

Adapting to the COVID-19 Pandemic

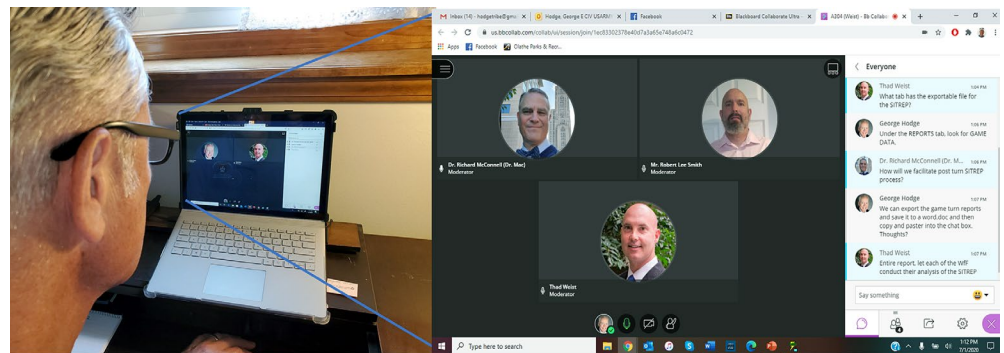
Transitioning from Literal to Virtual Teaching at the Command and General Staff School (CGSS)

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In early March 2020, instructors at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff School (CGSS), Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, were informed that they would have to radically adapt their teaching methodologies in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. With very short notice, the instructors found themselves locked down, working from home, and reformatting classes originally designed for face-to-face instruction into a distributive-learning (DL) mode. Although the uncertain situation presented several significant challenges, the instructors found that having to redesign classes proved to be a catalyst for positive change and advancement. In the process of improvising expedient solutions, they discovered that the experience made them better instructors; the



Collaboration Session Using Blackboard Collaborate

Preparing & Rehearsing Class over Distance Learning

(Composite image provided by Dr. Richard McConnell)

redesign expanded their teaching capabilities, including learning skills and modalities (standard methodologies) that instructors anticipate will be used when they return to face-to-face instruction.

Parameters and Constraints

Due to COVID-19, curriculum delivery methods had to be adjusted to support force protection by

preventing further spread of the virus. These protective measures initially created challenges but ultimately resulted in opportunities. The obstacles were numerous in a learning situation that was as difficult as building an aircraft in flight. Here is just a short list.

the obstacles under the restrictive conditions imposed by the pandemic was a skill that they improved upon through practice. Moreover, what was at first thought to be a debilitating and overwhelming challenge for the faculty members turned out to be a tremendous oppor-

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First, faculty were, in general, unqualified for telework and had to be processed through the five-module certification in a reduced time frame while mostly working from home. Second, most faculty members were unfamiliar with DL platforms that had to be established with little preparation or any chance to test the systems before execution.

This process was made more complicated by the fact that A304: Decision Making for Commanders included a computer simulation known as Decisive Action Brigade Level (DABL). Previously at CGSS, classes including DABL had always been conducted in actual classrooms face-to-face, on a closed network, and not in a virtual environment. Consequently, the necessary adjustments that transformed the curriculum into a DL format created a steep learning curve.

Nevertheless, faculty members were able to both qualify as DL instructors and swiftly bring systems into place to deliver virtual, simulation-based instruction to students. This unfolding situation yielded some best practices that should be considered for future instruction. What follows is a brief description of some of the discovery learning instructors experienced that ultimately resulted in opportunities for improved future instruction.

Many faculty members at the CGSS resident course at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, experienced emotional experiences as they confronted the necessity of adjusting their courses to meet the constraints resulting from COVID-19.

Instructors were required to change quickly from a familiar teaching method to one that was unfamiliar and initially disconcerting. In many ways, instructors felt like they were flying blind. However, after their initial discomfort, they discovered that their ability to negotiate

tunity to exercise their own critical and creative thinking skills. Formulating teaching solutions to the obstacles faced in concert with their students, instructors gained experience managing uncertainty and ambiguity. In other words, in the same way CGSS instruction is focused on training field grade officers to deal flexibly, creatively, and decisively with unexpected and unfamiliar problem sets, CGSS instructors were able to showcase for their students their own adaptability in overcoming the challenges of adverse circumstances.

Instructors developed primary and alternative platforms to collaborate and facilitate learning. Additionally, they discovered that the current Blackboard system was more than adequate to facilitate several adjustments made to the curriculum. While instructors expected adjustments to detract from the overall quality of instruction, they found instead that some adjustments resulted in even better results than face-to-face instruction.

