

# **The Changing Police Recruit: A Mixed-Methods Evaluation of Instructional Preferences Following COVID-19 Educational Disruptions**

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## **Abstract**

Today's police academy recruits enter training with varied educational experiences, readiness levels, and instructional expectations. This mixed-methods study examined recruit development and instructional preferences within a California basic law enforcement academy, with particular emphasis on the relationship between foundational instruction and experiential learning. Quantitative analyses examined changes in emotional intelligence and decision-making confidence from academy entry to completion, as well as recruits' perceptions of lecture-based and problem-based instruction. Qualitative analysis of open-ended responses explored recruits' instructional experiences, readiness, and perceptions of professional development. Results showed significant increases in emotional intelligence and decision-making confidence, along with strong support for problem-based and scenario-based learning. Qualitative findings further indicated that recruits valued structured foundational instruction before participating in increasingly complex practical exercises, viewed learner readiness as extending beyond academic knowledge, and associated increasing confidence with repeated practice and instructor feedback. Collectively, the findings suggest that foundational and experiential learning serve complementary purposes and that instructional sequencing and learner readiness are important considerations in police academy instruction.

## **Introduction**

Law enforcement agencies operate within increasingly complex environments characterized by evolving legal standards, rapid technological change, heightened public scrutiny, and expanding expectations regarding professionalism, communication, and ethical decision-making. Preparing recruits for these demands requires police academies to do far more than teach legal knowledge and procedural skills. Today's officers must rapidly evaluate incomplete information, communicate effectively under stress, regulate emotional responses, collaborate with diverse individuals, and exercise sound judgment in dynamic situations where decisions carry significant legal and public safety consequences. Accordingly, contemporary police academy training increasingly emphasizes critical thinking, experiential learning, and professional decision-making, in addition to foundational knowledge and technical skills.

Blumberg et al. (2019) similarly argue that contemporary police academy training should develop recruits' cognitive, emotional, social, and ethical competencies alongside technical proficiency. More recent research emphasizes the value of authentic, case-based learning in police recruit training as a way to connect classroom knowledge with the complex situations recruits are likely to encounter in real-world policing environments (Buhrig, 2024).

Over the past two decades, this evolution has been reflected in the widespread adoption of learner-centered instructional strategies, including problem-based learning and use of interactive scenarios. Drawing upon principles of adult learning and experiential education, these approaches place recruits in realistic policing situations where they actively construct knowledge by analyzing problems, applying legal principles, collaborating with peers, and reflecting upon instructor feedback. Rather than treating recruits as passive recipients of information, student-centered instruction emphasizes developing independent judgment, adaptability, and professional competence. Research in criminal justice supports student-centered instructional approaches that emphasize active learning, problem solving, and applying knowledge to realistic policing situations (Birzer, 2003; Chappell, 2008).

Despite broad support for experiential learning, comparatively little research has examined whether recruits' academic characteristics have changed. Most discussions of police academy instruction assume that learner readiness remains relatively stable and that instructional effectiveness depends primarily upon selecting the appropriate teaching methodology. However, educational research increasingly suggests that instructional effectiveness depends not only on the quality of instructional design but also on students' preparedness entering training. As the educational experiences of incoming recruits continue to change, instructional approaches that proved highly effective for previous academy classes may need to be modified without abandoning the principles of student-centered learning.

This question has become particularly relevant following the educational disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic. Millions of students completed substantial portions of their secondary or postsecondary education through remote or hybrid learning that reduced opportunities for classroom discussion, collaborative problem solving, experiential learning, and direct instructor interaction. Although these adaptations maintained educational continuity during an unprecedented public health emergency, subsequent research documented substantial disruptions in student learning, academic progress, and educational engagement during and following the pandemic (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Kuhfeld et al., 2022; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2021; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2021). Whether these broader educational changes have influenced learner readiness within police academy training remains largely unexplored.

Instructor observations within one California basic police academy suggested that incoming recruits may be demonstrating subtle but meaningful differences in classroom participation, communication, study habits, resilience, and adaptation to the structured demands of academy training. Although these observations span a decade and nearly 1,000 recruits, they were not systematically collected as research data. They therefore should be interpreted as practice-based observations that informed the development of the present study rather than as empirical findings. Nevertheless, the consistency of these observations raised an important question: Have the instructional needs of today's police recruits changed even while problem-based learning remains the preferred instructional approach?

This mixed-methods study addresses this question by integrating quantitative and qualitative findings examining emotional intelligence, decision-making confidence, and instructional preferences among contemporary police recruits. Earlier academy surveys provide historical context for examining changes in recruit instructional preferences over time, while practice-based instructor observations offer additional context for understanding changes in learning readiness. Together, these sources provide a basis for examining how recruits develop during academy training and how their instructional needs may be changing.

Rather than evaluating whether problem-based learning should replace lecture-based instruction, this study examines how instructional methods can be sequenced to support learning among police recruits. An unexpected finding from the most recent recruit class was that recruits strongly supported experiential learning while also favoring additional lecture-based instruction before participating in interactive scenarios. This shift suggests that the central instructional question facing police academies may no longer be whether experiential learning is superior to classroom lecture, but how to integrate foundational instruction and experiential learning to support professional development. The theoretical perspectives that follow provide the conceptual foundation for examining this emerging instructional challenge and for considering how instructional sequencing can support contemporary police recruits.

