

Decisive Action Goes Digital

**CGSS ADAPTING TO
COVID-19 PANDEMIC**
SUBMISSION

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The Command and General Staff School's (CGSS) resident elective A350, Decisive Action Tactical Application Course, transitioned to a distributed learning (DL) modality as part of the school's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. For the first time in its seven-year history, the A350 faculty delivered a course designed for in-person, student tactical

staff and faculty collaboration in a DL model without sacrificing learning outcomes. The students and faculty encountered and overcame numerous challenges during planning, preparation, and execution of the elective. In the final analysis, students and faculty assessed that the course effectively delivered the curriculum while meeting the desired course objectives.

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Maj. Matt Hill briefs Decisive Action Tactical Application Course instructors and fellow student brigade staff members during a decision briefing exercise 19 April 2017 at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. The global outbreak of the COVID-19 virus in early 2020 virtually eliminated all such in-person classroom contact, which required faculty and students to exercise initiative and creativity in the development of a distributed learning interactive method that would replicate the essential elements of the curriculum in virtual scenarios, including map briefs, conducted through networked computer systems linking students and faculty. (Photo by M. Shane Perkins)

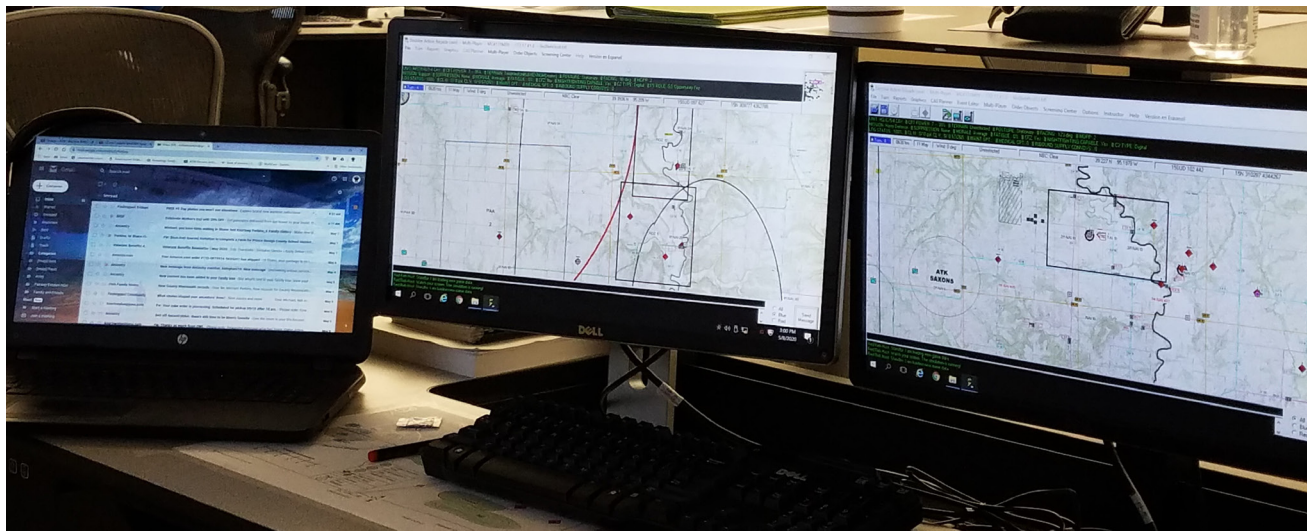
Background

The Decisive Action Tactical Application Course is a combined elective taught by CGSS faculty members from the Department of Army Tactics (DTAC) and the Department of Sustainment and Force Management (DSFM); it was first taught during academic year 2014-01. Students accepted into A350 learn to lead brigade combat team staffs while immersed in a tactical operating environment. Students develop plans, execute decisions, observe the outcomes of those decisions played out in real-time, and respond based on those outcomes. Students and faculty form a cohort and remain together throughout the A350 course. The faculty organizes each cohort according to the students' postgraduation assignment locations to enable them to start building a network of peers. Each student staff plans, prepares, and executes tactical operations against other A350 student cohorts. Using a force-on-force simulation system known as Decisive Action Brigade Level (DABL), the students execute multiple tactical "fights." The faculty coaches the

student staffs; however, the students make all the decisions. Ultimately, student planning and tactical decision-making determine the outcome of each fight.

