

Building Mutual Trust in the Classroom

Lessons for the Command and General Staff College

Maj. Caleb Riggs, U.S. Army

Abstract

This article recommends that educational methods used in professional military education (PME) should utilize different teaching methods from the field of adult education and emphasize the concept of mutual trust in the classroom between teacher and student. Although this article covers the topic of military education broadly, the Command and General Staff Course is used as a reference in order to analyze the benefits of the andragogical approach for effective teaching methods; the large, diverse audience that includes sister services, interagency, and international students relies heavily upon the previous knowledge of the students. Methods from the field of adult education inspire multiple recommendations for improving the outcomes of PME, one of which is a discussion of the value of formative assessments during learning. The text argues that mid-career military officers must be educated differently than initial entry officers or enlisted soldiers due to extensive prior knowledge on the topics discussed in the classroom. The flipped classroom model, case study, and team teaching are all recommended to support critical thinking and self-directed learning.

The nature of warfare continues to change at a rapid rate. After two decades of largely counterinsurgency-focused operations, the U.S. military must refocus its training and education to counter peer adversaries in the volatile environment of the 21st century. Rarely does one simple answer exist for any given problem in today's complex, strategic environment. In 2013, Gen. Martin Dempsey, then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, called for leaders with "requisite values, strategic vision, and critical thinking skills to keep pace with the changing strategic environment" (Meiser, 2017, p.

81). To maintain pace with America's adversaries, military educators must be willing to challenge teaching techniques and to question the current structure and format of professional military education (PME). In short, military classrooms require a culture of mutual trust that holds students accountable for their own learning.

When Dempsey previously assumed command of Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC), trust was one of only three focus areas; his successor, Gen. Ray Odierno, appropriately called trust the "bedrock of our honored profession" (Allen & Braun, 2013, p. 73). In 2016, the chief of staff of the Army addressed the significance of trust. Gen. Mark Milley was careful to point out that trust goes vertically through the chain of command as well as laterally amongst peers (Lopez, 2016). Trust is vital in a graduate-level education, as is demonstrated in the emergence of new learning theories and methods in the field of adult education. Those theories and methods encourage diversity of opinion and self-directed learning, and they rely critically on a culture of trust in the classroom (Knowles, 1984). The PME system has been slow to adopt andragogical methods, such as the flipped classroom and team teaching. Large lectures were the norm, and assessment of learning still largely focuses on rote memorization rather than actual application of complex subject matter.

This article utilizes the Command and General Staff College (CGSC) at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, as an example of an institution that educates mid-career officers who have already demonstrated exceptional performance in more than a decade of service in the military. Mid-career professional education necessitates significantly different teaching methods than those utilized during the initial education of young soldiers, either enlisted or commissioned officers. Because of the extensive prior knowledge and experience of these men and women, mid-career students are expected to be much more active participants in classroom learning than novices during initial officer training.

Each year, the school hosts military officers from the other branches of service in the U.S. military as well as individuals from interagency organizations and many international military officers from around the globe. With more than 1,000 students per year, this institution provides an excellent opportunity to better understand the complexities of operating in a joint, interagency, intergovernmental, and multinational environment. To stimulate critical discourse, the large diversity of backgrounds from international and interagency students in the CGSC classroom encourages new ideas and perspectives rather than simply relying on conventional U.S. military doctrine and tactics.

Rigidity in military education has not been limited to just the United States. British psychologist Dr. Norman Dixon (2016), who examined the education of British military officers in the early 20th century, concluded that two main reasons exist for stultifying

Maj. Caleb Riggs is a U.S. Army officer stationed at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. Riggs has a bachelor's degree in journalism from the University of Missouri and an MS in adult learning and leadership from Kansas State University.

military educational programs. The first stems from the belief that unpleasant, boring, and tedious tasks develop character; and the second is the argument that intellectual exercise, which cultivates independent thinking as opposed to rote learning, harms the loyalty and obedience that military schools strive to enforce (Dixon, 2016). While character and obedience are clearly required traits, they cannot be overly enforced to the detriment of independent and creative thought. Dixon (2016) concluded that these rigid teaching methods at British military schools ultimately led to the promotion of some of the most incompetent military leaders in British history.

Unfortunately, before arriving at PME, many mid-career officers experience a lack of trust from commanders; these leaders often perceive senior leaders as unwilling to provide honest, candid feedback and unwilling to permit any honest mistakes or shortcomings (Allen & Braun, 2013). Officers routinely feel micromanaged and unable to manage their own units and calendars. Sadly, this climate extends into PME. Military classrooms often replicate the rigid climate of a board room more than they do the relaxed environment of a typical graduate-level classroom. Rather than challenge students to master their professions and think more conceptually, military educators continue to repeat the flawed rigid, lecture-based methods from previous generations that often encourage simple memorization and regurgitation of doctrine and tactics. The complex battlefield of today demands that PME adopt the teaching methods utilized in civilian graduate schools.

