

What Makes A Good Firearms Training Class?

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Any person who takes a firearms training course has to pay for tuition and ammunition. Sometimes, extensive travel costs are required. Since the student is usually paying hard earned dollars for these classes, every student needs to be able to determine if the firearms training provides the best value for the money spent. This article describes some useful criteria for evaluating an instructional experience. Areas of evaluation include the instructor, the curriculum, safety issues, and the student.

At the beginning of every firearms training session, *a clear set of course objectives* should be stated. During the course, anytime an objective is obtained, the instructor should pause, reiterate the objective, *and indicate how the objects were satisfied.*

Good shooters are not necessarily effective firearms instructors. Most good shooters instruct strictly by demonstration. They show the students how to do something without any explanation and expect the students to determine the necessary steps to follow. An effective instructor gives *clear, step by step procedural instructions*. Procedural means that a series of steps are presented that are understood and that can be mechanically performed to obtain a specific skill. The instructor then needs to lead the students through each step, one step at a time. After the student attempts to follow the complete sequence, the instructor should be able to provide *clear precise useful diagnostics*. These diagnostics should be in the form of very precise actions to be taken by the student to improve mastery of the skill involved.

I once took an introductory carbine class. The first command was “Lock and Load”. No explanation and training were given on the 8 steps necessary to perform this command. After shooting the firearm, the group was about 12” wide. The diagnostic instructions were to “Try something different.” If you are paying money for this lack of information, you are clearly being duped.

Firearms usage requires extensive manual activity as well as eye-hand coordination. When constructing curricula for physically based skills, such as firearms training, the instructional sequence must proceed from *simple skills to more complex skills*. Moreover, the skill sequence taught in the curriculum should be organized in such a manner as to have the *complex skills build upon the previously learned simpler skills*.

An important evaluation criterion for any firearms training curriculum should involve some *objective method for evaluating progress* as a result of participation. The most common format used is a pre-test and a post test that consist of a representative set of skills. If the course is a basic course, then only a post test is likely. In any case, students should be given some criteria for evaluating the results of the test. Testing formats such

as this are also an effective means by which the instructor can assess the need for improvement in the instructor's skills.

Experience with firearms training curricula has shown that a number of elements are most useful for building automatic reactions and muscle memory. A ***high rate of live fire directed at specific skills*** during training improves the smoothness and the speed of the activity by elimination of excessive movement during the exercise. In our classes, we typically fire 800 – 1200 rounds during a 12 hour training day. ***Varying the stress levels*** through timed exercises forces the student to focus on the specific skills while under pressure, further eliminating excess movement. ***Variation of shooting conditions and shooting positions*** further programs the autonomous muscle memory so that the shooter acquires the desired skill as a programmed response in a confrontational situation.

Mindset training is a very important aspect of any curriculum that deals with the effective use of firearms. Exercises may begin from a standing position shooting at paper targets under ***benign conditions*** and should proceed throughout the class to end the session with moving in the dark, shooting from behind barriers, shooting from under cars, and dealing with a ***wide range of lighting conditions***.

A well designed curriculum should leave the student with ***some very specific feelings***: I learned some new skills, I improved some existing skills, I feel like I've been in a gunfight, and I had fun.

If an instructor develops and utilizes a curriculum that meets all of the criteria above, the class is likely to be very dynamic indeed. Therefore, safety is a major issue. The manner in which the class exercises are conducted is the key determinant of safety. Each skill should be ***practiced step by step***. Skills should be ***practiced first with an unloaded weapon*** prior to any attempts to actually perform the skill with a live weapon. When students are at the highest risk, such as exercises that involve shooting on the move, all exercises should be ***performed in relays***. When one relay is performing the skill, another relay should act as the safety officers. Each shooter should have an assigned safety officer who stays behind the shooter and controls muzzle discipline and line discipline.

The final contributor to an effective firearms training class is the student. Students should ***follow directions of the instructor*** (otherwise, why pay money for the class), train with ***multiple instructors of sufficient quality***, and train with ***multiple weapons and weapons configurations*** (for instance, iron sights and combat optics on carbines).

Sworn officers should ***also train regularly with civilians***. The training is often much better and more effective than the training that occurs within the typical law enforcement agency. This factor alone is likely to do more to save your life on the street than anything else that you do when training. Officers need to see that civilians who take firearms training are very serious about their gun handling skills as well as their tactical management skills.

Finally, agency administrators need to realize that training with civilians is likely to be one of the *most effective means of community relations* available to law enforcement officers today.