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ACTION RESEARCH

Joint Practice Development and Action Research across the Further Education and Skills sector

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University of Sunderland

— *Intro*

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— *Intro*

The Learning and Skills Teacher Apprenticeship

The Level 5 Learning and Skills Teacher Apprenticeship integrates practical experience with academic studies, including the theory surrounding teaching and learning. It is aimed at anyone who currently works in, or plans to work in the Further Education and Skills sector. This can include vocational education, training, coaching and mentoring roles across a variety of industries.

The apprenticeship is designed to develop professional teaching and learning knowledge. It will progress apprentice planning, designing and delivery skills, supporting them to become highly reflective practitioners. Experienced academics with a wealth of employer experience support apprentices to engage with teaching and learning educational theories and practice, helping apprentices to explore how to implement this in practice.

Throughout the programme, apprentices investigate the techniques involved in the design, development, delivery, assessment and evaluation of learning.

https://www.sunderland.ac.uk/study/higher-and-degree-apprenticeships/learning-skills-teacher/

— *Intro*

Editor's Note

Welcome to the third issue of Action Research, showcasing the Joint Practice Development (JPD) projects of our Learning and Skills Teacher apprentices. This edition demonstrates the breadth of practitioner research taking place across education, healthcare, policing, community learning, and industry, with each project responding to authentic challenges through evidence-informed inquiry. A strong thread running throughout the issue is the creation of learning environments that support both cognitive and emotional development. From retrieval practice and learner confidence to emotional intelligence, menopause as a learning barrier, creative curricula, and purposeful learning environments, these studies show how relatively small changes can make a significant difference to learner engagement, inclusion, and professional practice.

Collectively, the projects reinforce the purpose of Joint Practice Development: using research to question existing practice, evaluate meaningful change, and improve outcomes for learners and organisations alike. They demonstrate that effective teaching extends beyond curriculum delivery to encompass wellbeing, belonging, confidence, and reflection. I hope this issue not only celebrates the excellent work of our apprentices but also encourages readers to reflect on their own practice and continue fostering a culture of inquiry, collaboration, and continuous improvement across the sector.

Reece Sohdi
Senior Lecturer in Further Education and Skills

What is Joint Practice Development?

Joint Practice Development (JPD) refers to a collaborative process where educators work together to enhance their professional practice in a collaborative approach, developing, testing, and refining teaching strategies and approaches.

Unlike traditional top-down professional development, JPD is a bottom-up, practice-based model that values mutual learning and knowledge exchange among educators. It fosters a culture of trust and shared responsibility, encouraging continuous improvement. Fielding et al. (2005), highlights the importance of this approach in building sustainable professional learning communities, and Cordingley (2015), underscores its effectiveness in supporting deep, context-sensitive improvements in teaching practice.

Can a 'Creative Curriculum' improve confidence, wellbeing, and employability among adults in community outreach and offender learning programmes?

Amy Brooks, Precious Oluleye & Bex Roberts

Introduction and Background

Junction 42's Creative Curriculum has been successfully used within prison settings to support personal development, confidence, and engagement. This project explored whether the same approach could be effectively transferred into a community outreach environment. The research focused on adults with experience of the criminal justice system, many of whom faced additional barriers including homelessness, substance misuse recovery, poor mental health, and social isolation. The primary aim was to investigate whether participation in a six-week creative curriculum could improve self-confidence, wellbeing, engagement, and employability-related skills.

Literature Review

Research into arts-based interventions within criminal justice settings suggests that creative programmes can positively influence confidence, self-esteem, motivation, and social development. Brewster (2014) found that participation in prison arts programmes improved life-effectiveness skills closely linked to Bandura's (1997) concept of self-efficacy, or an individual's belief in their ability to succeed. Lanskey et al. (2024) identified improvements in wellbeing, self-concept, and personal development through creative engagement. These findings align with Biesta's (2016) concept of subjectification, where learners develop greater agency and autonomy. Cheliotis and Jordanoska (2016) further argue that arts programmes can contribute to secondary desistance by supporting individuals to move beyond an offender identity towards becoming active and productive members of society.

