Incorporating Reflection Exercises to Identify Soft Skills in Army Education

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Abstract

Reflection exercises are frequently applied in higher education as part of student development but have been underexplored in Army education. Soldiers participate in extensive training and education to acquire technical skills that contribute to their professional development. The technical skills acquired are complemented by soft skills that are essential for military advancement and postmilitary career transitions; however, identifying and describing the soft skills acquired through Army education courses remains a challenge for soldiers. This article proposes a series of reflection exercises for Army education to help soldiers discuss the soft skills they develop over the duration of their military service. An introduction to reflection methods for developing soft skills is offered, implications for Army facilitators and soldiers are discussed, and barriers to successful implementation are outlined.

The U.S. Army conducts training and education to enable soldiers to successfully contribute to their organization's mission accomplishment and to acquire sets of competencies that are important for their professional development. Army training develops the technical skills required for successful execution of military jobs. At the same time, application of methods for developing soft skills in soldiers are often lacking or misunderstood, even while being a highly valued component of Army training and education. These soft skills, many of which are outlined in the Army's core leader attributes and competencies, contribute toward soldiers' effectiveness, including adaptability, teamwork, initiative, critical thinking, problem solving, and the ability to effectively communicate, among others.[1]

Well-designed reflection exercises can be used in Army courses to ensure that soldiers are better able to articulate and continually develop the soft skills acquired throughout their military service. Unfortunately, few scholars and practitioners have examined the best practices available to Army training and education for incorporating reflection in the classroom. This article proposes classroom exercises for integrating reflection with-

in Army training and education that will give soldiers the tools to successfully increase awareness and development of soft skills throughout their military service. Implications for Army facilitators, faculty development courses, and soldier self-development are provided as well as potential barriers to successful implementation.

Background

The Army has a history of executing exceptional training and education programs designed to develop a combination of technical and soft skills that enable soldiers to successfully operate in complex environments. As John Kem, Eugene LeBoeuf, and James Martin noted, early in an Army career, much of a soldier's learning relates to performing the technical aspects of a job.[2] Over time, the balance transitions so that education dominates courses in the later part of the career, where soldiers seek to increase intellectually and become more "agile, adaptive, and innovative."[3]

Senior leaders outline the courses and leadership characteristics that are required for career progression. Student assessment in courses, however, usually has a greater emphasis on developing technical competencies required to successfully perform the job.[4] Despite their wide-ranging technical and subject-matter expertise, a recent study from the Center for Army Leadership revealed Army leaders' effectiveness at developing subordinate's leader competence was in need of attention.[5] In fact, just over half (59 percent) of Army leaders were perceived as effective at developing others. Moreover, about 25 percent of participants believed that their units placed a "low" or "very low" priority on leader development activities.[6] The Army's learning environment must be adaptive to learners' needs, engage students at their level, and offer a challenging and relevant curriculum leading to higher levels of learning.[7] Synthesizing Army training and education with soft-skills development in more effective ways could be a key contributor to changing perceptions about leader development.[8]

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Soldiers' soft skills can be leveraged in military and nonmilitary roles, and many private-sector employers prioritize hiring veterans because of their skill sets.[9] Veterans, however, have a history of struggling to articulate their soft skills to nonmilitary employers.[10] Additionally, various veteran subgroups purposefully do not identify or promote their military skills when marketing themselves in corporate America. Reflection is a worthy tool to help soldiers identify their acquired soft skills and improve leadership competence.[11]

After completing a mission, training exercise, or milestone, soldiers often complete a counseling session or after-action review (AAR) about their performance. Rarely, however, are Army personnel challenged to reflect on their field and classroom experiences as part of identifying soft skills. This claim does not suggest the Army undervalues reflection. In fact, AARs are frequently used in training and combat to identify successes and failures as well as to make improvements. Reflection exercises can be applied in ways similar to conducting an AAR in Army courses to increase soldiers' awareness of their acquired soft skills. As Robert Dalessandro outlined regarding Army officers, "self-reflection on schooling, experience, and individual performance becomes critical in identifying strengths and weaknesses within the leadership construct of leader, led, situation, and communications."[12]