## **Literature Review**

### **Evolution of Police Academy Instruction**

Historically, police academy instruction emphasized classroom lecture, rote memorization, repetitive skills practice, and standardized testing. This instructional model reflected a broader educational philosophy in which learning was viewed primarily as the transmission of knowledge from instructor to student. Recruits were expected to master criminal law, departmental policy, defensive tactics, firearms proficiency, and emergency vehicle operations through structured classroom instruction followed by practical performance assessments. Although this approach emphasized technical knowledge and skills, critics argued that it devoted comparatively less attention to analytical reasoning, communication, ethical judgment, and decision-making in police training (Birzer, 2003).

As policing evolved during the 1990s toward community-oriented policing, procedural justice, and evidence-based practice, expectations of police officers expanded considerably. Officers were increasingly expected to solve complex problems, communicate effectively with diverse communities, exercise professional discretion, and justify their decisions in legally and ethically challenging situations. These changing demands prompted corresponding changes in police academy education, shifting instruction from predominantly lecture-based delivery toward student-centered approaches designed to develop critical thinking, adaptability, communication, and professional judgment (Chappell, 2008).

These changes paralleled broader developments in higher education and professional training. Research in adult and experiential learning supports instructional approaches in which learners actively engage with authentic problems, reflect on their experiences, collaborate with others, and apply knowledge in realistic situations (Knowles et al., 2015; Kolb, 1984).

Police academies gradually incorporated these principles through expanded use of scenario-based training, facilitated discussion, tactical simulations, and problem-based learning. Rather than emphasizing memorizing criminal statutes or procedures alone, instructors increasingly challenged recruits to analyze evolving situations, apply legal principles, communicate effectively, justify decisions, and reflect on their performance through structured debriefings. Research in police training supports student-centered approaches that engage recruits in problem-solving, critical thinking, effective communication, and the practical application of knowledge in realistic training situations (Birzer, 2003; Chappell, 2008).

Despite widespread support for experiential learning, much of the police education literature has focused on whether problem-based learning is more effective than traditional lecture. Comparatively little attention has been devoted to how different instructional approaches should be sequenced or how learner characteristics may influence their effectiveness. Educational research suggests that instructional effectiveness depends not only on the methods used but also on students' prior knowledge and the

sequencing and level of instructional support provided during learning (Rosenshine, 2012; Sweller et al., 2019). Consequently, the central question for today's police academy training may no longer be whether experiential learning is effective, but how foundational instruction and experiential learning should be integrated to support recruit learning and professional development.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided this study:

1. How have recruit perceptions of instructional methods evolved within the Stanislaus County Sheriff's Office Basic Academy since the educational disruptions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What evidence suggests that learner readiness is an important consideration in police academy instructional sequencing?
3. How should police academies sequence foundational instruction and experiential learning to support recruit learning and professional development?

The significance of this study extends beyond a single academy or instructional program. Police academies throughout the United States prepare officers to make sound legal, ethical, and tactical decisions in complex, rapidly evolving environments. Understanding whether changes in recruit educational preparation require corresponding changes in instructional design has important implications for academy instructors, curriculum developers, POST commissions, and criminal justice instructors. By examining the relationship between recruit readiness and instructional sequencing, this study seeks to identify considerations for improving academy education while preserving the experiential learning principles that remain central to professional preparation.

### **Adult Learning Theory**

Adult learning theory provides an important foundation for contemporary police academy instruction by recognizing that adult learners differ from younger students in their prior experiences, motivations, and readiness for learning. Rather than serving as passive recipients of information, adult learners actively interpret new knowledge through the lens of prior experience. They are more engaged when instruction is relevant, problem-centered, and immediately applicable to professional practice (Knowles et al., 2015). These principles closely align with the educational demands of police academy training. Recruits must do more than acquire knowledge of criminal law, investigative procedures, and tactical operations. They must also apply that knowledge under conditions of uncertainty, time pressure, and interpersonal complexity while exercising sound judgment and effective communication. Effective academy instruction extends beyond transmitting information to creating learning environments that actively engage recruits in analyzing problems, applying legal principles, collaborating with others, and reflecting on their decisions. Adult learning theory also recognizes that learners enter training with differing backgrounds, experiences, and levels of preparedness. These differences can influence how recruits acquire and apply new knowledge, suggesting that effective instruction should account for learner readiness rather than assuming that all recruits enter training with the same educational foundation. This perspective provides an important basis for understanding why instructional sequencing may influence learning outcomes within contemporary police academies.

Although adult learning theory explains why active participation is essential for adult learners, it provides less guidance regarding how professional competence develops over time. Experiential learning theory

extends these principles by describing how knowledge is acquired through repeated cycles of experience, reflection, conceptualization, and application.

### **Experiential Learning Theory**

Experiential learning theory extends the principles of adult learning by explaining how professional competence develops through experience. Kolb (1984) proposed that knowledge develops through a continuous cycle of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Through this process, students refine their understanding by applying concepts, evaluating outcomes, and adapting their performance to new situations.

These principles closely align with the educational objectives of police academy training. Effective policing requires more than factual knowledge of criminal law, policies, and procedures. Officers must apply that knowledge while managing uncertainty, communicating effectively, exercising sound judgment, and making decisions under pressure. Scenario-based instruction provides recruits with opportunities to integrate these competencies in realistic settings while receiving structured feedback that promotes reflection and continuous improvement.

Research in police education supports experiential learning as an important component of recruit training. Scenario-based and problem-centered approaches give recruits opportunities to engage in critical thinking, decision-making, communication, and the practical application of classroom knowledge (Birzer, 2003; Burnes et al., 2024; Chappell, 2008). These findings have contributed to the widespread adoption of learner-centered instructional models within modern police academies.

