Mission Command in Education

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Mission Command is a commander-centered process or action, applying a balance of the art of command and the science of control to accomplish the mission.[1] However, one key tenet mentioned in the very next paragraph of that same doctrinal publication is often overlooked: "…educators [emphasis added] throughout the Army will also use this publication."[2] To that end, the Institutional Force,[3] using Army educators, have a unique opportunity to practice, model, and inculcate Mission Command beyond the Operational Force[4] and beyond the battlefield.

While the Army's Mission Command concept traces its origins back to a German approach called Auftragstaktik,[5] some Army educators, such as those in Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC), often trace the root of their education concept back to another German concept called Andragogik.[6] In its current form, Andragogy is described as the art and science of helping adults learn.[7] The primary correlation between the six principles of Mission Command and the six assumptions of Andragogy is that both were developed to better understand complex human endeavors within their associated fields. While Mission Command positions the commander or leader at the center,[8] Andragogy positions the adult learner as the central figure.[9]

Purpose

The purpose of this monograph is to explain how the institutional force contributes to the overarching mission command strategy. This is accomplished by highlighting the six principles of Mission Command and how they are being satisfied by one organization within Army University using the six assumptions of andragogy. The juxtaposition of Mission Command and Andragogy offers a unique framework for Army educators to conduct professional military education (PME) curriculum and concurrently support mission command doctrine.

The Department of Distance Education (DDE), United States Army Command and General Staff College (CGSC) at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, demonstrates how they employ (practice, model, and inculcate) the framework's concepts within the organization, within their Advanced Operations Course (AOC) faculty, and within the AOC online student cohorts. The organization is a relatively small one in terms of employees, but large in terms of its impact to field grade officer professional military education (PME). On any given day, this Army University Department actively manages the enrollment of over 5000 students.

Brief Background

The Department of Distance Education underwent a major modernization effort in 2007, just a few scant years ahead of the establishment of the Mission Command Center of Excellence in 2010, also at Fort Leavenworth. Both organizations fall under TRADOC and have unique roles in optimizing the human performance initiatives[10] of the Army. DDE did not exist in its present composition as little as eight years ago. Prior to 2007, DDE was known as the Directorate of Non Residence Studies (NRS) program or briefly as the School of Advanced Distributed Learning (SAdL), and more famously known by the vernacular, 'box of books.'

In adult learning theory terms, the NRS delivered courses via an asynchronous method with little consideration for the students' learning style or any other adult learning theories, such as Andragogy. No consideration or focus on Mission Command existed because the concept was just beginning to be socialized inside the Army. In 2010,

DDE transformed, grew exponentially, and offered AOC in a blended format of asynchronous and synchronous course delivery methods with a facilitator assigned to each cohort of sixteen students. This student cohort model persists in DDE today with much success credited to the new student-centered, facilitated learning model built on Andragogy's assumptions and put into action using Kolb's Experiential Learning Model.[11]

DDE's transformation was solidifying as the Mission Command Center of Excellence (MCCoE) became the Army lead for implementing Mission Command across the force. [12] As a Center of Excellence, its mission is to develop, integrate, and synchronize Leader Development, Army Profession, and Mission Command across the force.[13] Most pertinent to this document are the six principles of Mission Command developed and published in Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 6-0.

Build Cohesive Teams through Mutual Trust

The first principle of Mission Command addressed in ADRP 6-0 is building cohesive teams through mutual trust. The Mission Command publication makes it clear that mutual trust is the foundation upon which cohesive teams are built. Another cogent point in the doctrinal publication is that trust takes time and is only gained through everyday actions.[14]

The corresponding assumption of Andragogy related to this Mission Command principle is that adult learners come to the learning environment with a robust set of experiences.[15] In the educational environment, these experiences are leveraged to enable adult learners to reach deeper levels of learning. Experience is also a key ingredient for educational programs that follow the theory of constructivism, which posits knowledge is constructed by or among the participants.[16]

