



Winning evidence

New training based on gaming technology has been developed to fill a much criticised gap in interviewing skills and ensure officers have the confidence to obtain the maximum evidence from child witnesses.

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By Dr Anne Adams



As technology advances, organisations are increasingly realising the benefits of using video games as an aid to staff training. The military, education and healthcare sectors have all adopted interactive simulations to teach their workforce new skills. Policing too is beginning to use video game technology to improve its training, with a joint project between the College of Policing and Metropolitan Police Service examining how it can help teach officers to use body-worn video cameras. Rolling this work out further could pay dividends for other neglected areas of the policing curriculum.

When taking first witness accounts from children, officers currently have access to empirical evidence and procedural guidance. However, there is no direct training, and what does exist focuses broadly on taking accounts from vulnerable witnesses. Concerns were raised over the lack of specific training in 2015 by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services, which said that current provision on this subject does not provide sufficient opportunities for reflection.

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learning tool on interview techniques that could be more effective than the face-to-face equivalent.

“This is something that is not at the fully immersive, expensive end of gaming and virtual reality,” said Dr Anne Adams, associate director for academic professional development at the Open University’s Institute of Educational Technology. “But it is something that is a huge step up from current provision.”

More than just a game

The ‘video game’, called the Child Witness Interview Simulator (CWIS), aims to provide first response witness training for new police recruits and instill them with the confidence to interact with children that would otherwise be gained only through real-life experience.

Developed by a team including experts in child interviewing, game developers and academics, it has already been piloted by a number of forces, but most prominently Lancashire Constabulary.

The CWIS puts players in the shoes of an officer tasked with obtaining a statement from a nine-year-old boy who has allegedly witnessed an assault on his way home from school. It is divided into two episodes, first requiring ‘the player’ to take an initial response account from the child at their home before asking them to conduct a full achieving best evidence interview.

These interactions are completed through a ‘conversation mode’, in which officers can click on multiple choice options for what they think would be best to say to the parent or child in the game. They can also click on highlighted objects to observe them, opening up further dialogue options, while another section of the user interface shows procedural notes and exploratory icons.

Success or failure is measured in a ‘rapport bar’, which fills or empties based on their choices. Although this indicator is clearly unrealistic, the developers found it both engages participants and focuses their attention on the areas that can affect the quality of an interaction.

In the first of the CWIS’s simulated conversations, the officer has to speak with the child’s parent, before progressing to taking a statement regarding the alleged offences. The questions raised in these scenarios, and the responses they are able to choose from, are based on problem areas the developers identified within this area of policing, such as building rapport with the subject, and showing empathy and respect.

They are also intended to improve officers’ understanding of the different approach they must use when trying to take a witness statement from a child, compared to the methods taught for other vulnerable people in the current training provision.

This is complemented by in-game tasks: the officer must find the right way to stop the child focusing on a video game and become more active in the conversation, as choosing overly aggressive statements can lower the child’s rapport with the participant.

“Children have a different attention level,” said Dr Adams. “With a vulnerable witness, the approach is usually to provide them with a lot of information to guide them through the process. In contrast, with a child, a different approach is needed as they can quickly become overwhelmed with information.”

Tricky Topics

The exact factors that influence the rapport bar were selected through a teaching process known as ‘Tricky Topics’. This comprises three stages – identify, capture and assess – and is used to discover the topics that contain challenging concepts that learners can find difficult to grasp.

In the first stage, teachers collaborate with learners to determine which areas they are struggling with and break them down into assessable 'stumbling blocks'. Next, these results are processed through a bespoke tool that helps teachers understand why the students find each stumbling block difficult. In the final stage, the insights already gathered are used to develop questions that fully assess student understanding, form interventions to help their learning, and evaluate each intervention.

Through the Tricky Topics process, the CWIS developers worked with 116 newly-recruited officers from Lancashire Constabulary, Thames Valley Police and Bedfordshire Police, who were then on their initial police learning and development programme. In collaboration with trainers, they tried to identify the barriers to their understanding of taking witness statements from children.