Although experiential learning provides an important foundation for professional competence, recruits may benefit from sufficient foundational knowledge before participating in increasingly complex scenarios. This consideration is particularly important when recruits enter academy training with diverse educational backgrounds and varying levels of preparedness. These considerations help explain why problem-based learning has become an important approach for applying experiential learning principles in police academy training.

### **Problem-Based Learning**

Problem-based learning (PBL) is a learner-centered instructional approach that engages recruits in authentic policing problems requiring analysis, collaboration, decision-making, and reflection. Rather than relying primarily on instructor-directed lectures, recruits actively construct knowledge by applying legal principles and procedural concepts to realistic situations that closely resemble professional practice. Within this model, instructors function as facilitators who guide inquiry, provide feedback, and encourage reflective learning rather than simply transmitting information (Hmelo-Silver, 2004).

Police academy training is particularly well suited to problem-based learning because law enforcement officers routinely encounter situations involving incomplete information, competing priorities, rapidly evolving circumstances, and significant legal and ethical consequences. Preparing recruits for these realities requires instructional methods that develop professional judgment alongside technical competence. Scenario-based learning gives recruits opportunities to integrate legal knowledge, tactical skills, communication, emotional regulation, and ethical decision-making while receiving instructor feedback that helps them improve their performance.

Research in police education supports problem-based learning as an approach that actively engages recruits in critical thinking, problem-solving, decision-making, and applying knowledge to realistic

policing situations (Birzer, 2003; Chappell, 2008; Makin, 2016). These findings have contributed to the widespread adoption of learner-centered instructional models within police academies and support the continued use of realistic, scenario-based instruction.

The challenge for today's police academies is not whether problem-based learning remains effective, but how much foundational instruction recruits need before progressing to increasingly complex practical exercises. This balance may change as recruits gain knowledge, experience, and confidence throughout academy training. Instruction can therefore shift progressively from foundational teaching toward greater application, problem solving, and independent decision-making.

This perspective shifts the instructional debate away from choosing between lecture-based instruction and problem-based learning. Instead, lecture and experiential learning should be viewed as complementary components of a progressive instructional sequence in which foundational concepts are introduced through structured instruction before being reinforced through increasingly complex interactive scenarios. This progression aligns closely with Cognitive Load Theory, which explains why carefully sequenced instructional support can improve learning among novice learners.

### **Cognitive Load Theory and Instructional Sequencing**

Cognitive Load Theory helps explain how instructional design affects the way recruits process and apply new information. The theory proposes that working memory has a limited capacity for processing new information and that learning improves when instruction reduces unnecessary demands and helps learners organize new knowledge (Sweller et al., 2019).

These principles are directly applicable to police academy training. Recruits must integrate criminal law, constitutional principles, officer safety, communication, ethics, tactical decision-making, and report writing while responding to rapidly evolving situations. For novice learners, managing all of these demands at once can overwhelm working memory and make it difficult to understand and apply what they are learning. Carefully sequenced instruction reduces this burden by establishing foundational understanding before recruits are expected to apply multiple concepts in increasingly complex scenarios. From this perspective, lecture-based instruction serves an important instructional function during the early stages of learning. Introducing legal concepts, policies, procedures, and decision-making principles through structured instruction helps recruits develop the cognitive skills necessary to perform effectively in scenarios and other interactive exercises. As recruits develop a stronger foundation, instructional support can be progressively reduced while they assume greater responsibility for independent problem-solving and decision-making.

This theoretical perspective helps explain the findings of the present study. Recruits did not advocate replacing experiential learning with lecture-based instruction. Instead, they consistently described lecture as valuable because it organized foundational knowledge before practical application. Their preference for additional foundational instruction therefore reflects a need for greater preparation rather than less experiential learning. These findings are consistent with Cognitive Load Theory and suggest that problem-based learning may be more effective when recruits receive sufficient preparation before progressing to complex practical exercises.

Collectively, adult learning theory, experiential learning, problem-based learning, and Cognitive Load Theory converge on a common educational principle: effective professional education depends not only on instructional methods but also on when and how those methods are introduced. Together, these theories

provide a foundation for understanding how recruits' educational experiences may influence learner readiness and the sequencing of instruction during police academy training.

### **COVID-19 Educational Disruption and the Emerging Research Gap**

The COVID-19 pandemic produced one of the most significant disruptions to modern education, fundamentally altering the educational experiences of students entering higher education and professional training. The rapid transition to remote and hybrid instruction reduced opportunities for classroom discussion, collaborative learning, experiential activities, and direct instructor interaction. Although these adaptations maintained educational continuity during an unprecedented public health emergency, subsequent research documented substantial disruptions in student learning, academic progress, and educational engagement during and following the pandemic (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Kuhfeld et al., 2022; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2021; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2021).

These educational changes are particularly relevant to police academy instruction. Effective policing requires recruits to integrate legal knowledge, communicate effectively, regulate emotions, solve complex problems, and make sound decisions under conditions of uncertainty and stress. The educational theories reviewed in the preceding sections suggest that developing these competencies requires instruction that considers recruit readiness and progresses from foundational learning to increasingly complex practical application.

Despite extensive research examining pandemic-related educational disruption, relatively little attention has been paid to whether these broader educational changes have influenced learner readiness within police academy training. Existing research supports problem-based and scenario-based instruction as important components of police recruit education. Less is known, however, about whether differences in recruits' educational backgrounds influence how they respond to these instructional approaches.

Practice-based observations accumulated during a decade of instruction involving nearly 1,000 recruits raised questions about whether recent academy classes may differ from earlier classes in areas such as classroom participation, communication, study habits, resilience, and adaptation to the structured demands of academy training. Because these observations were not collected through systematic research procedures, they are not presented as empirical evidence. Instead, they provided the practical observations that helped generate the research questions examined in the present study.