A350 courseware integrates the curriculum material and synchronizes the lesson flow of multiple elective courses. Most importantly, A350 allows the students to actually fight their plan to validate how well they achieved the learning outcomes. A350 incorporates many of the learning outcomes included in elective courses such as A301 (MDMP [military decision-making process] Techniques to Lead, Manage the Process, and Train Your Staff); A302 (Warfighting Integration in Unified Land Operations); and A331 (Reconnaissance and Security). A350 also incorporates the majority of the learning outcomes from enabler classes including A304 (Tactical Decision Making for Commanders), A306 (Advanced Engineer Operations), A307 (BCT Fires), and A339 (Tactical Military Intelligence).

Based on the breadth of the course hours and the depth of the course material, students who volunteered



and applied to enroll in A350 from a very select group of individuals. Each academic year, approximately 20 percent of the A350 enrollees are students whose next assignment will be at the School of Advanced Military Studies (SAMS). Two of the past seven Master Tactician Award winners and many of the final phase contestants were also A350 students. Every class has been a true combined arms class as armor, engineers, field artillery, infantry, and military intelligence officers make up every course. Aviation, logistics, military police, and signal corps officers often participate as well. The instructors from both DTAC and DSFM are hand-picked by their department leaders and represent a diverse background of tactical billets, command positions, and leadership assignments.

The decision to transition from in-class to 100 percent DL instruction for the CGSS class 2020 created a unique situation that impacted all students, faculty, and courseware. On 18 March 2020, the A350 faculty met and determined the challenges and opportunities a shift to a DL modality would present. We needed to determine how to convert A350 to a DL-delivered course nineteen days before execution while simultaneously transitioning to telework status and with students on block leave as CGSS retooled all elective requirements and changed from a seventy-two-hour model to a ninety-six-hour model.¹

Using the operations process, the faculty had nineteen days to conduct the initial planning and preparation. Of the nineteen days, twelve were duty days and the last ten duty days were exclusively telework days for the faculty. The A350 execution started on 6 April and culminated on 1 June. The faculty conducted formal student surveys on 29 May through 1 June, and the formal faculty after

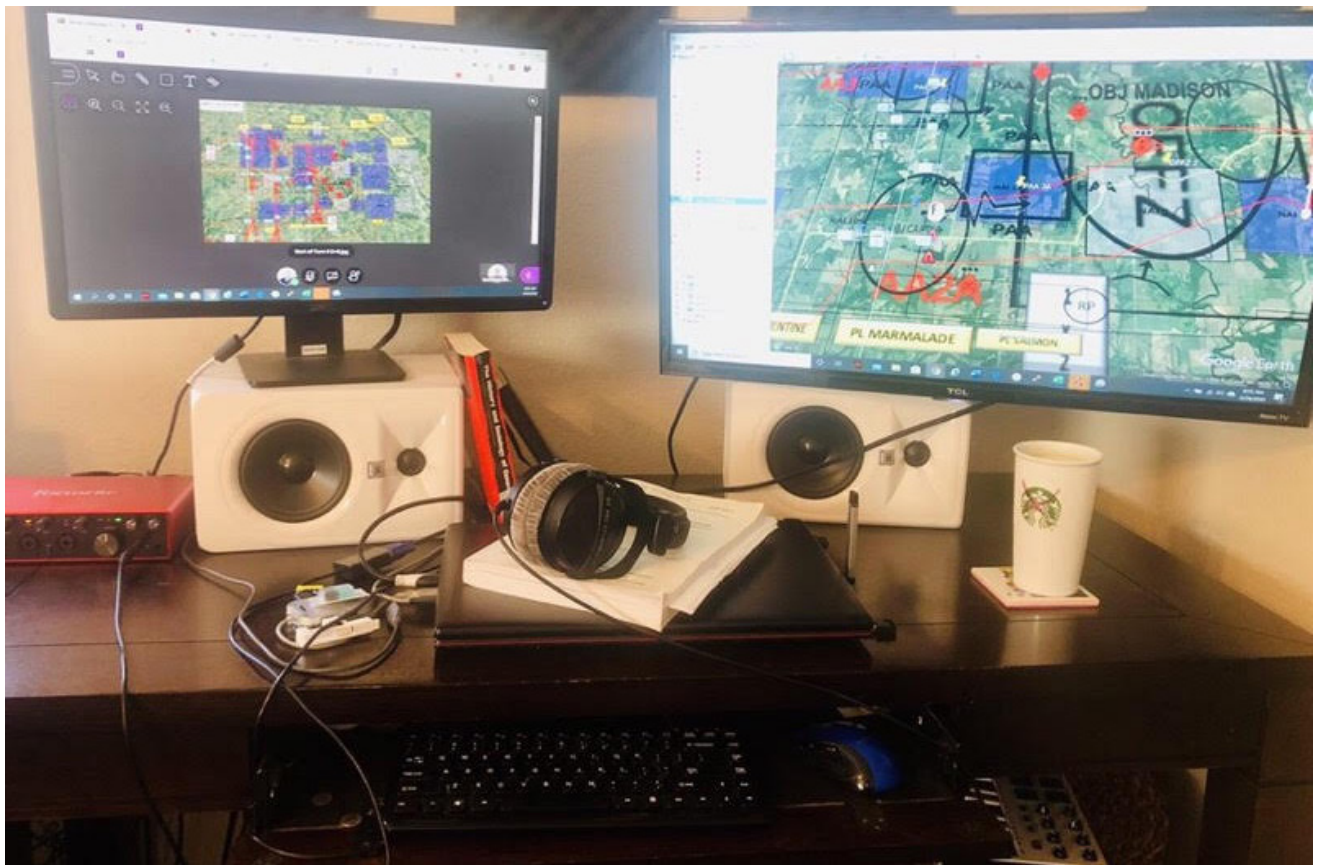
The instructors' classroom suite of desktop computers effectively hosted Decisive Action Brigade Level simulations in support of the Decisive Action Tactical Application Course. (Photo by M. Shane Perkins)