Methodology

A mixed-methods approach was adopted to capture both measurable outcomes and rich participant experiences. The project involved the delivery of a six-week Creative Curriculum programme, with participants attending facilitated group sessions and completing additional creative activities independently. Quantitative data was collected through adapted pre- and post-programme questionnaires based on the Ministry of Justice Intermediate Outcomes Measurement Instrument (IOMI) and the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS). Qualitative data was gathered through participant interviews, focus groups, observations, feedback cards, and reflective comments. Eight participants initially enrolled onto the programme, with three completing all stages of the intervention.

Analysis of Results

67% of participants reported increased ratings across the measures used. Improvements were particularly evident in creativity, confidence, instruction-following, and feelings of usefulness. Wellbeing scores generally increased across participants, although one learner experienced a decline due to significant personal circumstances outside the programme. Qualitative feedback was positive as participants described enjoying the opportunity to try new activities, challenge themselves, and develop practical skills. One learner progressed beyond the programme by independently developing woodworking skills and expressed interest in leading future workshops. Others identified aspirations to engage in mentoring or further learning opportunities. Participants frequently highlighted the positive impact the programme had on their mental health, confidence, and sense of achievement.

Discussion

The findings suggest that creative engagement can positively influence wellbeing, confidence, and personal development within community outreach settings. Improvements in creativity, confidence, and feelings of usefulness support Bandura's (1997) theory of self-efficacy, indicating that successful participation in creative activities can strengthen beliefs in one's own capabilities. The findings also resonate with literature on secondary desistance, where positive identity transformation occurs through engagement in meaningful and constructive activities. However, participant attendance and retention were significantly influenced by wider social circumstances. Several participants experienced homelessness, substance misuse recovery, or criminal justice interventions during the project, reflecting Maslow's (1954) argument that basic physiological and safety needs must be addressed before higher-order learning and self-development can occur. These contextual challenges highlight both the value and complexity of delivering educational interventions within community-based settings.

Recommendations and Conclusion

The project provides promising evidence that creative curricula can support confidence, wellbeing, and employability-related skills among adults engaged in community outreach programmes. Junction 42 plans to build upon these findings through further arts-based projects, employability programmes, and digital skills initiatives. Despite the challenges associated with participant retention and complex life circumstances, the findings suggest that creative learning can act as a powerful catalyst for personal growth, wellbeing, and progression towards education, employment, and positive community participation.

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Can retrieval practices support Care Certificate learners to recall teaching and help implement their teaching into practice?

Elayne Chapman & Kirsty Clark

Introduction and Background

The Care Certificate programme provides three days of mandatory training for new healthcare support workers, with the ultimate goal of ensuring that learning is retained and effectively transferred into workplace practice. Whilst training evaluations often capture learner satisfaction, they do not always provide evidence that learning has been retained or implemented in professional roles. This project explored whether retrieval practice strategies could improve knowledge retention, identify learning gaps, and support learners to apply their training more effectively within clinical settings. The study focused on introducing structured retrieval activities, including challenge grids, knowledge checks, and reflective questions about workplace application, to evaluate their impact on learner progress and professional practice.

Literature Review

Atkinson and Shiffrin's (1968) model of memory highlights the need to transfer information from short-term to long-term memory, whilst Cognitive Load Theory suggests that previously learned knowledge reduces cognitive burden when encountering new information (Shibli & West, 2018; Lovell & Sherrington, 2020). Rosenshine (2012) emphasises the importance of regular review and checking for understanding, whilst Ausubel's work highlights the significant influence of prior knowledge on new learning (Simonsmeier et al., 2022). Research by Agarwal et al. (2014) found that retrieval practice improves learning outcomes and reduces learner anxiety, with most students reporting positive experiences. However, Anderson, Bjork and Bjork (1994) raise concerns regarding retrieval-induced forgetting, suggesting that recalling some information may temporarily inhibit recall of related content.

