



The Reality and Myths of Distance Learning

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After fifteen years of conflict, trillions of dollars spent, and troop withdrawals from foreign theaters, the Army's challenge is to shrink back to a manageable size, able to support national strategy yet, agile enough to operate on a significantly lower funding level. The constraints of the Budget Control Act of 2011 and the more recent Bipartisan Budget Act (BBA) signed in December of 2013¹ are forcing the Army senior leadership to field the best force possible with available resources. Historically the Army reduces troop levels after conflicts.² Acquisition programs tend to lose support and/or congress cuts or reduces funding all together. While there are resources the Army may be able to do without, there are areas where they cannot accept the risk.

One of these areas is the investment in human capital. The Army's Strategic Vision begins with "The All-Volunteer Army will remain the most highly trained and professional land force in the world."³ Supporting this vision is their focus on training and leader development, with the guidance to the force that "Training is a crucial investment in force readiness."⁴ The Army must achieve this without growing educational infrastructure; strapped with a finite throughput of students, the Army needed other options. Distance Learning (DL) is one avenue that will support a large population of students with minimal resources and infrastructure.

The advancement in technology over the last decade has made Distance Learning able to achieve the same learning outcomes as resident programs; however, competing demands for the distance learner can become distractors for the student doing coursework in their spare time, and the old perception that 'only the best' attend the resident course still lingers. Also, many tend to resist change and are convinced that students must complete studies in a resident 'brick and mortar' schoolhouse to receive the best available education. Technology will only continue to get better, so distance learning is clearly a viable quality alternative mode of education.

The Good!

The advantages of Distance Learning are students are able to achieve the same learning as in face-to-face (F2F) modalities, it is cost effective, and it provides a lot of flexibility. Perhaps the largest misconception is that distance learning is not as good as face-to-face instruction; however, that is not the case. One recent meta-analysis looking at learning outcomes in online versus face-to-face courses found that "Meta-analytic work spanning the past several decades has identified negligible to modest difference in student performance between online and face-to-face course formats."⁵ The U.S. Department of Education's 2010 (revised) study 'Evaluation of Evidence-Based Practices in Online Learning' found that "Students in online conditions performed modestly better, on average, than those learning the same material through traditional face-to-face instruction."⁶ Surely there are areas where the learning outcomes are higher in face-to-face instruction, but conversely there would be areas where Distance Learning creates better outcomes. In a recent RAND study on Army Distance Learning, RAND does acknowledge that past research contends that DL can provide training as effective (more efficiently in some cases) than classroom training, yet they still proffer that they "do not believe DL can fully supplant residential instruction in civilian education any more than it can in military training."⁷ Still, with respect to the quality of learning, the Army is not losing educational value with distance.

From the macro view alone, just considering personnel moving costs and infrastructure requirements, Distance Learning is a cost effective approach to educating the force. The Army University's Command and General Staff College (CGSC) provides a good example to illustrate this significant savings. The Command and General Staff Officers Course (CGSOC) provides resident instruction to approximately thirteen hundred students⁸ while



the Department of Distance Education (DDE) has approximately fifty two hundred students taking the course in a distance learning format.⁹ The United States General Accountability Office (GAO) 2015 report to congressional committees on Military Compensation (GAO-15-713) assess the cost to move a military family at a little over thirteen thousand dollars each.¹⁰ Using the above numbers and not accounting for the maximum population for the Department of Distance Education (which is more potential savings), the Army enjoys a savings of over sixty seven million dollars (moving cost times number of students in distance learning). The resident program has a state of the art facility to educate the thirteen hundred students, where the Distance Learning program does not need substantial infrastructure or budget to deliver the curriculum to four times as many students.

Strict timelines and locations do not drive Distance Learning, making it significantly more flexible than the traditional face-to-face education. Staying with the example of the Command and General Staff College, the Army offers the resident course once a year beginning in August and ending in May. So to start, an officer's personal timeline must align with these dates; if deployed they will have to defer until the next year, or perhaps some family issues might prevent attending. The college synchronizes the tight master schedule to maintain the complex array of daily activities. However, one small deviation will disrupt the well-orchestrated schedule. A guest speaker time change (or addition) or weather related delays and closings require a schedule adjustment that will ripple through the schedule with changes. Conversely, the Distance Learning format has no set time or place for most lessons, so students have the flexibility to choose when to 'attend' class. They can take lessons when they want, where they want. In many cases, they can also work ahead, or miss a class and catch up. Distance Learning provides students more options to complete the work. Now, while there are some pluses to Distance Learning, there are also some drawbacks.

The Bad!

While Distance Learning is a flexible educational option, it does not provide the same experience as traditional formats because of the geographical separation of students and competing demands with other daily requirements. Distance Learning students do miss the social and networking aspects of the traditional resident format. Geographical separation does not allow students to collaborate in person like traditional forums. Each of these elements are unique qualities of resident instruction. Interpersonal skills are always important in large organizations, especially when working in supervisory roles. A lot of 'business' occurs at casual social functions along with making personal friendships. With that, is the opportunity to form opinions of other's strengths and weaknesses. In the Army, focusing groups to achieve a common purpose is one of the foundations of success; understanding people is part of that dynamic. The first principle of Mission Command is to "build cohesive teams through trust."¹¹ While students in DL miss out on opportunities to study and build group dynamic in f2f settings, they gain substantial experience working in a networked environment building trust in online situations, which is becoming commonplace in the military because of asymmetric operations and robust online conferencing suites. (See "[Mission Command in Education](#)" for more on this).