Accordingly, this study does not ask whether problem-based learning remains effective. Rather, it examines the importance of learner readiness and instructional sequencing within the context of evolving educational experiences among contemporary police recruits. By integrating quantitative and qualitative findings, the study examines how foundational instruction and experiential learning can be sequenced to support recruit learning and professional development.

### **Conceptual Model of the Study**

The conceptual model guiding this study integrates adult learning theory, experiential learning theory, problem-based learning, and Cognitive Load Theory to explain how instructional sequencing influences recruit learning within contemporary police academy education. Collectively, these perspectives suggest that effective professional education depends not only on the instructional methods employed but also on how those methods are sequenced to align with learner readiness. Rather than viewing lecture-based

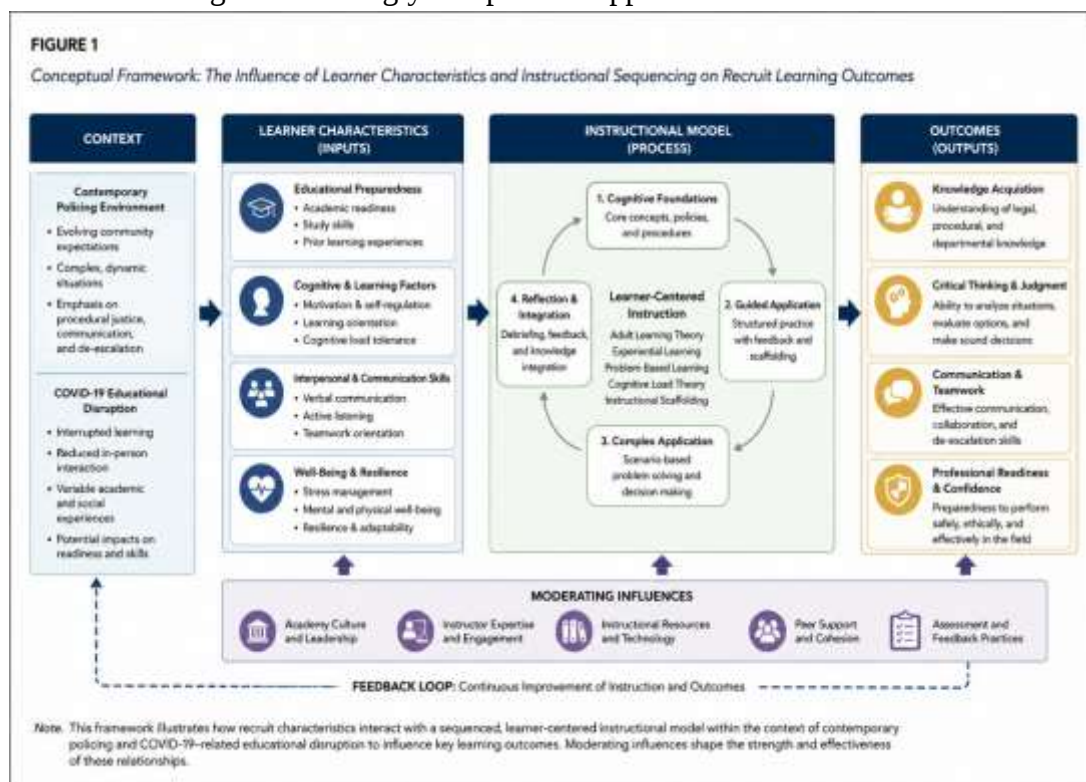
instruction and problem-based learning as competing approaches, the model treats them as complementary strategies that serve different purposes in recruit learning.

Adult learning theory provides the educational foundation by emphasizing that adults learn most effectively when instruction is relevant, problem-centered, and actively engages prior experience. Experiential learning theory explains how recruits transform knowledge into professional competence through repeated cycles of experience, reflection, conceptualization, and application. Problem-based learning puts these principles into practice by placing recruits in realistic policing situations that require critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and decision-making.

Cognitive Load Theory adds to this model by explaining why instructional sequencing matters for novice learners. Foundational instruction introduces the legal principles, policies, and conceptual frameworks recruits need to organize new knowledge before applying it in increasingly complex scenarios. As recruits gain knowledge and experience, instructional support can be gradually reduced, giving them greater responsibility for problem-solving and decision-making.

The model further recognizes that broader educational experiences may influence learner readiness. The educational disruptions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic may have negatively affected the academic preparation and learning experiences of some incoming recruits, making learner readiness and instructional sequencing increasingly important considerations. The present study, therefore, examines whether recruits continue to prefer problem-based learning while also recognizing the value of structured foundational instruction before engaging in more demanding experiential learning activities.

Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual relationships examined in this study. The model proposes that foundational instruction, progressively integrated with experiential learning, can support the development of knowledge, emotional intelligence, decision-making confidence, communication, and professional judgment. Within this model, learner readiness and instructional sequencing help guide the progression from foundational learning to increasingly independent application.



## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

This study employed a convergent mixed-methods research design to examine contemporary police recruits' perceptions of instructional methods within the Stanislaus County Sheriff's Office Basic Academy. A mixed-methods approach was selected because quantitative and qualitative data provide different but complementary perspectives on recruits' educational experiences (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

The quantitative component consisted of an 11-item Likert-scale survey measuring recruit perceptions of lecture-based instruction, problem-based learning, decision-making, report writing, stress management, and overall instructional preferences. Quantitative findings identified patterns of agreement among recruits and provided descriptive evidence regarding instructional preferences. Internal consistency of the 11-item instructional preference scale was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. The scale demonstrated acceptable internal consistency for an exploratory study ( $\alpha = .69$ ).