The first adjustment was to adapt the course schedule to maximize the number of repetitions each student would get as the commander. The pandemic necessitated a different modality and the adjustment developed a creative way of facilitating more effective learning outcomes. This process was initiated by a brainstorming event with the instructors. While few, if any, deliverables were expunged from the course, faculty used several functions within Blackboard (e.g., blogs, wikis, discussion posts) to meet learning outcomes more efficiently with outstanding results. Furthermore, the quality of analysis and subsequent commentary to each post/discussion topic was generally better than the discussion during the face-to-face class sessions. In

the end, the virtual environment allowed each student a repetition as the student commander with direct feedback from the instructor(s) to the entire group.

effectively replicated a real-world environment where members of a staff provide a plethora of information to the commander from their respective staff perspectives.



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The second adjustment was to re-create the Commander Operations Process (understand, visualize, describe, and direct-lead and assess) in the DL modality. In a face-to-face modality (common in-class instruction typically used at the resident course) of instruction, one student would provide the acting commander a visual description of the simulation after each iteration. The

designated student commanders would go through the operations process using products developed during planning and make decisions. However, the virtual environment enabled the entire planning staff to give their view to the commander that, unlike face-to-face environments, forced the commander to sift through relevant information that led to a commander's decision. This change to student behavior during the class was not something the instructors set out to accomplish. Nonetheless, it

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The third adjustment was to execute the simulation to account for the virtual modality (over Blackboard, something never attempted previously

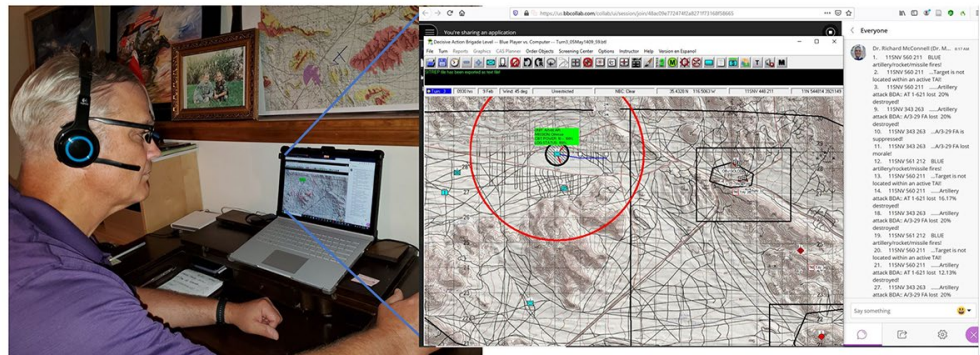
at CGSS). During in-class instruction, there is a time-cost for students to learn how to run the simulation. That cost was cut and repurposed to gain another class session to allow for an

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additional iteration, which allowed another student to be a student commander. In the virtual environment, instructors displayed and manipulated the simulation in accordance with the students' decision support matrix, high-payoff target list, and staff directives. The additional repetition that allowed each student to be a student commander was an invaluable experience. While the students did not get the opportunity to manipulate the simulation, the benefit of each student getting a simulated repetition as the student commander was well worth the cost. Hence, our initial impression is that the virtual environment may be the most beneficial modality of delivery to maximize engagement, facilitate learning, and achieve desired learning outcomes.



Blackboard Collaborate and Decisive Action Brigade Level

Running Computer Simulation over Distance Learning

(Composite image provided by Dr. Richard McConnell)

Main Challenges

The above said, the experience of adjusting to the constraints imposed by the pandemic was not without challenges. The first challenge was how to use the simulation in a DL format. In the face-to-face context, the students learned the simulation using the established closed-system network. The advantage was that the hardware and software were already in place. All that was needed was about one hour of class time to teach the students enough of the simulation to execute the upcoming tactical scenario problem sets. The instructor could personally engage and lead the simulation tutorial on the front classroom screen in a face-to-face environment, and if needed, walk over to the student's screen and visually watch them perform the necessary simulation tasks.

As CGSS transitioned to the DL environment, providing effective oversight over the simulation became obstacle number one. The instructors discussed several options and consulted with instructors in the Department of Distance Education. They decided

they would not attempt to require the students to load the simulation program on their home PCs. Instead, instructors loaded it on their home PCs. CGSS devised a process to communicate the inputs and results of the student plan for students to process information and make any necessary decisions. Since the students were not physically collocated and could not see facial ex-

pressions or body language of their team members, they were completely dependent on voice communications and their own individual maps. While this approach was a change from the normal protocol, it actually better replicated conditions expected in a live environment. It had the effect of emulating and reinforcing the importance of precise doctrinal language, brevity, and clarity in communications.