Balancing a full time job and finding time for school is the biggest competing demand for the distance adult learner. Unlike a resident format where the student's place of duty is school, Distance Learning students have to work their job, and then find time to do the schooling. So inherently, schooling becomes secondary or tertiary to the distance learner versus the 'job' for the face-to-face learner. Arguably, family is another competing demand, however the importance of family trumps any schooling requirement, so to this extent would be equal in either modality. Regardless, through all the drawbacks, one element that is admirable for the distance learner is their dedication to their profession. Even with the balancing act between a full time job, family, and other personal demands, many persevere, do well and subsequently enjoy the rewards of promotion and command that come with a competitive career. However, despite the advancement of technology designed for distance education through the years, there are always those whom are reluctant to accept change.



The Ugly!

Advancements in technology make it possible to provide a robust virtual learning environment that will achieve the same learning outcomes as face-to-face, however perceptions are slow to change, and some view Distance Learning as an inferior option. Again, through the lens of Army education, some do not accept that Distance Learning can achieve the same learning outcomes as face-to-face.

Another mindset is if an officer did not attend the resident course, they do not have the same potential as those that did. Previous discussion provides evidence that Distance Learning is on par with the face-to-face approach. Perhaps the issue is many of the 'naysayers' are not aware of the evidence or chose to discount its validity, which is not uncommon. The Wright State University study found that historically many institutions met with resistance toward accepting Distance Learning, however in the last decade many of the opinions changed. In fact, the percentage of academic leaders that rate online education higher than face-to-face has increased from 52% to 77%.¹² So it appears that Distance Learning is gaining acceptance.

Another stigma associated with Distance Learning is the mindset that the potential of the distance learner is not as high as the face-to-face learner. This is an artifact of twenty years ago when the Army only selected half of an officer's year group to attend CGSOC in resident, leaving the rest to study via correspondence (which was literally boxes of books) or not at all. Based upon throughput capability of the college (CGSC) the Army could not get every officer through the resident course, therefore, the officers who demonstrated the most potential went; the others did the box of books. This did establish a clear division of any given year group based upon board results. The correspondence version was extremely basic, and did not have the ability to create the same/similar experience as the resident course though a virtual classroom. There was no collaboration, no student to student interaction, no learning from others' experiences. But through the last several decades times have changed: turmoil in the middle east refocused attention from education to operational experience; technology advanced to be able to replicate the classroom experience online; an officer's availability to attend the resident course did not always align with the start date of the course; even the course design evolved though the years. Through this process of evolution, the Army was able to educate its entire intermediate level officers in differing modalities, achieving the same learning outcomes. The bottom line is, the cross section of students has changed though the years, yet the stigma still permeates.

Moving back to the example of the Command and General Staff School, the Army's approach to intermediate level education evolved from the 'one size fits all' approach to one that provides a common core of education for all the officers, and the ability to receive a credentialing course based upon the officers specialty and/or educational needs. As an example, the Command and General Staff Officers School has two different courses: a common core course, and an advance operations course. These are available in both formats (DL and F2F). The common core curriculum is required for all intermediate level education regardless of an officer's specialty. The advance operations course is primarily for the Maneuver, Fires, and Effects officers (Infantry, Armor, etc.) and is the credentialing course for those specialties. Conversely, a Military Intelligence (MI) officer would have to take the common core course, but could attend a Strategic Intelligence course (as an example) that would suffice for the advance operations course.

So, to dispel some of the lingering stigma from the 'old school' approach, one must examine the populations that are not able to attend in resident. Some officers do not need both courses so do not attend. The Army gains more by specializing educational requirements for specialties that do not need what the course offers. As of March 2012, the Army allows approximately fifty alternative credentialing courses including some programs like the Interagency Fellowship Program and the Joint Chief/Secretary of Defense Internship program.¹³ Both of these are elite programs that only accept a small percentage from the best officers of each year group. The United States Military Academy locks cadre into service obligations, so by the time the officer completes their commitment at the academy they need to move back to the operational force and hold a Key Developmental (KD) position to



remain competitive for promotion. Both of these populations of officers have demonstrated significant potential and are highly competitive, yet they normally do not attend the resident CGSC course. These are just two examples that should dispel the myth of inequality.

One other population worth discussing here is the National Guard and Reserves. They do not get many allocations to attend the resident course so they rely on other avenues available for common core education through classes provided through reserve schools or distance learning. However, the only mode available to complete the advance operations course (a credentialing course) is via distance learning. (See "[CGSOC at a Distance](#)" for more on this). Within both these populations are many quality officers who progress to command battalions, brigades, and to become the senior leadership of their service. So again, the available modality dictates how the officer completes their professional military education, not the quality. As all this pans out, circumstances and educational needs dictate how an officer receives their education.

There are many benefits and some shortcomings to distance education along with (in some cases) outdated perceptions of the overall quality of the educational benefits. However, advancements in technology presents new avenues to provide quality learning to students on par with the traditional face-to-face model of learning. As with any situation, there are always some tradeoffs in a chosen modality, but personal drive and perseverance will prevail. As with most change, there are always those that are slow to accept it. But, eventually they will come to at least accept it, or perhaps end up in the La Brea Tar Pits.

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NOTES

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