The qualitative component consisted of open-ended survey questions that invited recruits to describe their educational experiences in their own words. These responses provided context for interpreting the quantitative findings by identifying recurring themes, perceived strengths and limitations of instructional approaches, and recommendations for improving academy instruction.

This study examined how recruits perceive the relationship between foundational instruction and experiential learning. Guided by the conceptual model presented in the preceding section, the study explored the importance of instructional sequencing and learner readiness within the context of today's basic academy recruits.

### **Participants and Setting**

Participants included recruits enrolled in the Stanislaus County Sheriff's Office (California) Basic Academy who contributed data to the investigations incorporated into this study. The primary quantitative and qualitative sample consisted of recruits from Class #196-26. Findings from earlier surveys provided historical context for understanding changes in instructional preferences among academy classes. These participants represented a recent academy class whose secondary or postsecondary education occurred during or following the educational disruptions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Class #196-26 consisted of 40 recruits at academy entry. Thirty recruits completed the academy and both the pretest and posttest assessments. These recruits also completed the instructional preference survey, which examined perceptions of lecture-based instruction and problem-based learning.

To provide broader instructional context, the study also incorporated practice-based observations accumulated over approximately ten years of academy instruction involving nearly 1,000 recruits. These observations suggested recurring patterns in learner preparedness, classroom participation, communication, study habits, and adaptation to academy expectations. Because the observations were not systematically collected using standardized research procedures, they provided contextual background for interpreting the quantitative and qualitative findings rather than serving as independent empirical data.

The Stanislaus County Sheriff's Office Basic Academy provides an appropriate setting for examining instructional practices because it has maintained a consistent learner-centered curriculum since 2015. This continuity provides a relatively stable instructional environment for examining changes in recruit perceptions and instructional preferences over time.

**Data Collection**

Data were collected at different points during academy training. Emotional intelligence and decision-making confidence were assessed at academy entry and again at the conclusion of training. The instructional preference survey was administered at the conclusion of training, allowing recruits to reflect on their learning experiences after participating in both classroom lecture and interactive scenarios.

Recruits completed an anonymous mixed-methods survey consisting of Likert-scale statements and open-ended questions. The quantitative portion assessed recruits' perceptions of learning effectiveness, stress and decision-making, report writing, and overall instructional preferences. The qualitative portion invited recruits to describe their instructional experiences, identify the approaches they found most effective, and recommend improvements to academy instruction.

The study integrated data from two related investigations conducted within the same academy setting. Combining the pretest-posttest assessment of emotional intelligence and decision-making confidence with the instructional preference survey and qualitative responses allowed the study to examine both developmental changes during academy training and recruits' perceptions of their instructional experience. Survey responses were collected in hard copy. Participation was voluntary, and recruits were informed that their responses were anonymous and would not affect academy standing or evaluation.

**Data Analysis**

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics summarized recruits' responses to the instructional preference survey. Paired-samples *t*-tests and Cohen's *d* effect sizes were used to evaluate changes in emotional intelligence and decision-making confidence from academy entry to completion. Internal consistency of the 11-item instructional preference scale was assessed using Cronbach's alpha.

Qualitative responses were analyzed using thematic analysis. Recruit statements were reviewed for recurring ideas and patterns related to instructional preferences, learner readiness, and professional development. Similar responses were organized into four major themes.

The quantitative and qualitative findings were subsequently integrated during interpretation using a convergent mixed-methods approach. This integration provided a more comprehensive understanding of recruit instructional preferences, learner readiness, and the role of instructional sequencing during training.

**Results**

Thirty recruits completed the matched pretest and posttest assessment of emotional intelligence and decision-making confidence, as well as the post-academy instructional preference survey. Most recruits were between 21 and 29 years of age, about one-third held a bachelor's degree, and most entered the academy with prior employment in consumer service occupations, including retail, hospitality, and food service.

The results are presented in two sections. First, the quantitative findings summarize changes in recruits' emotional intelligence and decision-making confidence and describe their instructional preferences. Second, the qualitative findings examine recruits' experiences through thematic analysis of the open-ended survey responses. Together, these complementary findings provide a comprehensive understanding of learner readiness, instructional sequencing, and instructional preferences.

## Quantitative Findings

### *Emotional Intelligence and Decision-Making Confidence*

The first quantitative analysis evaluated changes in recruits' emotional intelligence and decision-making confidence from academy entry to completion using matched pretest and posttest assessments. Among the 30 recruits who completed both the pretest and posttest assessments, the overall mean survey score increased from 3.64 at academy entry to 4.07 at academy completion, representing an increase of approximately 12%. The increase in the overall survey score was statistically significant,  $t(29) = 3.71$ ,  $p = .001$ , with a moderate effect size ( $d = .68$ ). Emotional intelligence increased significantly,  $t(29) = 2.92$ ,  $p = .007$ , with a moderate effect size ( $d = .53$ ). Decision-making confidence also increased significantly,  $t(29) = 3.37$ ,  $p = .002$ , with a moderate effect size ( $d = .62$ ).

Collectively, these findings indicate that recruits demonstrated significantly higher emotional intelligence scores and greater decision-making confidence at academy completion than at academy entry. See Table 1 for a summary of the quantitative findings.