The Application of Adult Learning Theories

Adult learning theories emphasize that adults must take responsibility for their own decisions and learning (Knowles, 1984). This mindset must be incorporated into the learning methods of PME. With such a diverse audience in the classroom, instructors cannot properly challenge each student to reach his or her own potential by requiring the same expectations from each student for each lesson. It is the instructor's role to support each student's learning journey, not force each student to take the same journey through the course material. Students who already have extensive knowledge on a topic must be held accountable to provide vocal leadership in the classroom to assist others. Students should constantly be challenged to conduct additional outside research and examine preconceived biases and gaps in understanding.

Another definition of trust is the "willingness to be vulnerable" (Puranam & Vanneste, 2009, p. 13). This definition poses a threat to the zero-defect mentality typically expected of military officers and the mindset that an instructor should be perfect. However, the greatest way for a military educator to establish a climate of mutual trust that supports higher learning is to be willing to share his or her own vulnerabilities and mistakes. An instructor cannot have the answer for everything. A willingness to humbly admit vulnerability helps the instructor relate to the stu-

dents. Storytelling provides an extremely effective way of connecting with students and demonstrating the practical application of the material. An instructor who is willing to share shortfalls and mistakes encourages other students to do the same for the sake of collective learning and improving practices for the future.

This willingness to be vulnerable requires a deep level of trust between the student and the teacher. This also requires instructors who are willing to take the time to truly master their profession and examine their own biases and assumptions. Much like the idea that students must be held accountable to direct their own learning, instructors must constantly challenge themselves to improve course material and find additional resources to challenge students. The classroom must be a safe learning environment where mistakes are viewed as learning experiences rather than as failures. Students who show initiative to experiment with new ideas and try new models should be rewarded, and instructors must also be willing to accept that they do not have all the answers.

While leaders who are willing to be transparent and admit personal imperfections are rare in the military, this transparency is critical to building trust between leaders and subordinates; the same is true in the classroom for trust between students and educators. Classroom instruction must provide a climate of trust for learning that facilitates freedom of expression and the option to offer contrary views or experiences to help learners synthesize the subject material. Honest debate and critical discourse stimulate professional development.

Instructors must demonstrate a profound respect for each student's prior knowledge and experiences (Pratt & Smulders, 2016). The instructor should never be viewed as the only source of knowledge and the only voice heard in the classroom. Regardless of the knowledge and experience of the instructor, students cannot learn the required material simply through transmission from the instructor; students learn by connecting past knowledge to new material through reflective application (Ross-Gordon, Rose, & Kasworm, 2017). Effective instructors do not want students to simply repeat what an instructor said in class. Students in PME must be expected to demonstrate higher-level thinking and analytical skills. Memorizing doctrinal terms and definitions may lead to high test scores; unfortunately, these test scores do not indicate whether students have the ability to synthesize ambiguous information and apply it in the real world.

Adult educators Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey (2016) use the term “constructive destabilization” to describe the process for leaders to grow and develop beyond their current abilities. Kegan and Lahey (2016) argue that a subordinate who can already demonstrate all the responsibility required for a particular task is no longer in the right job. When applied to the classroom, students who already have knowledge of a particular topic must be challenged to examine their biases and build deeper understanding through rigorous studies, and possibly by rotating through unfamiliar leadership positions. Instructors should not accept surface-level analysis from students and verbatim reproduction from the readings

(Pratt & Smulders, 2016). However, to facilitate this higher learning, students must be given adequate time to process, reflect, and apply the information to truly be evaluated or assessed on their understanding of the subject matter.

Education requires critical and creative thinking to properly analyze all the context and perspectives that apply to a given situation. Military experiences from one generation or one operation cannot blindly be applied to another theater, an unfortunate lesson learned during the past 19 years in Iraq and Afghanistan. For any particular subject matter, a humble instructor willingly accepts that students may have relevant or applicable experiences to share with their peers. Rather than feel challenged by student knowledge, the instructor should exploit it for the good of the group. This will not lead to a loss of instructor credibility; rather, this will lead to increased admiration for the instructor's authenticity.