Methodology

A mixed-methods approach was adopted to investigate the impact of retrieval practices. Quantitative data were collected through challenge grid scores and analysis of learner performance data, whilst qualitative data were gathered through learner check-ins, knowledge checks, evaluations, and reflective responses within practice assessment documents. Retrieval activities included challenge grids administered shortly after training, knowledge-check questions embedded within learner documentation, and reflective prompts encouraging learners to explain how they had implemented training within their workplace practice. Data were collected from 27 learners.

Analysis of Results

Learners achieved strong challenge grid scores immediately following training, with an average score of 37 out of 45 on day one. Among learners who completed multiple challenge grids, 76.47% demonstrated improvement over time, suggesting that repeated retrieval strengthened knowledge retention. Knowledge checks and reflective responses also provided evidence that learners were successfully applying learning within their professional roles. Learners described improvements in person-centred care, communication, professional behaviour, and confidence in practice. Additional engagement activities, such as "Buzz Word Bingo," received particularly positive feedback, with all respondents reporting that the activity improved engagement and helped maintain concentration throughout training sessions.

Discussion

The findings support the hypothesis that retrieval practices can strengthen learning, provide evidence of retention, and facilitate the transfer of knowledge into workplace practice. The challenge grids offered valuable insight into learner understanding and highlighted areas where additional support could be provided. The results align closely with Cognitive Load Theory and Rosenshine's principles of instruction, which emphasise the importance of review, scaffolding, and repeated retrieval opportunities. The findings also reinforce Jones' (2020) work on the Ebbinghaus forgetting curve, suggesting that retrieval activities can counteract the rapid loss of newly acquired information.

Recommendations and Conclusion

The project recommends the continued use and expansion of retrieval practice strategies within Care Certificate training. Gathering learner feedback specifically about retrieval activities themselves may provide additional insight into learner perceptions and preferences. Greater consideration should also be given to learners' prior knowledge and experiences before training begins, enabling more targeted support and differentiation. Overall, the findings suggest that retrieval practice provides an effective mechanism for reinforcing learning, identifying knowledge gaps, and supporting learners to translate training into improved professional practice. As healthcare environments continue to require high standards of person-centred care, retrieval-based approaches offer a valuable strategy for strengthening both learning and workplace performance.

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What is the impact of retrieval practice on newly qualified nurses' confidence during preceptorship training?

Stephen Johnston & Pam Phoenix

Introduction and Background

Preceptorship programmes play a vital role in supporting newly qualified nurses as they transition into professional practice. The Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) describes preceptorship as a structured process that helps newly registered professionals integrate into their teams and develop confidence within their roles. Despite evidence that preceptorship programmes improve confidence and competence, there is limited exploration of how retrieval practice can be used to help learners recognise their own progress and strengthen their confidence over time. This project investigated whether the systematic use of retrieval practice could improve learner confidence, support reflection on learning, and strengthen knowledge retention among newly qualified nurses.

Literature Review

Rosenshine (2012) highlights the importance of frequent review and guided practice in strengthening memory, whilst Jones (2021) argues that retrieval activities help learners reconnect with previously taught content and bridge gaps between learning episodes. Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Theory further suggests that structured opportunities for reflection enhance learning by enabling learners to make sense of experiences and monitor their own development. Recent work has also identified links between retrieval practice, scaffolding, and increased learner confidence, with learners reporting greater understanding and stronger engagement when retrieval strategies are embedded within training programmes (Sohdi, 2025). Within nursing education, confidence is a particularly important outcome given concerns regarding early-career attrition and workforce retention (Devereux, 2024; Stacey, 2024).

Methodology

A mixed-methods approach was employed to examine changes in confidence across two cohorts of newly qualified nurses undertaking the first six months of a twelve-month preceptorship programme. One cohort acted as a comparison group and did not participate in structured retrieval activities, whilst the intervention cohort engaged in retrieval practice at the beginning of each monthly session. Quantitative data were collected using Likert-scale confidence measures, asking participants to rate confidence in their role, decision-making abilities, and readiness to undertake nurse-in-charge responsibilities. Qualitative data were gathered through follow-up questions exploring the reasons behind learners' confidence ratings.