**Table 1**  
***Summary of Quantitative Findings***

| Study/Measure                                                            | Sample (N) | Major Findings                                                                                                                                                                                                       | Key Results                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Emotional Intelligence and Decision-Making Confidence (Pretest–Posttest) | 30         | Recruits showed significant improvement across academy training. The overall mean score increased from 3.64 at academy entry to 4.07 at academy completion, an increase of approximately 12%.                        | Overall Mean Survey Score (26-Item Scale): Pretest $M = 3.64$ ; Posttest $M = 4.07$ ; paired-samples $t(29) = 3.71$ , $p = .001$ , Cohen's $d = .68$ .<br><br>Emotional Intelligence Subscale: paired-samples $t(29) = 2.92$ , $p = .007$ , Cohen's $d = .53$ .<br><br>Decision-Making Confidence Subscale: paired-samples $t(29) = 3.37$ , $p = .002$ , Cohen's $d = .62$ . |
| Instructional Preference Survey (Post-Academy Survey)                    | 30         | Recruits strongly supported problem-based learning and realistic scenario training while also recognizing the value of lecture-based instruction for developing foundational knowledge before practical application. | Descriptive results from 11 Likert-scale items indicated strong support for experiential learning while also recognizing the value of lecture-based foundational instruction.                                                                                                                                                                                                |

*Note.* Higher scores indicate greater emotional intelligence and decision-making confidence.  $p$  values  $< .05$  indicate statistically significant differences between pretest and posttest scores. Cohen's  $d$  values of .50–.79 represent moderate effect sizes or how large the observed change was.

### Instructional Preference Survey

The second quantitative analysis examined recruits' perceptions of instructional methods after completing the academy curriculum. The 11-item instructional preference scale demonstrated acceptable internal consistency for an exploratory study ( $\alpha = .69$ ). Survey responses strongly supported learner-centered instructional approaches, particularly problem-based and scenario-based learning. Overall, recruits viewed experiential learning favorably while also recognizing the value of lecture-based instruction as part of the academy learning process. The qualitative findings discussed below provide additional insight into how recruits perceived the respective roles of foundational instruction and experiential learning.

These findings suggest a shift from earlier academy surveys. Previous recruit classes strongly favored experiential learning over traditional lecture-based instruction. Class #196-26 continued to express a strong preference for problem-based learning while also indicating greater value for structured foundational instruction. This pattern suggests that recruits in the current academy class valued the sequencing and integration of instructional methods rather than viewing lecture and experiential learning as competing approaches.

Taken together, the two quantitative analyses provide complementary evidence regarding recruit development and instructional preferences. The pretest-posttest assessment demonstrated significant increases in emotional intelligence and decision-making confidence over the course of academy training, while the instructional preference survey indicated strong support for experiential learning alongside continued support for lecture-based instruction. Although these findings identify measurable patterns in recruit development and instructional preferences, they do not fully explain why recruits held these views. The qualitative findings presented in the following section provide additional context through recruits' descriptions of their academy experiences.

### Qualitative Findings

The qualitative findings provide additional context for understanding recruits' instructional experiences and the quantitative results. Thematic analysis of the open-ended survey responses identified four major themes: experiential learning, foundational instruction, learner readiness, and professional development. Although presented separately for clarity, the themes represent interconnected aspects of the academy learning experience and provide insight into how recruits perceived instructional sequencing and their development throughout academy training.

#### *Theme 1. Experiential Learning as the Preferred Instructional Method*

The most consistent theme emerging from the qualitative responses was recruits' strong preference for experiential learning. Participants repeatedly identified realistic scenarios, practical exercises, and problem-based learning as instructional approaches that contributed substantially to their understanding of academy material. Recruits described learning as particularly effective when they could apply classroom knowledge in realistic situations requiring critical thinking, communication, and decision-making.

Recruits also emphasized the importance of immediate instructor feedback during scenario-based training. Participants described mistakes made during practical exercises as valuable learning opportunities because

they could receive corrective guidance, reconsider their decisions, and apply that feedback in subsequent exercises. This combination of realistic application and instructor feedback helped reinforce classroom learning while allowing recruits to refine their performance in a controlled training environment.

Participants also emphasized that experiential learning increased confidence. Repeated engagement with realistic policing problems required recruits to apply academy concepts in situations that called for independent thinking, effective communication, and sound decision-making. Recruits reported that these practical experiences strengthened their confidence in using what they had learned and improved their ability to respond effectively in challenging, pressure-filled situations.

The qualitative responses complement the quantitative findings, which indicated strong support for problem-based and scenario-based learning. Together, the findings indicate that recruits particularly valued experiential learning because it provided opportunities to apply classroom knowledge in realistic situations requiring communication, judgment, and decision-making.

### ***Theme 2. Foundational Lecture Supports Experiential Learning***

Although recruits consistently preferred experiential learning, a second major theme emphasized the continuing value of structured classroom instruction. The recruits did not view lecture as an alternative to experiential learning. Instead, they described foundational instruction as helping prepare them to apply legal, procedural, and conceptual knowledge during increasingly complex practical exercises.

Recruits frequently explained that classroom instruction provided the legal, procedural, and conceptual knowledge needed to understand realistic scenarios. They described prior explanation of new concepts as helping them better understand what was expected when applying that knowledge during practical exercises. In this way, recruits generally viewed foundational instruction as preparation for experiential learning rather than as a separate instructional objective.

Recruits further emphasized the importance of balancing classroom instruction with practical application. Although scenarios were consistently identified as a highly valued component of academy training, participants indicated that practical exercises were most effective when supported by sufficient explanation, demonstration, and guided discussion. This progression allowed recruits to develop foundational understanding before being expected to apply that knowledge with increasing independence. This theme suggests a shift from patterns observed in earlier academy surveys. Previous recruit classes strongly favored problem-based learning over traditional lecture-based instruction. The present class continued to strongly value experiential learning while also emphasizing the importance of foundational instruction before practical application. Rather than viewing lecture and experiential learning as competing approaches, recruits described them as complementary components of a sequenced instructional process.

