Centre for Policing Research and Learning

Game-based Learning for Police Training in Child Interviewing

Abstract

Police frequently come into contact with children, either victims who may be at risk, or child witnesses who can provide valuable evidence. When dealing with children police officers have to cope with a complex set of emotions. There is important guidance provided on how to safeguard children's welfare whilst also facilitating the collection of high quality evidence. However, there are often key barriers to effectively working with children. The aim of this research is to assist in the embedding of good practice and provide a more engaging mode of the training of police officers when talking to children. Based on game-based learning, a gaming simulation has been developed to complement existing training methods, aimed to improve the competence of early career police officers when taking first accounts from children. The research process is a unique collaboration between police experts, game design experts and research academics. There are three iterative phases, co-development, formative evolution, and the summative evaluation where the final game-based simulation will be evaluated with the target users (new recruits) across two police forces.

Background

Interviewing vulnerable children and using them as witnesses is a difficult and sometimes challenging issue, especially for new recruits and early career front line police, who may have limited training and real-life experience of interacting with children. Past research within child interviewing has often focused on the controversy around suggestibility and reliability of a child's statement, their vulnerability in the judicial setting, and a child's perception of the police as an authority figure [1]–[3]. To support police practice in this field there are important 'Achieving Best Practice' (ABP) guidelines provided on how to safeguard children's welfare whilst facilitating the collection of high quality evidence [4], [5]. However, all too often police do not adhere to these guidelines when conducting interviews with children [6]. One of the key barriers preventing the adoption of these guidelines is the training of front line police officers, making it difficult for them to develop the necessary skills that can assist them when faced with taking an initial account from a child. In the recent 2015 HMIC report entitled 'In Harm's Way', the specialist training of police in the area of child interviewing skills (especially when taking first accounts), was considered ineffective with a reliance on simplistic online training [7] . This has resulted in a police problem, with disengagement with current online training (e.g., NCALT), along with a simplistic understanding of the techniques and processes required to gain good quality initial accounts from children.

Previous child interviewing research suggests that child statements should be taken as early as possible after the alleged offence. Interviewers should encourage children to disclose as much information as possible by using open-ended prompts (e.g., 'Tell me what happened'), as opposed to focused (yes/no) questions [8], [9]. Children are capable of providing accurate information about their experiences, but the quality of communication and the types of retrieval methods used need to be carefully considered [10]. Far too often child witnesses are not interviewed by police as their abilities at remembering the events are considered poor. Research has identified various techniques, such as revisiting the context in which the event occurred, or drawing during interviews to enhance free-recall while avoiding feelings of risk and error [10]. Paine et al. [11] identified that the mode of interaction with children that includes visual prompts can positively impact upon the success of these interviews. Unfortunately, these findings have not effectively been passed through into police practice. Research has revealed that more often suggestive utterances and focused questions were used as a means to obtain accurate information due to limited time and lack of effective training [9], [12].

Both academic research and tacit police knowledge have identified the important need for effective training when taking first statement from a child, especially for front-line early career police officers. Although new recruit officers are given some training in interview procedures these are not focused towards children, and there is little time to practice these skills. One of the essential elements when interacting with a child is the ability to build good rapport. The onus is for the front line officers (who arrives first at the scene), to establish good rapport quickly. This can be very challenging, especially when time maybe limited and there are other witnesses and distractions to deal with. Current online-training courses are limited and deemed inadequate to develop these skills.

Research Aims

The aim of this research is to develop a serious game that focuses the learners on specific tacit skills that can support them in their early career, prior to attending a more specialist child-interviewing course. The anticipated outcome of this research will be to:

- provide a more engaging mode of online training using game-based learning techniques.
- assist front-line new recruit police officers in developing a deeper understanding of effective practices and tacit knowledge needed when collecting a first account from a child.
- complement existing training methods providing a more innovative solution.

The Serious Game

The Open University has contracted an expert serious game-based learning company called HighSkillz to create the game-based simulation to be used within this study. The Child Interview Simulator (CIS) is a serious game that simulates a real-life situation, allowing the learner to play the role of police officer whose goal is to obtain a first account from a child that has witnessed an alleged criminal offence, and then go on to conduct an ABE interview. Learners will engage in dialogue (via text) with characters within a storyline and will be challenged to determine what the correct processes (guidelines) are when interviewing a child. The simulation will monitor the actions of the learner, and qualify the decisions made according to an assessment matrix. At different stages during the game the learner is given detailed feedback of what was done correctly and the implications of poor decisions.

The Development Process – Current Status

The game development process has been co-developed between the UK police force, game experts and research academics, following an iterative development cycle across three phases:

1. Co-design of the CIS (Lancashire Constabulary Lead, Advisory The Met and TVP)
2. Develop initial prototype and conduct Formative Evaluation
3. Develop final prototype and conduct Summative Evaluation

1. Co-design

In collaboration with police experts 'best practices' were identified through example storylines, sceneries, storyboards and game flows to create a final visual mock-up. The learning objectives (metrics) were defined along with content (dialogue) needed to create the first initial prototype.

2. Formative Evaluation

The first initial prototype was created and evaluated in house and then in Lancashire by 8 police officers (2 trainers, 3 experts in child interviewing, and 3 new recruits), and a full evaluation report created. Feedback from this is currently being used to improve the CIS and create a final prototype.

3. Summative Evaluation:

The plan of the summative evaluation is to conduct a large-scale evaluation (N=50-60), across at least two different forces. These first evaluations are being scheduled for December. A mix of quantitative questionnaires, and qualitative interviews/focus groups/observations will be used. The evaluation plan is currently being developed.

Published Outcomes

Hart, J., Adams, A. and Oliveira, M, "Evidence-based Practice: Innovative Training and Technical Support for UK Police Professional Development". *CEPOL European Police Science and Research Conference*. October 2016

Margoudi, M., Hart, J., Adams, A., & Oliveira, M. "Exploring Emotion Representation to Support Dialogue in Police Training on Child Interviewing", *Joint International Conference on Serious Games* (pp. 73-86), Springer International Publishing

It is anticipated that further conference papers and journal articles will be published, which will co-written between Lancashire Police, HighSkillz and The Open University.

Benefits

The outcomes of this research will be of immediate benefit to Lancashire Constabulary, who has invested their time in co-developing the CIS. Other police forces within the OU Police Research Consortium will have the opportunity to become involved during the evaluation process.

The scope of this research has the potential to enhance all police forces across the UK and Wales, as if proven, it could offer a more engaging and effective way of learning that could support front line police officers, allowing them to enhance their skill, knowledge and confidence when they are interacting with children.

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