action review was on 5 June. The faculty conducted daily informal but persistent course assessments, which drove planning adjustments and changes in preparation. An examination of the plan, prepare, execute, and assess design as it applies to the course adjustments reveals important lessons learned for future DL opportunities.

Planning and Preparation

Prior to shifting to distributed learning, the faculty already possessed a finalized roster of sixty-one students when the adjusted guidance for electives arrived. The new guidance reduced the number of electives required, which changed the priorities for a considerable number of students. Although some of the students chose new plans, other students began looking for fresh opportunities to replace those on their schedule that could not be converted to distributed learning. Once students completed registration, A350 began classes with forty-one students, a number that exceeded expectations for participation in the course.

Given the changes in electives, the demographics we achieved pleasantly surprised the faculty as we maintained a mix of students with varied backgrounds and specialty areas. The elective normally has many SAMS selectees who desire more repetitions on planning prior to attending their follow-on course. This year, however, we lost half of our SAMS population due to the adjusted elective's guidance, but



four SAMS selectees remained, giving us one for each cohort group. Within the combined arms branches, the course retained enough engineer and field artillery officers to allot each cohort one representative and enough aviation, military intelligence, and signal corps officers to staff three of four cohorts with one each. Additionally, one Department of the Army civilian and two international students who desired a deeper understanding of brigade-level operations also participated in the course. As is usually the case, infantry and armor officers made up the remainder of the course. Despite challenges in building the final class roster, we achieved four cohort groups with similar demographics to previous years and enough depth in knowledge to create four strong cohorts.

Each year, building the student and faculty groups requires a great deal of flexibility as the faculty attempts to balance talents with follow-on assignments. The faculty starts by ensuring that every group has the right balance of combat arms and non-combat arms positions to make functioning staffs that address all the warfighting functions. Next, we align each officer cohort based on the students' follow-on duty assignments.

A home command post set up by Maj. Tim Shepherd, a student enrolled in the Decisive Action Tactical Application Course, to enable virtual participation in class instruction and exercises after in-person classroom instruction was suspended due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. (Photo by Maj. Tim Shepherd)

This usually requires the greatest amount of shuffling to make the numbers and expertise work out correctly. Even though the arrangements are often painful to manage, the opportunity for students to build relationships with officers they will be later stationed with creates a great learning environment.

Lastly, we attempt to align instructors based on their operational experience and assignment history with the students' needs. For example, instructors who previously served at Fort Hood will teach the student group with orders to Fort Hood. Student capabilities may also impact instructor breakout; for example, if there is no aviator in the student group, we place an instructor with an aviation background with that group. Or if a student previously had one of the A350 instructors, then that student gets assigned to a different

A350 instructor. To the greatest extent possible, we try to assign students to cohorts with other instructors to increase exposure to different perspectives, ideas, and, most important, feedback.