Analysis of Results

Participants who regularly engaged in retrieval practice demonstrated stronger confidence scores at programme completion compared to their starting points. Learners reported that retrieval activities helped them reconnect with previous learning, recognise how much knowledge they had retained, and identify areas requiring further development. The end-of-programme retrieval grid was particularly valuable in enabling learners to visualise their learning journey and reflect on progress made throughout the programme. The retrieval activities also encouraged discussion between peers, helping participants revisit key concepts and build confidence through collaborative reflection and reinforcement of knowledge.

Discussion

The intervention appeared to help bridge the gap between monthly training sessions, reducing the likelihood of knowledge decay and helping learners feel more prepared when revisiting topics. The results align with Rosenshine's (2012) principles of instruction and Kolb's (1984) emphasis on reflection as a critical component of learning. Importantly, retrieval practice appeared to support not only knowledge retention but also learners' perceptions of their own competence and professional growth. However, the study also acknowledges that confidence is influenced by multiple factors, including workplace experiences, mentorship, and wider support systems. As a result, whilst retrieval practice may contribute to improved confidence, it is difficult to establish a direct causal relationship between the intervention and confidence outcomes alone.

Recommendations and Conclusion

The project recommends repeating the study with a complete six-month cohort and greater control of external variables to strengthen reliability and validity. Future research could compare different forms of retrieval practice to determine which approaches are most effective in supporting confidence development. The use of standardised confidence measures, alongside external assessments of competence, would also strengthen future investigations. Despite limitations relating to sample size and programme timing, the findings suggest that retrieval practice offers a valuable mechanism for supporting reflection, reinforcing learning, and increasing confidence among newly qualified nurses. In high-pressure healthcare environments where confidence and competence are closely linked to professional performance, retrieval-based approaches may provide an effective strategy for enhancing both learning and workforce development.

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What is the impact of integrating Emotional Intelligence (EI) into manufacturing onboarding programmes on team dynamics, safety culture, and workplace readiness?

Steve Lawson & Chris Small

Introduction and Background

In response to significant organisational growth, AESC UK expanded from approximately 300 employees to a planned workforce of 1,000 within a new Gigaplant manufacturing model. This rapid growth created a substantial skills and workforce development challenge, leading to the establishment of the National Battery Training and Skills Academy in partnership with New College Durham. Alongside technical and compliance-based training, there was growing recognition of the importance of emotional intelligence (EI) in supporting team integration, workplace safety, and organisational culture. This project explored whether integrating emotional intelligence into the onboarding process could strengthen team dynamics, improve workplace readiness, and contribute to safer and more effective manufacturing teams.

Literature Review

Emotional intelligence is commonly defined as the ability to recognise, understand, and manage one's own emotions while also responding effectively to the emotions of others (Goleman, 1995; Bar-On, 2006). Research suggests that emotionally intelligent workplaces experience stronger communication, improved collaboration, and reduced workplace incidents. Edmondson's (1999) work on psychological safety highlights the importance of creating environments where employees feel comfortable contributing ideas, asking questions, and discussing concerns. Within manufacturing settings, effective team communication and emotional awareness are closely linked to safety culture and operational performance (Clarke, 2010; Neal & Griffin, 2006). Research into onboarding further demonstrates that structured induction processes contribute significantly to employee retention, engagement, and productivity (Bauer, 2010; Ashforth, Sluss & Saks, 2007).

Methodology

The study adopted an action research framework using a mixed-methods design. Quantitative data were collected through pre- and post-onboarding surveys involving 50 new employees, measuring emotional competencies, empathy, collaboration, and perceptions of team dynamics. Qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with five trainers and observational studies across three onboarding cohorts. The use of multiple data sources enabled triangulation, enhancing the credibility of findings and providing insight into both measurable outcomes and lived experiences within the onboarding process.

Analysis of Results

Participants reported increased confidence in recognising their own emotions, with average ratings rising from 3.2 to 4.0 out of 5. Empathy scores increased from 3.5 to 4.2, while team trust levels averaged 4.1 following programme completion. Furthermore, 85% of participants reported that their expectations regarding teamwork and collaboration had been met. Trainer interviews highlighted strengths within the onboarding programme, including effective mentorship opportunities and a structured but adaptable delivery model. However, trainers also identified challenges relating to information overload, inconsistent delivery practices, and difficulties integrating new employees into existing teams.