The second challenge was to train and equip the instructors to lead the students toward the learning objective, run the simulation, share the results, and make student command decisions and changes in a timely manner. All of this was designed to reach the learning objectives supported by the simulation. While this sounds like a list of simple sequential tasks, the tasks were in fact continuous and mostly simultaneous, which could easily become overwhelming. To the instructor was having to multitask. At times, the instructor often had to pause the class to reduce task saturation. This instructor overload became a key after action report (AAR) point of discussion between

The screenshot shows the Blackboard course management interface. On the left is a navigation sidebar with a 'Course Tools' menu. The main content area is divided into several sections: 'My Tasks' (No tasks due), 'Retention Center Alerts' (No Retention Alerts), 'Activity Alerts' (No Notifications), 'What's New' (No Notifications), and 'Needs Attention' (No Notifications). A red box highlights the 'Course Tools' menu in the sidebar, and a red arrow points from a text box labeled 'Suite of instruments in Blackboard' to this menu.

(Screen capture of course tools provided by Dr. Richard McConnell)

seminar leaders at the conclusion of each class and a key rehearsal action prior to the next vignette.

The AAR discussion points and rehearsal practices helped to prioritize instructor tasks but also helped refine what visuals became essential for the lessons. Some of the visuals were screen shots of the simulation terrain with respect to the intelligence preparation of the battlefield as well as course of action planning for the students. The instructors downloaded the simulation map background, converted it into a PowerPoint or PDF document, and posted it to the shared drive so students could have easy access. After each turn of the simulation was executed, the instructor had to convert the turn results screen display into a word-picture narrative. This took the form of an intelligence report and/or spot report depending on what action had occurred during the turn.

At first, the instructors vetted the reports to give students only the essential information, but later, they changed back to giving them the preponderance of all the turn-generated reports, which forced them to have to “sift the wheat from the chaff.” This reinforced the idea of clearly articulated priority intelligence requirements, exceptional information, and the issuance of a clear commander’s decision. In other words, students really had to

think through their decision support matrix/template and develop a quality commander’s intent and guidance.

In the end, the distributed environment forced the instructors and students alike to better visualize, describe, and direct actions than had been occurring in the brick-and-mortar classroom. The instructors of A304 learned much while teaching and learned more through reflection, Advanced Faculty Development, Blackboard Help Desk, and the Digital Learning Instructor Course. What follows is a brief description of those lessons.

Additional Tools for the Classrooms

According to the old axiom, necessity is the mother of invention. One aspect of that time-honored saying is the learning journey of discovery. All of these additional tools discovered post-COVID-19 lockdown existed in CGSS’s capabilities prior to the pandemic. It required a health emergency to force their use and investigate new ways to improve rigor in instruction and its outcomes. For example, the quality of student reflection has historically been a key topic of concern and conversation at CGSS. The use of discussion threads, journal entries, blogs, and wikis have habitually

been touted as great tools to improve reflection, with mixed results. However, during A304, the quality of interactions on the discussion threads was much higher than verbal interactions previously observed in a face-to-face classroom. Additionally, we found that the students were quite creative in finding new ways to collaborate in this distributed learning environment. Several groups of students used a variety of applications to enable their collaboration and share files to great effect. The quality of their interactions in this virtual classroom in some regard was better than anything we would normally achieve in a face-to-face context.

Such observations have caused us to reflect on how we might take a blended approach toward learning in the future. Face-to-face instruction could be enhanced by distributed tools. Feedback could be digitized for faculty-to-student, student-to-student, and individual student reflections. For years we have been discussing the possibility of introducing electronic portfolios in which students could keep track of and build upon their learning throughout their experience during the academic year. By enhancing face-to-face instruction with the tools resident in Blackboard, we would enable learning

as well as keep a record of that learning for a student to take with them to their next assignment. In some ways, the pandemic forced everyone to go under the hood to further hone their skills and become better instructors.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic will be remembered as an extremely challenging and uncertain time for our nation, our military, and the educational institutions that support the military. However, as uncertain and difficult as this time has been, it has not been without its benefits. Forced to adjust to an emerging situation, CGSS faculty members were compelled to learn the full extent of capabilities inherent in the system. CGSS's capabilities have been similarly increased after adjusting to the challenges of the pandemic. These hard-fought lessons will drive CGSS to improve its ability to continue to provide the highest quality and most rigorous professional military education to the Armed Forces. Perhaps because of these unexpected benefits, the COVID-19 pandemic might also be remembered as a watershed moment for CGSS when the faculty learned to overcome adversity and became better because of it. ■