AXON

CREATING REALISTIC SCENARIOS FOR LAW ENFORCEMENT STUDENTS WITH AXON VR

Laconia Huot Tech Center

> The Huot Career and Technical Center in Laconia, New Hampshire prides itself on providing students with a cutting-edge education. The subject of that education ranges widely, with its 12 courses covering automotive work, digital media arts, and bio-medical technology, among others. Students from the eight regional high schools nearby vie for space at the center. In 2016, the school brought on former Laconia Police Department Captain William Clary to administer its two-year law enforcement course.

Clary used his 28 years of policing and experience teaching D.A.R.E. to design a curriculum covering everything from case law to emergency response. In the first year, which focuses on bedrock law enforcement knowledge, the 32 students in the two yearly classes study the US Constitution, the criminal code, and more to build a strong foundation of learning. If they apply for and get into the second year of the program — a competitive process — they start to practice more hands-on work. That means operating handcuffs, filing reports and, crucially, completing scenario-based training.

Students who complete the course graduate with Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) certifications, community engagement response team (CERT) certifications and several first aid certifications. “If a student makes it to my second year, they never have a problem going into law enforcement if that’s what they want,” Clary says.

In 2022, Clary decided to take those training scenarios to the next level by bringing in Axon Virtual Reality (VR) technology.

THE CHALLENGE

Although most of Clary’s curriculum worked well as is, scenario training ran into one very significant roadblock: a distinct lack of realism. For one, the class had to practice scenarios like roadside stops using somebody’s car in the parking lot. Domestic violence calls took place on opposite sides of a classroom door. These limitations undercut the believability of the scenarios, and, try as they might, Clary’s students simply couldn’t commit to their roles.

“The problem when we do those non-VR ways of training is the characters are other students,” Clary says. “And unfortunately, sometimes they can’t play the role as they’re supposed to play it. When they’re with their classmate, they giggle, or they can’t be as combative or compliant as they’re told to be.”

Clary’s curriculum isn’t designed to convince students to join law enforcement. Rather, it aims to give them a deep understanding of law enforcement work and empower them to decide whether or not the field is for them. With this lack of realism, students weren’t having that experience.

THE SOLUTION

Throughout his time at Laconia PD, Clary had always kept up with the latest and greatest in police technology. His department had a long relationship with Axon that began with TASER energy weapons and folded in body-worn cameras just before he retired. Clary doesn't like to use unproven tech, so his history with Axon helped him take the plunge on VR. "I knew VR was coming up, and I knew Axon was working on one, so when I started seeing some of their advertisements, I sent out the request for more information," he says. "I leaned on Axon very early, and even though I did look at a couple of other products, I just felt safer with this."

Clary's program uses two VR headsets. The headsets can be used in conjunction with a projector to show the class what the student wearing it sees or used individually. Clary also has the option to watch the headset feeds on his computer.

"If I don't project the first headset, then when the students interact with it, the sound is just in their headsets, so you're really not disturbing the rest of the class," he says.

Being young digital natives, the students quickly grasped the technology. Clary says, "There was no pushback from the students and no pushback from the school board or the public during the rollout."

VR improved the realism of instruction scenarios almost overnight. "We can put the headsets on them and they're talking to people that aren't animated, that are real people," Clary says. No more students breaking out into fits of giggling. Plus, Clary has more control over how the scenarios proceed, what ground they cover, and how students experience them. Scenarios covering schizophrenia, for example, were all but impossible before Axon VR.

"It's really neat because it'll give you the scenario three times. You get to experience the scenario from the community members' point of view, the officer's view, or the backup officer's view. That's extremely new for me, extremely new for current law enforcement and extremely new for my students. They're seeing a lot of mental health issues through the VR headsets, which allows them to be a lot more empathetic," says Clary.

Another advantage for Clary was the ease with which Axon VR modules slotted into the existing curriculum. VR scenarios cover much of the same material he already targeted, so he didn't need to redesign his class to integrate the technology effectively. Plus, the scenarios support one of his central teachings – the importance of report writing – by providing plenty of material for students to report on. Not only that, but VR can help teach the students to standardize report writing by providing them each with an identical scenario, then comparing how different individuals write it up.

THE RESULTS

Clary says students love the VR program, and they're not afraid to say so. "When we do tours, the instructors kind of stand by and the seniors talk about the programs themselves to the sophomores. They're proud to say the technology we have is the same technology the local police departments have, and they're telling everybody about it."

That brings more students into the program, which in turn leads to better recruiting prospects for local police forces. Clary estimates around a third of his students express an intention to go into law enforcement at the start of the course. But in his last class, the number of pupils who followed through was even higher. After graduation, two joined the military, two went straight into local law enforcement and all but one of the others went to college for a law enforcement-related field such as forensic science.

Clary says he's "extremely satisfied" with the results, especially because his students are in such high demand among local law enforcement. "We're all small towns around here and it's very hard to recruit. Every single one of them that has hired a student from my class has been overtly excited and pleased with the quality of the student that we sent."

Clary has also found uses for VR outside of teaching students, namely teaching faculty at the school how to deal with challenging scenarios. "My director was even thinking of having some of the teachers that don't teach law enforcement go through some of those scenarios, like the English as a Second Language or the schizophrenia scenarios, just to know how to deal with these situations. They're not every day, but sometimes they're there."

Overall, Clary recommends other educators look into how VR can support their work. "Don't think you have to write a new curriculum," he says. He also wants to reassure others that the benefits far outweigh the initial price tag.

"Don't be afraid of the cost," he says. "It's well worth every penny."

To learn more about how Axon VR can improve engagement among your students, book a demo today.

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