Besides recruiting and organizing the student cohorts, we also had to build digital versions of our maps and map overlays to match our simulation software. A350 uses the Leavenworth, Kansas, area because it allows students to

slides, and how to use the whiteboard function to share ideas. In addition, the Ultra course demonstrated how to use the breakout rooms, which allowed the different warfighting functions to collaborate independently of fellow students. The faculty who attended the training then used their experience to assist, train, and conduct rehearsals with fellow instructors in preparation for the elective. BB Ultra became our primary means of com-

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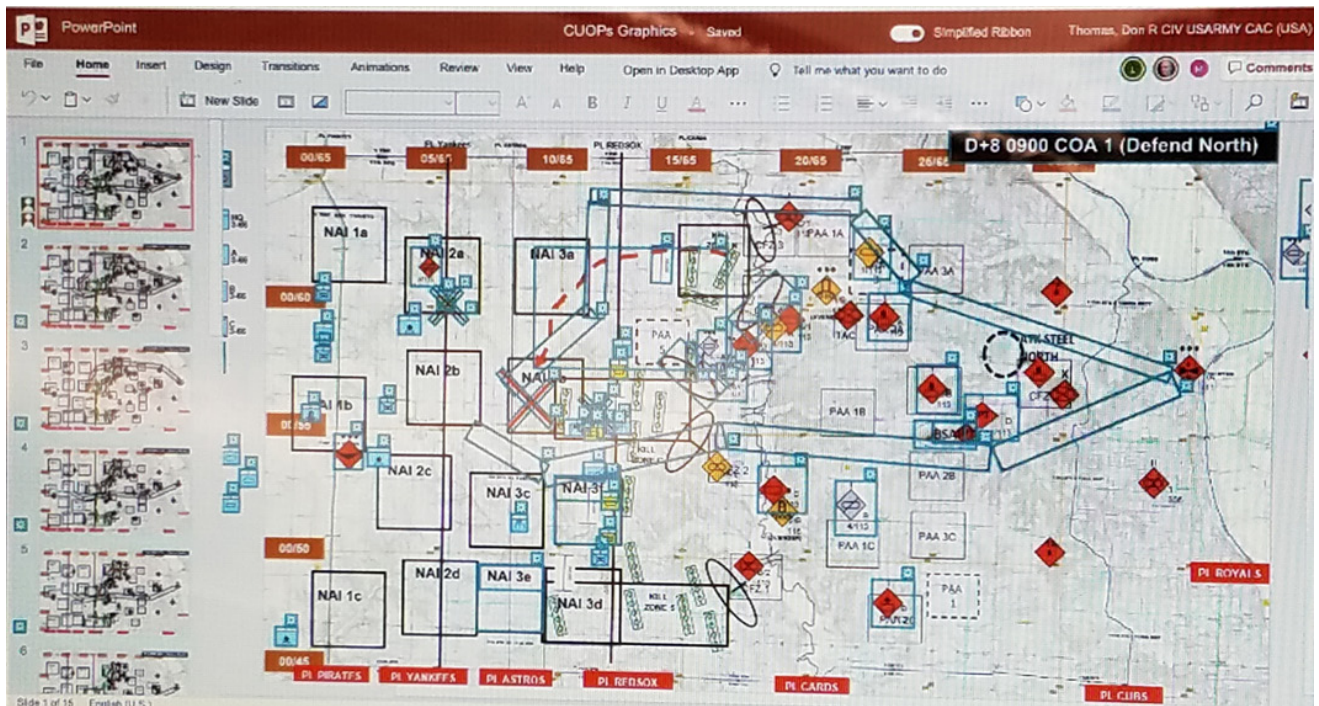
walk the terrain outside of class and gain an appreciation for reality versus simply using the map. During previous classes, A350 students worked on large paper maps with sheets of acetate for terrain marking and unit graphics. The students could see the simulation and could battle track directly on their analog map. For this class, paper maps were not an option so we had to create digital options that replaced the map and overlays.

Army University's Department of Simulation Education (DSE) maintains the DABL software. Curt Pangracs, a DSE simulation support specialist, recently updated the A350 DABL software with new coded terrain and operational graphics files. Pangracs transferred the coded simulation map, operational graphics, and terrain software to a usable Adobe PDF. We then created a series of layers within a single PDF to allow students to have a map with operational graphics and terrain markings to match the simulation file. These mapping efforts ensured student planning synchronized with the simulation and created shared understanding among all participants.