The convergence of these two seemingly distinct sets of principles and assumptions are evident in DDE as an organization, in the AOC faculty, and in AOC student cohorts. First, DDE as an organization earned trust within the institutional force during the early days of their modernization effort through the strong personal integrity and commitment of its first faculty supervisor, Michael R. Martinez, Colonel (Ret.) USA. Col. Martinez, a former infantry officer, brought to the department leadership skills and experience from a long career. In short, he was an expert in Mission Command. Another key member in the early days of DDE was Henry Martin, Ph.D., also a retired military officer, a respected academic expert, and the only DDE faculty member with a doctorate. Together with the new active duty program manager, the three formed the department's first command team, forging a strong work ethic and organizational culture. While the new organization grew internally, the leadership team sought and built relationships with its higher command at CGSC, laterally with other teaching departments, and externally with other Department of Defense distance education programs. These and other daily actions by DDE as an organization allowed the faculty, curriculum development and administrative teams within DDE to flourish.

Once the organizational command team structure was set, additional teams were formed. The AOC faculty was one such team. This team of teaching faculty is the primary focus for the duration of this paper regarding how Mission Command permeates the organization. Each faculty member in AOC is assigned two student cohorts of eighteen students each. The AOC faculty member serves as a facilitator instead of the traditional role of instructor. As a facilitator, the faculty member can share his/her knowledge and experiences on the weekly curriculum topic as they guide the students to share their knowledge and experiences, thus supporting Andragogy. These types of two-way communications or interactions as they are called in the field of distance education, are exactly what is prescribed in the Mission Command publication to build trusted teams.[17]

Students in AOC are field grade officers who come from each of the three Army components (Regular Army, National Guard, and United States Army Reserve). Once assigned to a cohort of learners they must form teams and develop trust amongst themselves as they work together to accomplish the demanding fifty-two week curriculum. Trust is hard to build anywhere, but particularly difficult in the online environment.

To comply with the intent of the in-person meetings mentioned as part of Mission Command, [18] the collective requirement a cohort completes first is an "icebreaker"[19] session using a web conferencing system (Blackboard Collaborate or Defense Collaboration Services) where students see and hear each other for the first time. This initial step may seem simplistic, but many distance learning researchers provide support for this type of activity. Along with meeting each other, the icebreaker provides an opportunity for sharing their experiences. These actions are in keeping with both the first principle of Mission Command and the first assumption of Andragogy.

By organizing DDE into teams and subsequently organizing the adult online learners into cohorts, the first principle of Mission Command is supported by the institutional force[20] within an academic environment - beyond the battlefield. As part of an AOC cohort, students are provided an opportunity to see the value of building trusted teammates. The relationships and teams are extant to combat situations and traditional army organizational structures.

The forming of teams, building trust, and communicating with peers across the three Army components support both the Army Leadership Development Strategy (ALDS) by developing innovative and agile leaders[21] and the former Chief of Staff of the U. S. Army's (CSA) strategic priority of evolving the Total Army.[22]

Create Shared Understanding

Many terms can be used to describe aspects of the second principle of Mission Command,[23] such as unity of effort, collaboration, dialogue, etc., but all these involve the need for communication.

Within DDE, communications flow like many organizations, from the top down, most of the time. However, the department director also has an open door policy so information can flow directly from the bottom to the very top, if needed. For lateral communications the AOC faculty members have a robust internal faculty development program. The program consists of mentoring from more senior instructors and a three week Department of the Army level course called Asynchronous Distributed Learning Instructor Course (ADLIC) that addresses the unique challenges of facilitating an online course. Within DDE there are also lesson block specific forums conducted by internal subject matter experts within the AOC team.

Some of these communication techniques are transferred into the AOC cohorts as well. For example, many cohorts establish student roles (S-1, S-3, etc.) to help the flow of information from facilitator-to-student and from student-to-student. The use of communication and collaboration are valuable to accomplishing course curriculum such as discussion boards, wikis, and online web conferencing sessions. Collaboration and communications support Andragogy's assumption that adult learners have a self-concept;[24] meaning that adults want to be involved in and responsible for the path their learning takes. With multiple avenues for AOC learners to communicate with each other and with the facilitator, this assumption is upheld, as it provides space and incentive for creating a shared understanding of both the course topic at hand and the expectations for the learning environment.