### ***Theme 3. Learner Readiness Extends Beyond Academic Knowledge***

A third theme concerned learner readiness and recruits' transition to the structured demands of academy training. Participants described entering the academy with differing educational experiences, study habits, and levels of confidence. While some recruits reported feeling adequately prepared for academy training, others described initial difficulty adapting to its pace, expectations, and academic demands.

Recruits described successful adaptation to academy training as requiring behaviors and skills beyond academic knowledge. They identified disciplined study habits, effective time management, written communication, personal organization, and self-discipline as important to meeting academy expectations. Recruits indicated that these abilities developed through structured expectations, consistent instructor feedback, and repeated practice.

Recruits also reflected on the transition from their previous educational experiences to the highly structured academy setting. They described adjusting to increased accountability, sustained classroom attention, continuous evaluation, and personal responsibility for mastering substantial amounts of material. For some participants, adapting to these expectations represented a significant part of their transition into academy training.

The qualitative findings suggest that learner readiness extends beyond prior academic development. Recruits described readiness in terms of study habits, time management, communication, self-discipline, resilience, and the ability to adapt to structured expectations. These responses indicate that learner readiness incorporates a combination of knowledge, learning behaviors, and personal skills that influence how recruits engage with the demands of academy training.

Collectively, these findings suggest that learner readiness should not be viewed solely as a characteristic present at academy entry. Recruits described study habits, self-discipline, organization, and adaptation to academy expectations as abilities that continued to develop throughout training. Their responses suggest that learner readiness can continue to develop as recruits adjust to the demands of academy training.

#### ***Theme 4. Progressive Practice Builds Confidence and Professional Judgment***

The fourth theme focused on how progressive practice contributed to recruit confidence and professional judgment. Participants described confidence as developing gradually as they repeatedly applied classroom knowledge during practical exercises. Recruits described realistic scenarios, instructor feedback, and repeated opportunities to practice increasingly complex policing tasks as contributing to greater confidence in applying what they had learned.

Recruits described repetition and corrective feedback as important to developing confidence. Participants reported becoming more comfortable applying legal knowledge and practical skills as they encountered progressively more demanding scenarios. Mistakes made during training were viewed as opportunities to receive corrective feedback, refine performance, and apply what they had learned during subsequent exercises.

The recruits further emphasized the value of progressively increasing instructional complexity. As recruits gained experience, they described greater confidence in communicating with others, making decisions under pressure, solving unfamiliar problems, and adapting to changing situations. Recruits viewed this progression as helping them move from understanding concepts in the classroom to applying those concepts with increasing independence in realistic policing situations.

These qualitative findings complement the quantitative results, which showed significant increases in emotional intelligence and decision-making confidence from academy entry to completion. Recruits' descriptions provide additional context for these changes by emphasizing repeated practice, realistic application, instructor feedback, and progressively challenging exercises as important components of their learning experiences. Together, the quantitative and qualitative findings suggest that confidence develops progressively as recruits gain opportunities to apply, evaluate, and refine their performance throughout academy training.

#### **Overall Evaluation of the Qualitative Findings**

Taken together, the four themes present a consistent pattern in recruits' descriptions of academy learning. Recruits strongly valued experiential learning while also recognizing the importance of foundational instruction before practical application. They described learner readiness as extending beyond academic preparation to include study habits, communication, self-discipline, organization, and adaptation to

academy expectations. Recruits also linked increased confidence to repeated practice, instructor feedback, and progressively challenging experiential learning.

Collectively, the qualitative findings complement the quantitative results by providing additional context for recruits' instructional preferences and development throughout academy training. Together, the mixed-methods findings indicate that recruits valued an instructional approach that combines foundational instruction with progressively more complex experiential learning. The findings further suggest that learner readiness and instructional sequencing are important considerations in understanding how recruits experience and respond to academy instruction.

## **Discussion**

The findings suggest that police academy instruction may be better understood through instructional sequencing rather than as a choice between lecture-based and experiential learning. Recruits strongly valued problem-based and scenario-based learning while also recognizing the importance of foundational instruction before practical application. This pattern suggests that readiness and instructional sequencing influence how recruits engage with increasingly complex academy training.

Previous research has supported the value of experiential and problem-based learning for developing engagement, critical thinking, communication, and the application of knowledge within police training (Birzer, 2003; Chappell, 2008). The present findings extend the literature by highlighting the importance of preparing recruits for increasingly complex experiential learning activities. In this study, recruits continued to value experiential learning strongly but also emphasized the importance of establishing foundational understanding before applying that knowledge in realistic scenarios.

The findings therefore support a progressive instructional sequence in which instructional support changes as recruits develop knowledge and experience. Early instruction can provide the legal, procedural, and conceptual foundation needed for subsequent application. At the same time, progressively more complex scenarios require recruits to assume greater responsibility for analysis, communication, and decision-making. In this model, foundational instruction prepares recruits for experiential learning rather than competing with it.

The principal contribution of this study is identifying learner readiness and instructional sequencing as important considerations in contemporary police academy education. Rather than focusing solely on which instructional method is most effective, the findings suggest considering when different instructional approaches are introduced and how they support recruits at different stages of development.

