover man reacts appropriately to the threat and presses the trigger. However, prior to the scenario you ensured a dummy round was on top of the magazine to incorporate another challenge into the scenario. What would you expect to occur? Remember, you do not rise to the threat; you default to your level of training.

Breaking tasks and skills down into component parts is a great way to train, but if we do not reconstruct them properly to synthesize the larger, gross activity, then we are not maximizing our training and we are doing a disservice to our team members. Component tasks that ultimately need to be performed simultaneously must also be trained simultaneously.

It is easier to automatize individual skills because expertise can be developed for that skill through repetition with

little regard to what the person next to you is doing. But automaticity can also be applied to a limited number of squad tasks. What squad skills come to your mind when thinking about this? Would you agree that a man-down drill, contact/cover or abort procedure all fit into this category?

In order to automatize squad tasks, individual skills must be coordinated and communicated in a manner that a shared goal or objective is realized. In other words, a shared “mental model” exists of what needs to be done. This shared model allows us to recognize and predict events and to guide our interactions with other team members so there is task alignment. To do this, we need to ensure that we develop in our officers a shared knowledge of the task and its demands. Each officer needs to be familiar with the role of each team member performing that task and how that role relates to the overall coordination of the task. Recalling the throw phone delivery scenario, this is why rotating officers into different positions is beneficial.

Additionally, we need to make sure that the team members have a common model of the task in their head and that they accurately assess the situation in which they find themselves. Ideally, the “automaticity” of the response is at the “organism level” and no part of the organism is delaying its role. In other words, is their analysis correct or are they trying to solve the wrong problem? If each member arrives at a different assessment, at best the coordinated response is delayed and the time competitiveness of the response is negatively affected. At worst, there will be no response at all.

To achieve automaticity, our squad task training has to approach the repetitive nature of an individual skill. But unlike individual skills that have little regard for what others are doing at that time, we now need to be very concerned with synthesizing the activities of all others in concert to produce the squad task being performed. You can structure this training by blocks too, adding challenges as needed to ensure that the shared mental model manifests.

The use of “confederates” is an easy way to test squad automaticity. In this context, a confederate is just an officer on the team who is working in concert with you to incorporate a challenge. For example, during entry training, you have set up a search warrant scenario. Your confederate is told that when he searches a room, a role player will engage him and he is to go down as an injured officer to measure team response against previously developed standards of performance for a man-down drill.

CHALLENGING THE VETERAN OFFICER

Keeping the veteran officers engaged during training can pose a particular challenge. They already have a broad base of knowledge and experience, and very often they are seen as



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leaders to the younger officers. If the veterans seem uninterested in or make negative comments about the training, it will likely have an effect on the younger officers.

Since the veterans are at or near the top of Bloom’s Taxonomy, we need to incorporate ways to keep them analyzing, evaluating and creating in training. This can be accomplished either through their direct involvement in the training repetitions or by assigning them a training block to instruct or oversee. When using them as instructors, clearly indicate what is expected of them so that they can present an interesting and challenging training block of instruction.

When they are directly involved in the repetitions, posing challenges that are particularly difficult or complex are a great way to hold their interest. In particular, a scenario that has multiple follow-on challenges will not only test their skills, but lead to interesting, thought-provoking critiques afterwards, which will contribute to developing shared mental models.

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DOCUMENTATION OF TRAINING

Training documentation is an area in which most of us need improvement. Court decisions have given us clear direction on this: If it is not written down, it did not happen. By and large, teams deliver great training across the country. However, we do not always document it as we should and take credit for what we have done.

It is important that you record what you did for the day. The environmental conditions, lighting and location are all important. This documentation need not be cumbersome. Much of this can be incorporated onto the training record with attached forms that have checkboxes or fill-in-the-blank formats. If you did scenario training, describe each scenario and challenges. You would be surprised at what



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you will be asked about your training during a deposition (think *Popow v. Margate*).

Ensure that training lesson plans and SOPs are keeping pace with what you are doing. An old lesson plan or SOP that differs from current practice is blood in the water for a plaintiff's attorney.

In addition to the training records that are kept for the team, we should encourage individual team members to document what training they have received, either through the department or outside the department. We cannot rely on the fact that the department records are accurate as paperwork does get misplaced. Being responsible for your own records is an easy way to ensure your training file is accurate.

SOME FINAL THOUGHTS

Do not overlook the benefits of video recording your training for later review. It is much easier today with the advent of smartphones. Having an individual or squad review their performance either at the end of the training day or between training evolutions is quite beneficial.

I am a proponent of giving team members access to the training lesson plans. They can be stored electronically on a shared drive or other convenient method that maintains security yet allows an officer to review them prior to the training day. They are also available when an officer merely wants to stay current on skills and processes to help solidify shared mental models.

I encourage you to research theories on training. Topics such as naturalistic decision-making, recognition-primed decision-making, shared mental models, automaticity, part-task training, segmentation, simplification, fractionation, backward chaining and more are all interesting areas of theoretical study.

Unless your team is one of the fortunate ones that has experienced an increase in training hours, you are left with determining how you can best utilize those precious hours that are allotted to you. Train smart and train safe. //

ENDNOTE

1. Watt, Steven R. "Building a SWAT training program," *The Tactical Edge*, Winter 2006.
2. For an excellent source on automaticity, individual and team-level training strategies and research, see *Making Decisions Under Stress, Implications for Individual and Team Training*, Cannon-Bowers, Salas.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Capt. Kevan Dugan (ret.) is a 29-year veteran of the Pennsylvania State Police, where he served in patrol, criminal investigations, undercover unit, underwater search team and the special emergency response team. On behalf of the NTOA, he has participated in course development for the association and the development of the NTOA SWAT Standards. He also served as Chair for the NTOA's Tactical Commander's Section. He currently serves as a western regional director and is secretary of the board.