As the faculty transitioned from classroom instruction to DL, we realized a deficiency when we used the many tools that Blackboard (BB) provided. All the A350 instructors had a basic understanding of BB's capabilities but needed to improve their knowledge of video and voice collaboration. Several instructors took a BB Ultra collaboration course offered by the college to better understand the tools available for DL. The Ultra course explains ways of speaking to students, how to present

communicating between faculty and students. Although we had solved the person-to-person collaboration issue, we also needed a method of recording plans and discussions. Blackboard, Microsoft Teams, and Google Drive formed the three available options. Blackboard allowed us to share documents; however, it did not allow for real-time collaboration. Microsoft Teams and Google Drive both allowed multiple students to edit a single document simultaneously. Unfortunately, Microsoft Teams did not allow international students to participate, so two of our four cohorts had to use Google Drive. The other two groups used a combination of both. Since Microsoft Teams is a Microsoft product, Excel, PowerPoint, and Word work more effectively with it than they do on Google Drive, but both collaboration tools were highly effective when students conducted their MDMP.

Effective planning required a map with operational graphics that students and faculty could share and use during the simulation. Based on Pangracs' work, all four groups produced a map embedded in PowerPoint that they could share and use for planning. Unfortunately, only three of the four groups had a map that proved effective in controlling operations during the simulation. Two of the three groups used a PDF map imported into PowerPoint for battle tracking, while the third group used Google Earth. Overall, students and faculty lacked understanding of applications like Google Earth, but through trial and error, they improved their proficiency. The students changed the settings on Google Earth so they could give directions to the person executing



Historically, Decisive Action Tactical Application Course students worked on large paper maps covered with acetate overlays for marking military symbols and graphics. However, as a result of constraints imposed on teaching due to the pandemic, paper maps were not a viable option. In response, the teaching staff built digital versions of the required maps and means to create map overlays to use with the class simulation software. The students could see the simulation and could battle track directly on their analog map from their distributed learning stations at home. In some ways, this actually better simulated the real-world environment for which students are preparing. (Photo by M. Shane Perkins)

the simulation in the Military Grid Reference System, thereby cracking the code on one of the more challenging aspects of that system.

In order to make the required changes in the brief time available, the A350 faculty team utilized daily synchronization meetings, work groups, and peer reviews. The faculty met daily for two work weeks to synchronize actions, brief progress, and review products with each other. Work groups consisted of members from both DTAC and DSFM. The various work groups revised products such as the calendar, the tactical orders, and the reconnaissance and security lessons. As the faculty developed each product, other members reviewed and commented on the product. Simultaneously, another group focused on developing a technique to execute the simulation and enable the students to fight their plans.

Execution

We anticipated that we would encounter some challenges in the collaborative environment when we entered the execution phase of A350, so we allowed for

extra time in each step of the MDMP. We focused on collaboration tools students used previously and developed assessments that would drive both process and discussion. To collaborate on the MDMP, we realized we would need redundant systems, but we also wanted to allow the students the flexibility to choose which platform they preferred to work in. Realizing we did not have extra time to train on any specific system, we utilized the systems the students felt most comfortable with to limit any additional training requirements.

During planning, students often used BB Ultra as a discussion platform while using the share option for a screen that showed the Google Drive or Microsoft Teams folder where the students worked. This allowed collaborative discussion while the students worked on their products. Unfortunately, Microsoft Teams did not work for international students, and because it was introduced so late, students deferred to something they had used previously; in this case, Google Drive. Additionally, students might have a sidebar conversation ongoing in a WhatsApp or GroupMe room. Both

WhatsApp and GroupMe provide similar options for chatting and reestablishing communications in the event a student or instructor drops off the network. As mentioned, maps were challenging for some groups, but eventually each group adapted; some used imported PDF versions while others used Google Earth. A potential long-term solution might be to use a Joint Planning System because it offers a universal map and collaborative planning tools similar to a Command Post Computing Environment (CPCE).

We realized that lack of face-to-face interaction may stymie some discussion, so we needed a methodology that encouraged early cross talk and enhanced collaboration. We specifically designed our homework assignments and assessments to drive student interaction and planning. We developed five homework assignments; the first was a scenario designed to allow students to practice with the tools available and begin to learn about each other. The next three homework assignments really drove the planning process, with the second assignment focused on reverse IPB, the third on mission analysis, and the fourth on course of action development for the reconnaissance plan. The final assignment focused on individual feedback of the student's ability to critique a subordinate's course of action.

The homework assignments that focused on the MDMP truly drove class discussion and planning. While instructors used these tools to give students feedback, the assignments also allowed the students to break out into smaller groups arranged around the warfighting functions, to compare analysis, and to further develop the plan. During the planning phase, we allocated two class periods for each step so that the instructors would have a chance to provide feedback on the different products to further enhance the student discussion. Instructors emphasized student development of specific tools, including the collection plan linked to an enemy commander's decision points, a field artillery synchronization matrix that included attack guidance, high-payoff targets and target selection standards, and a friendly synchronization matrix that linked events to commander's critical information requirements and commander's decisions. All of these tools drove students' tactical plans.