Mutual trust between the instructor and the student reassures the student that his or her professional development is the end goal and not a means to an end. If an educator is viewed as a loyal partner who genuinely cares about student learning, students will trust the instructor and feel safe to experiment with new ways of thinking (Pratt & Smulders, 2016). Authentic instructors are approachable and willing to take the time to challenge a student in ways that encourage professional development, even if initially the student fails the first attempt.

Inversely, the student must still view the instructor as credible, even if the instructor willingly admits he or she does not have all the answers. His or her credibility begins with the requisite knowledge and experience to educate the next generation of America's leaders. Adult educator Stephen Brookfield (2015) notes that instructors must be viewed as having relevant knowledge, skills, or experiences that have immediate application for the student. Brookfield (2015) warns that educators must also understand the line between an authority and an ally. The instructor is obviously the authority figure but must be viewed as the student's ally to support learning and encourage questions and discussion. If the environment is too hierarchical and authoritarian, students will not feel free to experiment with new ideas and theories in the classroom to increase their level of understanding of complex topics.

Credibility and authenticity go hand in hand. Authenticity sets the foundation for trust. Brookfield (2015) describes authenticity as the perception that teachers are open and honest with students. The first step is to establish clear and definable expectations for classroom conduct, participation, and evaluations. These expectations must remain constant, and they must apply equally to all students. Authenticity is also demonstrated through effective feedback, both during classroom activities and homework assignments. Instructors must find ways to conduct regular formative assessments, either formally or informally, during each block of instruction. These assessments can be much more developmental and less threatening than summative assessments, which come at the end of the block of instruction.

Not all learners are the same, but the military educator must understand the personalities and motivations within the classroom to enable everyone's success. Rather than treating adult students as blank canvases, adult educators must be cognizant of the experiences that students bring to the classroom and leverage those experiences for a greater collective understanding of the material. Beyond just delivering a lecture, an instructor's role is to understand the classroom dynamics and help activate students' prior knowledge to bridge the gap between what they already know and the new content (Pratt & Smulders, 2016). In the process, the educator will be challenged along the way by thought-provoking questions and new experiences learned from his or her students.

For instructors who do not feel completely confident in their ability to effectively engage students on a particular topic, the transmission model of pedagogy is often the default (Pratt & Smulders, 2016). This model allows the instructor to facilitate a deeper discussion of the subject matter by delivering a substantial amount of material, typically through a lecture with slides, rather than hold students accountable for the readings. For topics where the material is new, lecturing using the transmission model obviously has its place in the military classroom. However, this model should not be the default for every block of instruction, especially for topics in which students have prior knowledge and experience. An overuse of the transmission method, often taking place through long lectures, can lead to intellectual stagnation as students become disengaged and disinterested in the material. Instructors must be prepared to use a variety of methods and techniques to keep students engaged in learning. Learners must be trusted to be active participants in their education.

Credibility as an actual educator is much different from professional credibility as an active duty or retired military officer or foreign service officer. Regardless of prior military knowledge and experience, poor teaching techniques will degrade the credibility of the instructor and lessen trust in the classroom. Some teachers may struggle to adapt to educational models that are less hierarchical and allow the students to actively participate in learning. However, if instructors remember that the end goal is to provide students with the tools they need to succeed postgraduation, then the instructor must be aware when students struggle to remain engaged in the course material.

The situational nature of the classroom requires instructors to be comfortable utilizing a variety of methods to enable student learning. The day of the week, time of day, and personal and family requirements also affect how a student engages with an instructor in the classroom. Each student will have a different level of interest in and motivation for each topic. Some students may experience external motivation, such as the need to pass a test; others may have a professional motivation because the topic is critical to their career field. The following three methods are recommended techniques for instructors to enable student learning through entrusting students to become active participants in their learning.

Proposed Classroom Methods

Flipped-Classroom Model

A simple method designed to enable trust in the classroom is the flipped-classroom model. In this model, students are assigned pertinent readings prior to class. Assigned readings mean that during class, the instructor does not have to transmit hours of information about the topic. The students are expected to come to class with a basic understanding of the content. Then, the instructor can facilitate a deeper understanding of the subject matter through a variety of means. This method holds students accountable by forcing them to be active participants, which requires reading and research prior to class. It also builds trust by encouraging them to share their thoughts and perspectives, even if students disagree on particular points. Effective instructors can use disagreement as a teachable moment to address the complexity of warfare and how complex problems often do not have one simple solution.

When used appropriately, the flipped-classroom model encourages healthy debate and creative thinking in the classroom, and the instructor is free to serve as more of a moderator or facilitator, rather than as a transmitter of information. Inversely, if used incorrectly, students do hours of reading prior to class but then cover the same basic material in class; in this case, there is no incentive for the student to prepare prior to class because the class simply restates the same basic material from the readings. Using the flipped-classroom approach, students are held accountable for preparing for each class.