The findings are also consistent with the theoretical perspectives guiding this study. Adult learning theory and experiential learning theory emphasize active, relevant, and applied learning (Knowles et al., 2015; Kolb, 1984), while problem-based learning gives recruits opportunities to apply knowledge through realistic problems and scenarios (Hmelo-Silver, 2004). Cognitive Load Theory further suggests that novice learners benefit from sufficient instructional support before being expected to apply new knowledge in more complex situations (Sweller et al., 2019). Together, these perspectives help explain why recruits strongly valued experiential learning while also recognizing the importance of foundational instruction before increasingly complex practical exercises.

The educational disruptions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic provide important context for interpreting these findings; however, the present study does not establish that pandemic-related educational experiences caused the instructional preferences observed among recruits. Rather, the findings indicate that recruits entered academy training with differing educational experiences and levels of

readiness, reinforcing the importance of considering learner readiness when designing and sequencing instruction. Additional research involving multiple academies and recruit populations is needed to determine whether similar patterns are evident across different educational settings and cohorts.

Taken together, the quantitative and qualitative findings support an integrated view of police academy instruction in which foundational learning and experiential application serve complementary purposes. Recruits demonstrated measurable development in emotional intelligence and decision-making confidence, strongly valued experiential learning, and described foundational instruction as important preparation for practical application. These findings suggest that instructional sequencing should be considered alongside instructional method when designing academy curricula to support recruit development.

### **Implications for Police Academy Instruction**

The findings suggest that police academies should consider instructional sequencing when determining how lecture-based, problem-based, and scenario-based instruction are incorporated into the curriculum. Police academies can introduce foundational legal, procedural, and conceptual material through structured instruction and then reinforce it through progressively more complex practical application. As recruits develop knowledge and experience, instructional support can be gradually reduced while recruits assume greater responsibility for analysis, communication, judgment, and decision-making.

The findings also suggest that academies should consider differences in learner readiness at the beginning of training. Recruits may enter the academy with varying levels of preparation in areas such as study habits, written and interpersonal communication, time management, organization, and self-discipline. Early instructional support, clear expectations, and structured guidance may help recruits adapt to academy demands before they transition to increasingly complex experiential learning activities.

The findings also suggest value in progressively increasing instructional complexity throughout academy training. Recruits described confidence as developing through repeated practice, constructive instructor feedback, and increasingly realistic scenarios. Accordingly, practical exercises can progress from structured, guided application to more complex situations requiring greater independence, judgment, communication, and decision-making. This progression allows recruits to apply foundational knowledge while gradually assuming greater responsibility for their performance.

Finally, curriculum development should focus less on choosing between lecture-based and problem-based instruction and more on determining how each can contribute at different stages of recruit development. Instructional decisions should consider the knowledge recruits need before practical application, the level of guidance appropriate to their readiness, and when they are prepared to assume greater independence in increasingly realistic scenarios. This approach preserves the value of experiential learning while recognizing the importance of structured foundational instruction.

### **Limitations**

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting this study's findings. First, the research was conducted within a single basic law enforcement academy in California, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to academies operating under different organizational structures, instructional models, or state training requirements. Research involving multiple academies and more diverse recruit populations would provide a stronger basis for determining whether similar patterns occur across different training environments.

Second, the instructional preference and qualitative findings relied on recruits' self-reported perceptions of their learning experiences. Although these perceptions provide important insight into how recruits experienced different instructional approaches, they do not directly measure instructional effectiveness or subsequent job performance. Future research should examine whether instructional preferences and changes in emotional intelligence and decision-making confidence are associated with objective outcomes such as academic performance, academy completion, field training performance, and longer-term professional development.

Third, instructional preferences and qualitative responses were collected at the conclusion of academy training and therefore reflect recruits' perceptions at a single point in time. Although emotional intelligence and decision-making confidence were assessed at both academy entry and completion, the study did not follow recruits beyond the academy. Longitudinal research extending through field training and early career assignments would provide additional insight into whether the developmental changes and instructional preferences identified during academy training are associated with subsequent professional performance.

Finally, although the educational disruptions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic provided important context for this study, the research design does not permit causal conclusions regarding their effects on recruit readiness or instructional preferences. The study did not directly measure participants' individual exposure to remote or hybrid education or compare recruits according to the extent of that exposure. Future research incorporating measures of prior educational experiences and comparisons across recruit cohorts would provide a stronger basis for examining whether pandemic-era educational disruption is associated with differences in learner readiness or instructional preferences.

## **Conclusion**

This study highlights the importance of sequencing instructional methods to support recruit learning in contemporary police academy training. The findings showed that recruits strongly valued experiential and scenario-based learning while also recognizing the importance of structured foundational instruction before increasingly complex practical applications. Rather than viewing lecture-based and problem-based learning as competing approaches, the findings suggest recruits saw them as complementary instructional strategies that serve different learning purposes.

The mixed-methods findings further highlight the importance of learner readiness in academy instruction. Recruits entered training with differing educational backgrounds, study skills, and levels of preparedness, while their responses indicated that important learning behaviors continued to develop throughout the academy. The findings also showed significant increases in emotional intelligence and decision-making confidence from academy entry to completion. At the same time, qualitative responses emphasized the value of structured instruction, guided practice, instructor feedback, and progressively challenging scenarios.

Collectively, the findings suggest that police academy instruction may benefit from intentionally integrating foundational and experiential learning through progressive instructional sequencing. As recruits' educational experiences continue to evolve, academies should consider how foundational instruction, guided practice, and increasingly complex experiential learning can be aligned with learner readiness. By shifting attention from choosing between instructional methods to intentionally sequencing them, this study provides a practical approach for addressing the instructional needs of contemporary police recruits.

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