Instructors also adapted to the DL environment and discovered we became more efficient when we used the same collaboration tools to grade our assignments.

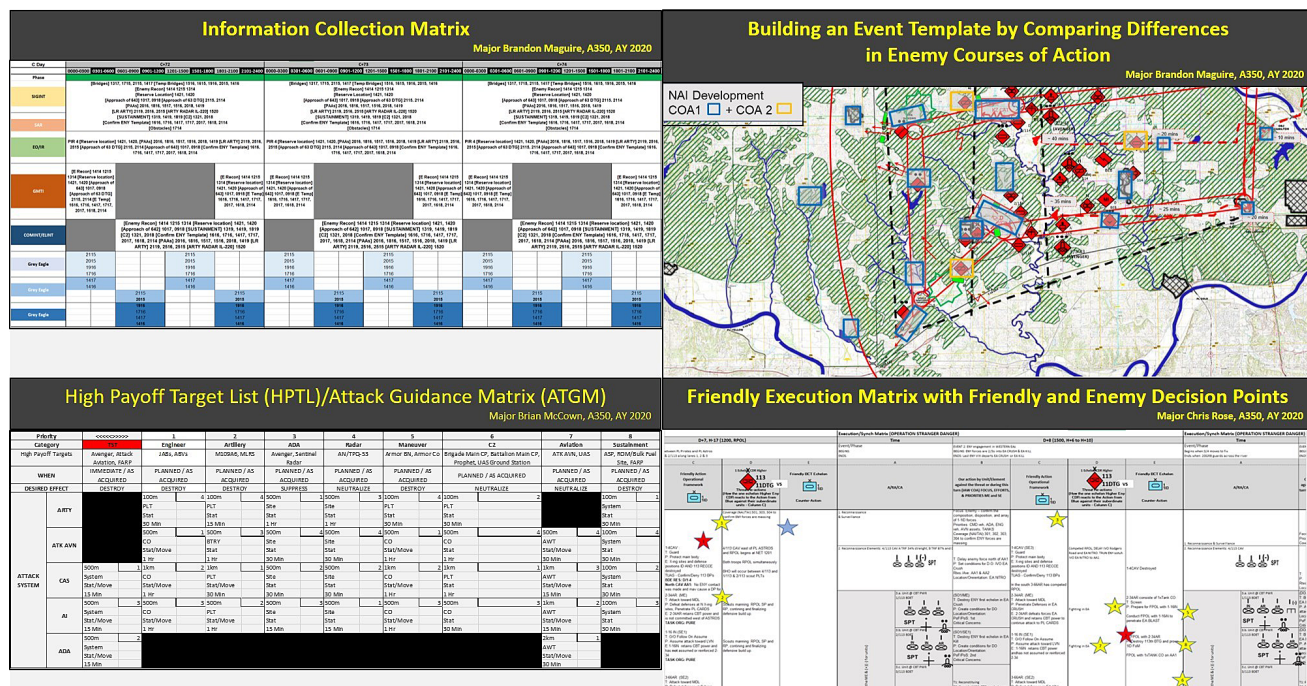
The student would email his or her homework to an instructor, who would then upload the homework into a Google Drive or Microsoft Teams folder that was only accessible to the group's instructors. Then all the instructors would comment on the homework. After all the instructors commented on the homework, one of the instructors would email the homework back to the student. We found this method to be much more efficient than our previous method of physically passing papers amongst instructors.

The last hurdle we had to conquer during execution was to determine how we could execute the simulation to drive student decision-making. We used the DABL gaming program in a DL mode, and we were able to meet or perhaps exceed previous years' A350 classroom efforts. After we attempted to run the program from home computers, we determined that course of action was unsupportable, so a few instructors returned to the Lewis and Clark building to run the simulation. The instructors acted as the subordinate commanders and received all their instructions from the students. Using BB Ultra as a command net, the students could collaborate and share a common operating picture while simultaneously giving the instructors' commands over the same net.

Assessment

At the end of the course, the faculty distributed a student survey to determine likes or dislikes and any changes for future courses. This year, we were happily surprised that the content of the survey answers did not differ significantly from previous in-person classes. In previous years, students have frequently praised instructor feedback, peer expertise, and the ability to watch their plan payout in real time on a simulation.