Discussion

Improvements in emotional awareness, empathy, and team trust support the view that onboarding should extend beyond technical competence and compliance training. Interactive learning activities appeared particularly effective in fostering collaboration and emotional responsiveness, aligning with experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984). Trainer feedback also highlighted the importance of structured support systems, mentorship, and opportunities for reflection. These findings reinforce existing research suggesting that psychological safety, emotional awareness, and effective communication are important contributors to both organisational performance and workplace safety. In a high-risk manufacturing environment, emotionally intelligent behaviours may support safer decision-making, stronger relationships, and greater workforce resilience.

Recommendations and Conclusion

The study recommends formally embedding emotional intelligence within onboarding programmes through structured activities, reflective discussions, role-playing scenarios, mentorship opportunities, and regular feedback mechanisms. Organisations should consider developing digital and immersive learning approaches, including virtual reality simulations and online EI development platforms, to support ongoing learning. Overall, the findings indicate that integrating emotional intelligence into onboarding programmes can contribute to stronger team cohesion, improved workplace safety, and enhanced organisational performance. As manufacturing environments become increasingly complex and collaborative, emotional intelligence represents an important component of workforce development and organisational success.

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Can Learner Task Notebooks enhance critical thinking and engagement when using video-based learning in police training?

Claire Metcalfe & Michael Hatcher

Introduction and Background

Video resources are frequently used within police training to increase learner engagement and provide realistic scenarios for analysis and discussion. They are particularly valuable when teaching complex or subjective topics, allowing learners to explore professional judgement, decision-making, and investigative practice through shared experiences. However, observations within crime training programmes suggested that learners sometimes focused on recalling events from the video rather than engaging in deeper analysis and critical thinking. This project explored whether the introduction of structured Learner Task Notebooks could improve the effectiveness of video-based learning by providing clearer purpose, focused questioning, and opportunities for reflection.

Literature Review

Didau (2015) argues that learning is often invisible and must be inferred through evidence of thinking and application. Sherrington (2019, 2021) highlights the importance of effective questioning and formative assessment in making learning visible, while Brame (2016) identifies cognitive load, engagement, and active learning as critical considerations when using educational videos. Research suggests that providing learners with guiding questions before viewing video content reduces extraneous cognitive load and encourages purposeful engagement. Studies also indicate that videos can act as powerful tools for professional socialisation, particularly within policing, where they communicate organisational norms, values, and expectations (Keesman, 2023). Despite these findings, limited research exists regarding the structured use of learner workbooks alongside video resources in police training, particularly when developing critical thinking in investigative contexts.

Methodology

A mixed-methods approach was adopted to explore the impact of Learner Task Notebooks across two police training programmes: the Initial Crime Investigators Development Programme and the Investigative Skills Course. Participants included three trainers, twelve learners on the detective development programme, and eight learners attending an investigative skills course. Learners viewed documentary and CCTV-based video resources supported by structured notebooks containing guided questions linked directly to learning objectives. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected through Microsoft Forms surveys, learner feedback, trainer feedback, and informal observations.

Analysis of Results

Trainers reported that the notebooks improved learner engagement, participation, investigative thinking, and the structure of classroom discussions. The notebooks provided a clear framework that enabled trainers to focus on facilitating learning rather than repeatedly clarifying task expectations. Learners reported that the notebooks helped them understand the purpose of viewing the video, identify key investigative details, and think more critically about the evidence presented. Thematic analysis identified several recurring benefits, including improved focus, stronger analytical thinking, enhanced memory and note-taking, and greater support for investigative reasoning. Many learners expressed a desire to continue using similar notebooks in future training activities and offered suggestions for further development, demonstrating strong engagement with the approach.