Additionally, students in the flipped-classroom model will find the classes and exercises much more engaging because the classes are more interactive and encourage critical discourse and the consideration of alternate perspectives. Students will also be more open to sharing ideas and opinions freely with peers rather than challenging the instructor as the sole voice in the classroom.

Case Study

An effective case study provides the perfect venue to demonstrate the analytical skills required for students in PME. Case studies are more than simple stories or situations described by an instructor; anecdotes told without broader context represent a single data point and do not provide proper perspective (Dahl, 2017). Case studies should be open-ended and present a dilemma to the student (Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 2017). This approach encourages different reactions from each student and challenges both students and instructors to be more open and less de-

fensive. Instructors must be exceptionally prepared with all the facts and context, and the instructor must be willing to explore new concepts and conclusions.

Case studies challenge students to analyze how they would respond in a particular situation. However, Dahl (2017) argues that case studies should do more than that. The broader goal should be to examine how a particular case study can inform the student's understanding for other cases and other situations. Using this perspective, instructors should encourage students to do additional research and look for other examples of similar situations and identify broader patterns and trends rather than revisit one battle or historical event. The instructor's willingness to allow diverse opinions and perspectives reinforces the need to understand situational context rather than simply copy previous techniques and decisions. This willingness enables the student to apply the lessons of the case study in the future rather than simply critique the decisions of the past.

Team Teaching

After 50 years of teaching experience, educator Stephen Brookfield (2015) still admits that it can be difficult to instruct with another teacher in the classroom. However, team teaching can be an extremely effective method to support learning. Team teaching does not mean a second teacher sits in the classroom and adds a few points in an unstructured method. Rather, team teaching, as instructed by Brookfield (2015), involves deliberate development of a lesson plan between two or more instructors to leverage the knowledge and experience of each instructor to increase student learning. When done correctly, this method provides the students divergent opinions and experiences to reinforce that all learning is situational. As a secondary benefit, team teaching also supports the idea that no one individual has all the answers, which reinforces the humility required in the military classroom.

Partnering an instructor with a student who has a particular expertise provides another opportunity for team teaching. The instructor and the student jointly develop a lesson plan that leverages the knowledge and experiences of the student while incorporating the teaching experience of the instructor to assist with the method of instruction. The instructor who effectively provides students the opportunity to teach his or her peers exhibits a profound respect for student credibility. Student teaching in this way can be extremely beneficial because students will often be more likely to understand the language and techniques of a peer who has similar professional experiences; when a peer demonstrates the relevance of the material, the learner is much more likely to take the time to understand its application in his or her own career. Students who do not find relevance in the subject matter will resist the learning (Brookfield, 2015).

Testing and Evaluation

Unfortunately, the true testing and evaluation phase for PME is often on the battlefield, which demonstrates the need for review of instructional methods utilized during PME. The last century is full of examples from leaders who rigidly followed doctrine and failed to innovate or leverage new technology or tactics; for example, British leadership before World War II that failed to recognize the potential of the tank drew the conclusion that “innovation and progress are inherently dangerous and therefore to be eschewed” (Dixon, 2016, p. 111). Often, this disdain for creativity and new tactics and technology stems from the repetitious training rituals conducted by military officers throughout decades of service. Eventually, over time, these ritualistic drills and tactics can lead to blind obedience or to outdated techniques and procedures on the battlefield. Outdated tactics led to immense loss of life during the two world wars and Vietnam.

In the 1950s, a study of the War College challenged the “restrictive militarism” of the school and its “tendency to conform to a prevailing pattern of thought” (Dixon, 2016, p. 330). Can the same be said today of PME? Will this generation of military instructors recognize the extreme changes in doctrine and tactics utilized by America’s competitors since Desert Storm? Failure to leverage new capabilities, such as cyber and space, could potentially lead to the same devastating results of the previous century including the failure to recognize the value of tanks and airplanes or the failure to accept counterinsurgency doctrine in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Graduate-level instruction begins with teachers who challenge students to think beyond the prescriptive steps of doctrine. The asymmetrical threats of the 21st century require military leaders who are valued for their ability to think and innovate, not for following rigid, prescriptive doctrine. This generation of America’s leaders express a great desire for meaningfulness and satisfaction in their work; this is true from the military base to the board room. Research shows the majority of millennials who leave a particular business experience burn out not because of overload but because of a lack of personal and professional development from superiors (Kegan & Lahey, 2016). The same is true in the classroom. Students who are not challenged will only put in minimum effort and will not see the value in the material.