A low student-to-teacher ratio helps with feedback on the take-home assignments and in-class discussion. Students have significant resources to rely on to help them in planning, along with three DTAC instructors and one DSFM instructor per cohort. The handpicked instructors take great care to give the best quality feedback they can, and they focus on specific specialty areas that are often not available during the core or Advanced Operations Course (AOC) portions of the school year. Often, valuable learning conversations occur between students and instructors on white boards within the classroom while other students continue to



Instructors and students developed a variety of collaborative solutions to pass information during the development of a common operating picture for exercises. From the information provided, the students updated their common operating picture and performed analysis in the development of orders for subordinate commanders (role-playing course instructors). This methodology better represented what actually happens in a unit due to friction, uncertainty, and frustration associated with the lack of clear communications, creating a previously unrealized level of realism for the students acting in leadership roles than experienced in classroom A350 exercises conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic. (Screenshot by M. Shane Perkins)

work through planning. The low student-to-teacher ratio allows instructors to dive deeply into problem sets and suggest solutions with a few students, while the others work on their own missions or with other instructors. These sidebar conversations sometimes develop into everyone gathered around the map learning an unexpected lesson that day.

In the DL environment, either everyone had to listen to the discussion, or we had to jump to other discussion rooms. While this method worked, it often distracted those working on other parts of the plan, and a jump to another room often deprived others of accessing a possible learning opportunity.

Our students are a self-selecting group who signed up to have deeper professional discussions and more repetition in the MDMP. They learn from the experiences and viewpoints of their cohort peers. During planning and execution in the core and AOC, students often have to contend with varying levels of experience and interest in their staff groups. In A350, peers self-select into the course, thereby guaranteeing a higher level

of interest and dedication than one might see in previous courses in CGSS. The structure of the cohorts and the higher level of interest readily leverage the expertise of students' peers in this collaborative environment. The students also benefit from bringing products and experiences from their previous staff groups to assist each other. Under this year's DL constraints, the lack of in-person classroom interaction frustrated students' and instructors' ability to communicate and thus hampered one of the most important ways the students learn. Despite the limitations in this environment, most students still listed peer-to-peer interactions as one of the most important elements in the elective.

Students normally conduct the MDMP several times throughout the year without ever getting a chance to execute their plan. During AOC, they get an opportunity to work through execution, but response to the pandemic mandated cancelling executions this year so the only chance to execute their developed plans occurred in the A350 environment. A350 gives them the opportunity to plan and execute, conduct

after action reviews, and then plan and execute again. Students learn the importance of planning and the key products that will enable execution as they fight their fellow classmates in another cohort. This is an experience not offered anywhere else in CGSS electives.

Students and faculty both acknowledged that linking sustainment to tactics requires a level of integration that is difficult to achieve in the real world, let alone during A350. The faculty attempted to integrate sustainment throughout the curriculum; however, students rarely got to see the effects of excellent or poor planning on their operations. Our current simulation does a poor job of reflecting cause and effect for sustainment efforts.

Lastly, we realized we must improve our knowledge management to ensure effective delivery in a DL environment. All the supporting documents and information that students and faculty require must reside in a simple and easily accessible repository. With the rapid transition to DL and the introduction of numerous new tools, we quickly lost track of critical information.

In assessing the faculty's preparation time, we noticed a significant increase in the hours required to prepare for this year's class. The faculty hours committed to A350 in academic year 2020 was 3,004.5 hours compared to 1,784 in academic year 2019.² This total represented a 68 percent increase in overall hours dedicated to the elective this fiscal year. Total hours increased in virtually every area except grading assessments, where totals decreased due to fewer students and increased efficiencies by the faculty.

Lessons Learned

A350 focuses on practical application and requires the ability to modernize and keep our scenario updated with supporting products to make the most of our students' educational time. The operations order and supporting annexes must be robust enough to support mission analysis while not so robust that they stifle student creativity in developing a plan to accomplish a mission. Students must bring their knowledge, expertise, and viewpoints to the course and think creatively to solve difficult problems with no easy answers. We plan to review our orders and products each year to ensure we keep a focused product to enable combined arms elements and student learning to integrate.