While identifying soft skills may be considered the responsibility of the individual, soldiers would arguably benefit from professionally modeled reflection in the classroom. Reflection within Army courses is crucial for raising soldiers' awareness of their individual behaviors and corresponding soft skills.[13] In addition, teaching soldiers to document the soft skills gained can be an effective way to demonstrate their professional development. Tying together learning experiences with career progression and success enables soldiers to excel in their positions.[14]

Reflection Exercises for Army Education

Reflection exercises have been firmly ingrained in adult-learning institutions since the 1980s.[15] Though interpretations of the term vary, reflection often relates to questioning and exploring experiences.[16] Reflection consists of "active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusion to which it tends."[17] Simply acquiring knowledge is not enough to assume the critical aspects of reflection will occur; instead, reflection requires intentionally guided examination.[18] Thus, it is necessary to outline strategies for modeling effective reflection within Army courses.

Reflection offers educators guidance for implementation and practice.[19] Benefits of reflection are more productive when contextualized as a bridge connecting learning and work.[20] Students are encouraged to examine their experiences to better understand who they are and the corresponding soft skills acquired as lessons learned. Because soldier

experiences and interpretations are unique to each individual, reflection is a dynamic and unpredictable process.[21] Every student and his or her coinciding learning experience is unique, and consequently, students' development and takeaways vastly differ.[22] Regardless of the learning, the product of reflection should lead to equipping soldiers with the tools and confidence to prepare them to address future missions.[23]

Facilitators play a vital role in encouraging students to participate in reflection exercises. Classroom learning combines instruction and experiences, with reflection being a key element of soft-skill identification. As John Dewey noted, learning does not occur from the experience itself; rather, learning results from reflecting on past experiences.[24] Soldiers are exposed to a great number of experiences, suggesting that reflection may be an effective development tool throughout their career. The following section proposes a list of strategies for introducing reflection exercises in Army education.

Preparation for Application

Army facilitators who incorporate the proposed exercises can benefit from better understanding how reflection will impact course outcomes. Because soft-skills identification is relatively new in Army courses, effective execution of reflection exercises is critical to its success. To be effective, facilitators should allocate time toward learning about the students, understanding their intended career paths, and identifying relationships between Army courses and soft-skill acquisition. Each factor may assist with tailoring appropriate reflection exercises in Army courses. Facilitators interested in developing reflection exercises that help guide the identification of soft skills may consider answering a series of questions drafted ahead of time. Sample questions for executing reflection exercises include but are not limited to the following:

1. Who is the audience?
2. What are the students' likely career paths?
3. What soft skills might students acquire through this course?
4. How can I facilitate soft-skill acquisition in the classroom?
5. How can I assist students in recognizing the soft skills acquired or developed through instruction?

During the Course

Army facilitators may choose to introduce reflection in the classroom by first addressing the purpose and intent. The purpose of the course and learning objectives can include how the curriculum contributes toward developing soft skills. Students may benefit by developing definitions and descriptions about soft skills during intro-

ductory comments. Students should also be informed that reflection exercises will help them identify their strengths and weaknesses, increase awareness of learning, and establish professional goals.[25] By including a discussion about reflection prior to moving into the course content, students may be more likely to engage with reflection exercises and accurately identify their soft skills.

Strategies

Video recording of course exercises is one strategy for introducing reflection in the classroom. Role play or demonstration exercises allow soldiers to apply course content and, through video recordings, create opportunities for reflection. Students viewing videos of themselves and interactions with others while performing tasks can provide insight for students on the corresponding soft skills being developed.[26] While soldiers view the recordings, they should be encouraged to reflect on their application of materials and consider how they contribute toward soft skills development. For documenting longer-term developmental progress, videos can be included as part of a more extensive student learning portfolio.