Readings and homework assignments must be deliberately selected to prevent students from becoming disengaged with the topic. Students must be active participants in the learning process. Information presented in class that lacks meaning to the student will be discarded once the test or evaluation is completed (Sousa, 2017). An instructor’s response to why a particular topic is important should never be that the material is simply on the test. Instead, the instructor must demonstrate that the learning objective has relevance to the student. Instructors must be more mindful and help students establish meaning for the material; this connects the subject area to prior experiences and helps demonstrate the significance of the

material for future use (Sousa, 2017). Again, a personal story or an example of how this material was either effectively or ineffectively utilized by the instructor helps the students understand its relevance.

Instructors must also have respect for time. Time blocks must not be so rigidly prescriptive that they inhibit learning by leaving no time to discuss the material or ask questions for clarification. If the material is too much for a particular block of instruction, then the instructor must take the time to find the most critical information and cover that information. The instructor must also be aware of the classroom dynamics. At times, students will be mentally exhausted from the strain of learning and applying new material; an instructor who is cognizant of this will either take a break or reengage the topic when students are more engaged. To keep content relevant, instruction should be problem centric, not content oriented (Knowles, 1984). Effective evaluations mirror this approach as well; multiple choice and fill-in-the-blank tests are not adequate for testing a student's ability to properly synthesize the material for future professional application.

A common flaw in the military classroom is an oversimplification of very complex ideas, either for the sake of time or for ease of grading; examining the Lykke model as a construct (ends + ways + means = strategy) provides a perfect example (Meiser, 2017). While this model can be a useful construct, Meiser (2017) argues that the model has become a crutch "undermining creative and effective strategic thinking" (p. 82). Simple whiteboard exercises that analyze complex ideas like military strategy or centers of gravity in a short amount of time do not stimulate critical discourse or synthesis of complex learning. In fact, they falsely encourage students to believe that strategic planning should be minimized to a prescriptive checklist.

The same can be said for many other models utilized in PME. Rather than conduct detailed, holistic analysis, students are often quickly encouraged to simply fill out a chart for the instruments of national power, mission or operational variables, or the effects of terrain on a given operation to demonstrate basic understanding for a block of instruction. Again, models and checklists can be useful tools, but overreliance on models without discussing linkages between actions and results leads to imperfect deductions (Meiser, 2017). According to Meiser (2017), a simple checklist will be much easier to grade than a white-board exercise that asks students to align resources with goals, but the latter demonstrates a much more thorough understanding of the solution to a given problem and stimulates further classroom conversation.

Ultimately, instructors must not lose sight of the goal: that students are able to transfer classroom learning to practical application in their future assignments. Doctrine is meant to be a guide, not a rulebook. Additionally, just because a student can memorize doctrinal terms and tactics does not necessarily prepare the student to apply that doctrine to solve a complex military problem. This requires instructors to adequately support students while allowing them to think, reflect, and question previous assumptions and beliefs (Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 2017).

Leaders like T. E. Lawrence, British Gen. William Slim, and Edward Lansdale provide timely lessons to America's military leaders today for demonstrating the value of innovation and unconventional tactics to achieve great success; sadly, many of the most innovative leaders such as B. H. Liddell Hart were not appreciated or respected by their peers because they did not simply remain quiet and follow orders from disillusioned leaders (Dixon, 2016). The CGSC classroom curriculum should address successes and failures throughout America's history and be willing to accept that history is unfortunately full of mistakes that led to unnecessary casualties. Some examples that demand analysis include overconfident leaders who failed to interpret intelligence at places like Pearl Harbor, interwar mistakes between World War II and Korea, and the refusal to adopt population-centric tactics during Vietnam. All stem from leaders who were unable to understand the battlefield environment and think creatively. Lawrence considered depth of knowledge as the most important trait for a military leader; he deplored the "closed and vacuous minds" of his peers (Dixon, 2016, p. 374). Challenging rigid doctrine and closed-minded thinking begins in the classroom.

Field grade officers are expected to lead large formations after graduation; they should be given the same respect in the classroom. Innovation and progress are absolutely essential for the future success of America's military. Instruction should be challenging yet developmental at the same time. Instructors must use their position in a helpful way to inspire, guide, and encourage students by empowering student leaders within the classroom through a climate of trust (Brookfield, 2015). As students gain increased knowledge and experience, each student should be given more of a primary role in the classroom; after all, what is learned is more important than what was taught (Pratt & Smulders, 2016). The first true test of a student's application of knowledge and abilities should be in the controlled environment of a classroom, not in a war zone thousands of miles away. ☞

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