During past iterations of A350, we have had students play subordinate commanders and input the

data into DABL. These students then saw the outcome of their decisions and transmitted the results to a map to create shared understanding. Often, these role-playing students saw more data than they had intended on their screens and transmitted more information than would be available in a real-world scenario. This year, due to COVID-19 restrictions, students could not be in the same room as the simulation. As a result, instructors role-played subordinate commanders and input the data into the simulation. During each turn, the student staff told the simulation operator what actions they wanted to occur during that turn. After the turn ran, the simulation operator reported the outcome of the turn. From the information provided, the students updated their common operating picture, performed some analysis, and produced more instructions for the simulation operator.

This methodology better represents what happens in a unit. It creates more friction, fog, and realism for the students acting in leadership roles, and it provides a more effective way to run the A350 exercise. The students had to maintain a common operating picture, analyze, and make decisions. In previous years, students often began playing the game instead of focusing on proper analysis. This method of executing the battles validated the student's plans and drove good solid learning points for the course. As instructors, we found this method of executing the fights so effective that even in a face-to-face class, we plan to execute the fights in a similar fashion with students in one room and the commanders in another.

The one problem area we found during the execution of the fights was the inability for students and instructors to gather around one large map and discuss what they were seeing on the battlefield. The mix of a PDF map, Google Earth maps, and simulation maps caused confusion and difficulty coordinating with adjacent units. If we teach A350 in a DL format next year, we must determine one specific application, whether Google Earth or PDF, to use as our map application. A future tool could be the Joint Planning System. This system offers a planning suite and access to more realistic digital maps from home computers, and it closely replicates CPCE.

In the future, we should look into developing enforced standard operating procedures to ensure students have an organized repository for information. With the lessons we learned this year, we can build a better

structure next year, regardless of what mode we teach in, and we can create a simpler, more user-friendly knowledge-management scheme that will enhance the class.

Course administrators failed to establish an easily understood primary, alternate, contingency, and emergency communications plan when we started teaching A350 DL. We relied on BB Ultra as our primary means of communication, and fortunately, Blackboard handled the class load. Although Blackboard remained stable throughout the course, students and faculty still routinely dropped off the network due to connectivity problems. Fortunately, these drops only affected small numbers and had little impact on the overall course. In the future, we need to establish a primary, alternate, contingency, and emergency plan in the unfortunate case we lose a larger number of participants.

The switch to DL inspired A350 instructors to create a new way to grade student homework collaboratively. In the past iterations of A350, students turned in paper copies of their homework to the lead instructor. The instructors made comments on the homework by passing the homework around. Unfortunately, this grading process meant only one instructor at a time could grade the requirement, so it often took several days to provide feedback. Over the years, students have found value in multiple instructor comments, so even though there was a lag in receiving feedback, students never minded. This year, the faculty produced a more effective way of managing prompt feedback by using Google Drive and Microsoft Teams to grade collaboratively. Multiple instructors could open and grade an assignment simultaneously, producing the same results as previous years but much more efficiently.

The instructors must find ways to stress the students and enable predictive delivery of sustainment versus reactive emergency resupply. Students understand this

lesson much better when a DTAC instructor introduces the need and importance of detailed sustainment planning and a DSFM instructor offers guidance and solutions. Instructors must emphasize the importance of sustainment as it relates to the successful outcome of operations. The A350 DSFM faculty are currently developing additional course materials to better replicate planning in sustainment operations.

Summary

The 2020 Decisive Action Tactical Application Course cohorts of U.S. Army officers, international military, and interagency students spent two months planning offensive and defensive operations that culminated in two competitive “fights.” COVID-19 pandemic conditions necessitated a different delivery modality for this year’s class so A350 was adapted into a digital learning format for the first time. Students and faculty collaborated through systems such as Blackboard Ultra, Google Drive, and Microsoft Teams. Combining these collaboration tools with the DABL simulation created an interactive learning environment. Despite the inability to gather around a real map or have face-to-face conversations, and despite myriad personal and professional COVID-related disruptions, the A350 students were able to learn and practice tactical leadership and decision-making. They graduated the course prepared to win the next fight against a peer opponent in large-scale combat operations and prepared to lead and teach the MDMP to peers and subordinates. The students graduated the course with a strong network of fellow “iron majors” with whom they will serve for two to three years. The faculty and students of A350, class 2020, adapted and overcame all challenges and seized the opportunity to hone tactical warfighting and leadership skills to meet future challenges. ■

Notes

1. Department of Army Tactics, “A350 Faculty After Action Review,” U.S. Army Command and General Staff School, 5 June 2020, edited 7 July 2020.

2. Department of Army Tactics, “Enclosure 1 (A350 Development Hours) to A350 Program Evaluation Report,” U.S. Army Command and General Staff School, 8 July 2020.