Discussion

By embedding purposeful questioning and structured reflection, the notebooks encouraged learners to move beyond passive observation towards active analysis and evaluation. These outcomes align with cognitive load theory, as the notebooks reduced unnecessary cognitive demands and directed learner attention towards key learning objectives. The results also support formative assessment principles, with structured questions helping learners articulate their reasoning and engage in richer classroom discussions. While the sample size was relatively small and formal observation opportunities were limited, the consistency of feedback from both learners and trainers suggests that structured notebooks can play an important role in developing investigative mindsets and critical thinking skills.

Recommendations and Conclusion

The study recommends the continued and expanded use of Learner Task Notebooks across police training programmes. Both trainers and learners supported their future use, highlighting their value in promoting engagement, critical thinking, and purposeful discussion. Future developments could include digital versions of the notebooks, greater adaptation for remote learning environments, and further research exploring their effectiveness when used alongside longer or emotionally challenging video content. Overall, the project demonstrates that carefully designed learner notebooks can significantly enhance the educational value of video resources, helping learners engage more deeply with complex investigative scenarios while providing trainers with a practical tool to support learning and discussion.

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Are classroom display boards an extension of learning or a distraction? Exploring their impact on learner attention and engagement

Harley Robinson & Rebecca Ramsden

Introduction & Background

Classroom display boards are a common feature of educational environments and are often used to promote learning, reinforce key concepts, motivate learners, and create stimulating learning spaces. However, questions remain regarding whether display boards genuinely support learning or whether they may inadvertently distract learners from lesson content. This project explored the role of display boards within vocational education settings, focusing particularly on whether they act as an effective extension of teaching or a potential hindrance to learner attention. The study investigated how learners interacted with different classroom environments and whether display content influenced engagement, focus, and learning behaviours.

Literature Review

Garnett (2006) argues that effective displays can support long-term recall and encourage learner engagement, while Creekmore (1987) found that students learned content more effectively when displays reinforced current learning topics. However, other research highlights potential concerns regarding visual distractions within classrooms. Fisher, Godwin and Seltman (2014) found that excessive visual stimuli can negatively affect attention and learning, particularly when displays are cluttered or unrelated to lesson content. Research involving learners with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) indicates that some learners, particularly those with autism or ADHD, may be more susceptible to visual distractions and gaze aversion behaviours (Hanley et al., 2017; Riby, Doherty-Sneddon & Whittle, 2012).

Methodology

The study adopted an action research approach using both qualitative and quantitative methods. Observations were conducted across three teaching environments: a classroom with no display boards, a classroom with non-subject-related displays, and a classroom containing displays directly related to the curriculum. An ethogram was developed to record learner behaviours, including eye movements, attention patterns, and off-task behaviours such as looking at displays, walls, windows, peers, or mobile devices. In addition, teaching staff completed questionnaires exploring how display boards were used, their perceived value, and whether they believed displays affected learner attention. This mixed-methods approach enabled comparisons between different learning environments while capturing practitioner perspectives on classroom displays.

Analysis of Results

In classrooms without displays, learners appeared more likely to direct their attention towards mobile devices or other activities when waiting for tasks to continue. In classrooms with non-subject-related displays, some learners were observed glancing at walls and displays during note-taking activities, although this did not appear to significantly disrupt learning. The most interesting findings emerged in classrooms containing subject-related displays. Learners actively engaged with the displays, with some commenting on their relevance to the lesson and visibly reading information displayed on classroom walls. Staff questionnaires revealed that all participating teachers used display boards, although most acknowledged that they rarely incorporated them directly into teaching activities. Respondents generally believed that learners found displays useful, particularly when they were colourful, informative, and relevant to the subject area.

Discussion

Subject-related displays appeared to attract learner attention more frequently than unrelated displays, indicating that learners may perceive them as useful extensions of classroom learning. However, this raises an important question: does attention directed towards displays represent meaningful engagement or a distraction from the immediate lesson? The research highlights a tension within existing literature. Whilst displays can support recall, motivation, and subject engagement, poorly designed or excessive displays may contribute to cognitive overload and distraction, particularly for learners with SEND characteristics. Furthermore, the study found that although teachers valued display boards, many did not actively utilise them within their teaching practice, raising questions about whether their educational potential is being fully realised.