Portfolios offer a second strategy for Army facilitators to consider using with reflection. Portfolios have been used to support assessment and reflection since the 1980s and can help students understand their progress and enhance professional development.[27] Throughout a course, students may accumulate a variety of artifacts related to learning and assessments that can be added to the portfolio. The electronic or hard-copy files provide students with documentation that can be reviewed to help outline their soft skills in future applications. Darren Cambridge added that artifacts can also outline something about the individual or demonstrate learning against an institutional standard.[28] Once the portfolio has accumulated a collection of course products and corresponding assessments, students can review and reflect on the content.

Reflective journals have been used as a strategy in K-12 and higher education courses to support ongoing student development but are utilized to a much lesser extent in Army courses. Journals help students preserve thoughts to reflect about concepts learned, insights gained, and behavioral changes. Students are more likely to reflect on their learning when time is allotted during regular class time as opposed to expecting students to complete journal entries outside of the classroom.[29] Reflection techniques can be applied after completion of a particular task, module, or learning unit. Facilitators should introduce the purpose of reflective journals and provide students with guiding questions to help facilitate reflection. Sample questions that may influence effective reflection are provided below; however, depending on the course and students, facilitators may benefit by creating their own questions. Some questions to ask might include the following:

1. What soft skills did you hope to acquire or improve over the course of the program? Why?
2. What soft skills have you acquired or developed over the course of this program?
3. What part(s) of the course contributed toward developing these soft skills? Why?
4. How might the soft skills identified have been beneficial in previous experiences?
5. How might the soft skills identified contribute to success in your current position?
6. How can you apply these soft skills in future positions?
7. What other soft skills would be beneficial for advancement in your military career?

Upon completing the journal entries, students should be encouraged to share important takeaways with a peer or the class, including the soft skills developed through Army training.

Group discussion of acquired soft skills can enhance learning by inviting insight and differing perspectives from classmates. Each student will likely identify their own acquired or refined soft skills, which can contribute to a more robust list. Through the group discussion, new insights on soft skills will likely be revealed. Leveraging group discussion as part of reflection can be integrated during multiple facets of a course in a similar manner to other strategies. Opportunities to discuss acquired soft skills include any time a unit, learning objective, or course is completed.

Course Conclusion

Courses should include a summative discussion about the content covered, as well as the technical and soft skills developed, which may be beneficial for soldiers in both their current and future positions. A complete list of soft skills identified through student reflection should also be collected and redistributed for students to reference when advancing in their careers. Facilitators should seek to develop reflection habits and encourage continuous reflective practice as a key contributor to soldiers' professional development. Through frequent reflection, soldiers will likely continue to improve their understanding of the soft skills that are so critical to leader development.[30] Implementing reflection in Army education requires facilitator analysis and time as well as commitment from students to be successful.

Discussion

The proposed reflection exercises provide a baseline for facilitators to help soldiers identify the soft skills acquired through Army courses. Reflection is not new in Army learning, although it could benefit from a more formalized process for implementation. The Army is exceptional at developing knowledge and skills in its members but has not

required soldiers to reflect on their acquired competencies and soft skills.[31] This gap may be more crucial to bridge than ever before. Today's rapidly changing military environment requires soldiers to be able to assess and reassess the necessary knowledge, skills, and other character attributes required for successful job performance.[32] Reflection in the classroom can contribute to soldier readiness in the field across ranks and positions. In addition, reflection promotes soldiers' long-term professional development and can continually be applied across Army training, education, and experience.

Implications

The introduction of reflection exercises in Army courses may have a lasting impact for Army facilitators, soldiers, and course learning outcomes. Army facilitators may benefit from a greater awareness of the impact their methods have on soft skills students acquire, while soldiers learn to reflect on their experiences as a component of professional development. Finally, learning outcomes from Army courses and training exercises may be enhanced or revised through the application of reflection. Each implication is expanded below.