By using the second Mission Command principle of creating a shared understanding in an educational environment, the AOC student gains valuable skills like creating and maintaining a shared understanding in an online environment. This is a valuable skill for future assignments where higher headquarters and subordinate units may be geographically dispersed. Enhancement of these skills supports the Secretary of the Army's top priority of telling the Army story where he calls for "...all components...[to] communicate clearly within their communities...."[25] Additionally, the specific ability to communicate using collaborative technologies like wikis, supports TRADOC's implementation of The Army Learning Concept for 2015.[26]

Provide a Clear Commander's Intent

There are times when communications and collaboration cannot take place, but a clear Commander's Intent statement will fill those gaps. The third principle of Mission Command is designed to provide both the purpose and

desired end state for military actions. A clear intent as Robert Scaife and Packard Mills Lt. Col. (Ret.), USA, so succinctly stated is "...what to do, not how to do it."[27] From the Mission Command perspective, understanding why the operation is performed is critical to the forces conducting that mission.

DDE translates the more pure form of a Commander's Intent used on the battlefield into a more educational institutional setting by providing a vision statement from the director. The current director, Colonel Eric Robinson, USA, provided an in-briefing to all the faculty and teams within the department upon his arrival. His briefing addressed many key areas, which together, formed his intent.

For the AOC student cohorts this Mission Command principle is perfectly aligned with the assumption of Andragogy which declares that adult learners "need to know."[28] Knowles[29] and Tough[30] both found that adults learn better when they understand: why they need to know the information, or what benefit knowing will bring them. If the value of education is not known by the student then the instructor has an implied task of finding a link to build the value for the learner. AOC instructors provide their intent during lesson block introduction briefings and through the many communication links, previously discussed.

Exercise Disciplined Initiative

Even when there is a clear intent and all forms of communication are functioning, there still exists a certain amount of freedom during the execution of tasks. The Mission Command principle of disciplined initiative addresses these times when opportunities and threats present themselves.

For DDE, an academic institution removed from the battlefield, these opportunities are often realized through or prepared for via the knowledge of a particular faculty member. Beyond the normal subject matter experts for each block of curriculum within AOC, there are often some uniquely qualified individuals serving as faculty. They have both breadth and depth of knowledge regarding specific branches of services, or technical knowledge related to operations at various levels of command. These experts can present opportunities for learning above and beyond the curriculum. The department's ability to manage this talent and maintain that expertise is critical. Conversely, a threat to the department exists when curriculum changes or changes to the scenarios are not fully developed or understood by the faculty members. Personnel shortages in both faculty positions and support staff also can become threats to the institution that need to be mitigated at the department level with assistance if needed from higher levels.

Within the AOC student cohorts, disciplined initiative presents itself when students not only have experience on the topic of the week, but may also have in-depth knowledge of that field due to their civilian employment. National Guard and Army Reserve officers often have these types of experiences and knowledge, providing opportunities to the entire cohort for elevated levels of learning during particular lessons. Sometimes these skill sets are not volunteered to the group and the AOC facilitator has to draw them out of the expert. Similarly, threat to learning exists when students lack a baseline of knowledge on the topic, or when for operational reasons the cohort loses key members of the team for either short durations or in rare cases permanently.

The Andragogy assumption of a readiness to learn is closest to this Mission Command principle. Once a learner knows why they must learn something they must also become self-directed toward learning. In adult learning this readiness presents itself most commonly between developmental stages, associated with either age or maturity. In AOC, readiness manifests itself not from age or maturity, but because the AOC student is progressing in their career from a company tactical level officer to an operational level field grade officer focused on operational tasks. The connection between Andragogy and Mission Command's discipline initiative is found in the "self-discipline" component that resides in both approaches.[31]

Use Mission Orders

The next Mission Command principle is the use of mission orders. This is described as "assign tasks, allocate resources, and issue broad guidance."[32] Mission orders have a doctrinal format they typically follow. Within DDE, the concept of mission orders has a practical application found in the course syllabus. Like mission orders, an academic syllabus follows a specific format. Similar to mission orders, learning outcomes are articulated instead of specifics on how to reach those outcomes. Terminal and enabling learning objectives (TLOs & ELOs) most closely resemble mission orders within DDE.

At the AOC instructor level and for the student cohorts, an advanced sheet does the same thing a mission order does; it addresses tasks, resources, and assessments. The advanced sheets contain the TLOs and ELOs for each lesson. The advanced sheets also follow a prescribed format. Another document within the institutional force that resembles mission orders are grading rubrics. Rubrics typically follow a set format and they provide more details about how course assessment is conducted. The best rubrics provide enough information for both the instructor and student to understand the intent of the requirement without limiting the range of "how" the requirement is accomplished.