This led to the discovery of the two major hurdles – rapport and interview technique. Both were divided into specific stumbling blocks, with rapport split into 'attention', 'empathy', 'respect' and 'informed consent', and interview technique into 'question procedure', 'limited questioning' and 'biased questioning'. Elements of these areas were built into the CWIS as problems for officers to overcome; for example, participants' concerns over asking too many questions and exhausting the child are reflected in a system in which the child responds negatively if the player subjects them to a barrage of inquiries. These learning points are then tested with further questions to check if players understand the problem and how to deal with it.

Improving understanding

When it was still in early development, the intention for the CWIS was that it would teach officers skills for securing premises. However, feedback from forces revealed this area was already covered by specialist training, and was not in need of an interactive supplementary programme.

The switch to looking into child witness statement taking followed analysis of literature that showed this subject was missing from the current training on offer. Evaluation of the CWIS has now suggested it can be more effective than more traditional methods.

Working with the same 116 trainee officers, researchers conducted a randomised controlled trial looking at how the CWIS compared with the existing course. The findings showed a significant improvement in officer understanding following the CWIS – while the face-to-face training led to a significant decrease.

According to Dr Adams, the decline observed on the traditional course is likely due to it not being specifically tailored towards interviewing children, and instead focuses on teaching interview skills for vulnerable witnesses in general.

The largest deterioration was seen in the concept of 'respect', suggesting officers who do not receive specific training in this area may become confused when having to deal with the issues involved in interviewing a child.

In contrast, qualitative data obtained through participant surveys revealed that officers realised the benefits of simulation-based training.

Players praised mechanics such as the rapport bar for keeping them focused on the areas that mattered, as well as the realistic elements such as the child becoming bored by repeat questioning.

Officers who played the CWIS also appeared more reflective about how they would apply their new skills in future interactions, with one telling researchers: "I was thinking as I was going through, if I was to speak to a child now, I would change my type of questioning."

However, the most significant impact was on officers' tacit knowledge, or skills that are difficult to communicate through verbal or written means, such as how to build rapport with an interviewee. This finding surprised the developers as they expected that real-life interactions would better facilitate transfer of these skills. Instead, design elements built into the game constantly reminded them of elements of this knowledge they might otherwise forget.

For example, after starting the game, the player's first task is to identify the right address. One wrong option ends with them being confronted by an axe-wielding murderer, with the aim of reminding them of the importance of getting simple steps like this right the first time. Several officers who have played the game reported that they knew they were supposed to check the child's address, but found it was the kind of detail that can be easily forgotten.

The multiple-choice answers were also settled on as a feature that allows officers the flexibility to make mistakes. The researchers found this improved their ability to learn from the game, and more effectively guided them to the topics that most needed covering.

Future expansion

The final randomised controlled trial for the CWIS project concluded in 2017, and since then the resulting data has been evaluated and analysed alongside participant feedback. The game has now been developed into a form that is ready to be sold to police forces, and has already attracted some interest. Lancashire Constabulary, which was heavily involved in the research, has expressed a desire to look into the CWIS's long-term impacts on practice.

High Skillz has also made clear its willingness to work with forces to develop other products, focusing on other currently overlooked subjects on policing's curriculum. Dr Adams believes these tools could help to significantly increase understanding across a broad range of topics. Ultimately, however, the benefits of this approach to training have been best demonstrated when the CWIS project was presented to the College of Policing.

"One officer got quite emotional about his training on interview techniques," she said. "He had avoided interviews for most of his career because he had been thrown straight into roleplay-based training, which overwhelmed him. He said that if he had done the game as a first step, it would have helped him to explore some of the things without being in that judgmental situation.

"It surprised me how traumatic his training had been for him, and how the other people in the workshop agreed. They felt that having the games-based training first and then leading into roleplaying, where you could apply the knowledge you had already gathered, would be a better solution."

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