Recommendations and Conclusion

The project recommends that display boards should be strategically designed and directly linked to current curriculum content if they are to contribute positively to learning. Teachers should consider how displays can be actively integrated into lessons rather than serving solely as decorative features. Overall, the findings suggest that display boards have the potential to enhance learning when used purposefully, but they may also become distractions if they are cluttered, irrelevant, or disconnected from classroom teaching. Effective use therefore depends not simply on having displays, but on ensuring they have a clear educational purpose that supports both teaching and learning.

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Addressing menopause as a learning barrier: How can training providers better support learners experiencing menopause and perimenopause?

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Introduction & Background

Whilst significant progress has been made in identifying and supporting learning barriers within police training, menopause and perimenopause remain relatively underexplored areas. Despite increasing organisational awareness of the impact of menopause within policing, little attention has been paid to how symptoms affect learning, training participation, and professional development opportunities. This project investigated whether menopause-related symptoms create barriers to successful learning and explored practical strategies that trainers and organisations can implement to better support affected learners.

Literature Review

Symptoms such as fatigue, brain fog, concentration difficulties, memory challenges, anxiety, sleep disruption, and vasomotor symptoms can negatively affect learning experiences and workplace performance (Galletly, 2024). Research suggests that declining oestrogen levels may contribute to cognitive changes affecting memory and information processing (Cho et al., 2025). Whilst relatively simple environmental adjustments, such as improved ventilation and regular breaks, can help alleviate some physical symptoms, stigma surrounding menopause often discourages open discussion between learners and trainers. Existing research emphasises the importance of normalising conversations around menopause and creating supportive organisational cultures that enable reasonable adjustments and inclusive learning environments (MacArthur, 2021; Clare, 2021). Although the College of Policing has produced guidance regarding menopause in the workplace, there remains limited consideration of its specific impact on learning and training participation.

Methodology

A mixed-methods approach was adopted to capture both measurable trends and personal experiences. Quantitative data were gathered through anonymous questionnaires exploring learner demographics, training experiences, and symptom prevalence. Qualitative data were collected through written testimonies and personal reflections, allowing participants to describe the impact of menopause on their learning experiences in greater depth. Particular attention was given to confidentiality due to the sensitive nature of the topic and the potential influence of stigma on disclosure. The study also considered organisational policies, existing support mechanisms, and opportunities for introducing more inclusive training practices.

Analysis of Results

Brain fog, concentration difficulties, fatigue, memory challenges, low mood, disrupted sleep, and overheating were identified as the most common barriers to learning. Participants frequently reported struggling to process information, retain knowledge, remain physically comfortable, and fully engage in training activities. Physical training courses, particularly those involving personal safety training and public order training, were identified as especially challenging due to heat, protective equipment, physical exertion, and limited flexibility. Many participants also expressed concerns about embarrassment, anxiety, and a lack of understanding from colleagues, particularly within predominantly male training environments.

Discussion

The combination of cognitive, emotional, and physical symptoms can affect both learner performance and confidence, potentially limiting access to training and career progression opportunities. Importantly, the research highlights that many of these barriers can be reduced through relatively straightforward adjustments. Increased awareness among trainers, improved communication, flexible delivery approaches, and environmental modifications can create more inclusive learning environments. Organisational stigma remains a key obstacle, with some learners reluctant to discuss symptoms or request support. Developing menopause awareness among trainers and embedding inclusive practices within training programmes may therefore be critical to supporting learner success and wellbeing.

Recommendations and Conclusion

The project recommends the development of a formal Standard Operating Procedure for menopausal learners within police training environments. Practical adjustments should include improved ventilation, access to water, more frequent breaks, flexible delivery arrangements, suitable accommodation, and the provision of handouts or pre-course materials to support memory and information retention. Trainers should receive dedicated training to improve understanding of menopause symptoms, appropriate language use, and strategies for making reasonable adjustments. Establishing direct communication channels between learners and trainers prior to training events may also help identify support needs early. Overall, menopause can create significant barriers to learning, but with increased awareness, supportive practice, and organisational commitment, training providers can create more inclusive environments that enable all learners to succeed regardless of life stage.

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