Army facilitators. Army facilitators can benefit from reflection exercises by empowering students to assist in identifying the impact of their training and education. While students complete their own reflection exercises, facilitators can also reflect on the soft skills they are personally developing. An important aspect of a facilitator's personal growth occurs through reflection on one's teaching performance.[33] Neville Hatton and David Smith noted how the terms "reflection" and "critical reflection" have increasingly appeared in teacher education as a vital form of developing impactful teaching practices.[34] Reflection includes self-criticism of action with the intent of improving performance.[35] Through reflection exercises, facilitators may gain insight into their own soft skills that extend beyond technical instruction. In addition, facilitators are encouraged to continually improve their subject knowledge, teaching methods, and classroom management.[36]

Soldiers. Soldiers participating in reflection exercises may experience long-term benefits as a result of identifying their soft skills. When preparing for promotion boards, soldiers must be prepared to address questions about both their technical and soft skills as outlined in Army doctrine. Reflection methods benefit soldiers over the duration of their career far beyond the classroom. Through correct application, reflection may be utilized in the institutional, operational, and self-development domains to develop a holistic learning continuum for Army soldiers.[37]

One final contribution of reflection extends beyond active military service. Military veterans struggle to articulate their soft skills when interviewing for civil-sector jobs.[38] For many, the Army represents their first professional job after graduating high school or college. During military service, soldiers develop soft skills that are

also critical for civil-sector employers.[39] By identifying and honing the soft skills acquired and developed through military service, veterans can be better prepared to articulate their transferable skills for those civil-sector employers. In doing so, employers may also gain greater clarity about how military training has contributed to the professional development of applicants with a military background.

Training and education. Training, such as field training or warfighter exercises, is distinguishable from education and may also benefit from inclusion of reflection exercises. As David Pierson outlined, training consists of skills and procedure development that is required to demonstrate mastery of a task or competency.[40] The result is a student who can perform specific tasks to a standard outlined by the profession.[41] The proposed classroom exercises can be applied during Army training to improve soldiers' awareness of the technical and soft skills developed. Army facilitators from all military occupational specialties may consider how these reflection strategies could contribute to the development of their soldiers.

Barriers to Successful Implementation

Introducing reflection exercises in Army education poses challenges for facilitators, including the issue that reflection is generally not considered a key element of work as a facilitator.[42] As such, faculty development course supplements are necessary to ensure facilitators model effective reflection methods that are customized to the course and rank as appropriate. Any standardized approach to reflection methods used by the Army must be treated with caution.[43] Because of the varying amount of time spent in the classroom depending on military occupational specialty and rank, Army facilitators need to incorporate reflection in a manner that best fits the needs of the students and course learning objectives. Additionally, course development can consume several hours for every hour of instruction. Facilitators new to reflection methods may resist an added time requirement. Advocates for reflection can be supported by highlighting the minimal time required to successfully introduce the exercises and outlining how reflection can support soldier development.

Lastly, students need to correctly and objectively reflect on the soft skills identified to appropriately apply them in context. For example, soldiers who identify improved critical-thinking skills should be able to articulate and explain through reflection. If unable to explain, the soft skills may need further development and/or examination. At the same time, soldiers may need substantial assistance in identifying and understanding soft skills as well as their relevance to job performance. Regardless, the soft skills identified should be examined and periodically updated as part of soldiers' professional development over the course of their Army careers.

Conclusion

Soldiers obtain and develop extensive soft skills throughout their Army career that complement their many technical skills. However, soldiers currently are not exposed to frequent, intentional reflection on their learning and developing of soft skills. The benefits of including reflection in Army courses range from supporting soldiers' career advancement to understanding the role courses have in developing soft skills. At the same time, Army facilitators can leverage reflection to improve their own effectiveness in the classroom. This article introduces proven reflection methods that Army facilitators can include in their classroom. These methods support soldiers' development of soft skills across their Army career and beyond. Finally, soldiers who have a deeper understanding of the soft skills they acquire will be better positioned to advance their careers beyond active-duty service. ☙

Notes

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