Andragogy's fifth assumption details the orientation to learn[33] for adults. This means that unlike children who are more subject focused, adults are more problem-centered or task-centered.[34] The task-centeredness portion of that assumption aligns best with mission orders. So, just as mission orders provide room for freedom of execution, a well-designed course syllabus should allow enough freedom for how the instructor delivers the content and how the students learn. Rubrics provided to students that form the structure for assessment of their efforts must also be flexible enough to allow for alternative ways of completing course work.

The flexibility provided in Mission Command, at DDE and within AOC distance learning cohorts enables those executing the tasks to be creative, exercise critical thinking, and optimize the human dimension in an academic environment. These benefits are critical to future Army leaders as supported by TRADOC Commander, Gen. David C. Perkins, USA, statement in the Army Times: "Our Soldiers just have to be better than their soldiers, their cognitive capability just has to be better."[35]

Accept Prudent Risk

The final Mission Command principle is accepting prudent risk. "Uncertainty exists" in all military tasks, but there is a sharp difference between a calculated risk and sheer gambling.[36] Mission Command seeks to strike a balance between total risk aversion and pure adrenaline seeking tendencies.

DDE as an organization also faces risks within their daily operations albeit not ones that result in loss of life. In an academic setting, the risks present themselves as issues such as balancing student participation, academic integrity violations, and copyright abuse. For AOC faculty, copyright violation is a real risk and can occur when using portions of a current article under the fair-use exclusion. Often there are current and relevant articles that are published outside the current curriculum development cycle. AOC faculty want to include these articles to supplement the course materials, but doing so means those articles are not officially approved yet by the school and no official copyright permission exists. The TEACH Act of 2001 was the government's attempt at leveling the field regarding use of copyrighted materials between the traditional classroom mode and online teaching mode.[37] Copyright law permits certain uses of copyright material under the fair-use exclusion without permission from the copyright holder.[38] The problem is the exact limitations of fair use are not well defined, so academic institutions and educators need to mitigate the risk by consulting with experts before using unapproved articles. Another risk in the educational realm are the government contracts that often expire mid-academic year, for academic support staff providing critical duties throughout the year. One type of contract specific to DDE covers the skilled personnel who run the computer simulation exercises. Without the contracts the organization's ability to offer technology enhanced learning opportunities is at risk or potentially degraded when back-up operators are pressed

into service.

At the AOC instructor level and student cohort level, calculated risks are typically linked to technology. For example, network outages or even partial outages affect the delivery and receipt of course work. Duration of these risks is normally short, but the impacts are much longer. For example, if an online session is scheduled once a week, for an hour, and connectivity is affected for just fifteen minutes, then twenty-five percent of the synchronous learning did not take place and the impact will be felt for the whole week of that lesson.

The final Andragogy assumption linked to risk is motivation or lack of motivation. Adult learners are typically more responsive to intrinsic motivators.[39] Adults normally seek to continue improving and growing, but if barriers exist like the risks mentioned above or if other adult learning principles are not supported then learning is impacted. Most students attending AOC are taking the course because it is a requirement within their branch or career field; this is the extrinsic component to their motivation. Sometimes AOC instructors leverage this external type of motivator to keep students moving through the course. However, the best method of motivating a student is to understand their personal intrinsic motivators. These internal motivations include providing a better quality of life for their family, a personal desire to excel, or increased career satisfaction. These types of motivation are much stronger leverage points. Assisting students to express their motivations is not only helpful to them, but to the AOC facilitator as well. Modeling this type of mentoring allows the students to see the effectiveness of this skill.

Summary

The six tenets of Mission Command are not just intended for use by the operational force. Army educators and students, as part of the institutional force are able to practice, model, and inculcate the missions command tenets. The Department of Distance Education utilizes both the six tenets of Mission Command and the six assumptions of Andragogy as a framework for educating adult field grade officers. By recognizing both the mission command principles and the assumptions of Andragogy the faculty is able to improve the professional military education learning experiences and the operational force gains educated and more experienced practitioners of mission command.

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NOTES

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