

# Insights for a Committed Learning Environment

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## Abstract

When educating adults, it is critically important to create a committed versus compliant learning environment, which inspires one to learn very deeply on wide variety of complex subjects and their associated challenges. A committed learning environment creates insights that will be deeply ingrained into one's thinking so they can be implicitly or explicitly applied to address these complex challenges students will face upon graduation. This chapter broadly examines ways to build a committed learning environment from curriculum, student, and seminar perspectives. In doing this, it draws upon a wide range of education subjects associated with the following: applying adult learning concepts; proper use of different stages of Bloom's learning taxonomies; enabling different types of discourse to fully examine complex and uncertain issues with a strategic perspective; applying team building concepts within a seminar to create trust and commitment; and the importance of and ways to encourage reflection to enable one's learning. This chapter provides insights on the synergistic application of these education subjects from the academic literature and the author's perspectives associated with educating future senior leaders at the United States Army War College for almost two decades. This chapter's overall focus is to help shape students and faculty thinking on how best to approach and complete an educational journey with a committed learning focus.

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## COMMITTED LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

*... we shall teach each other: first, because we have a vast amount of experience behind us, and secondly, in my opinion, it is only through free criticism of each other's ideas that truth can be thrashed out . ... during your course here no one is going to compel you to work, for the simple reason that a man who requires to be driven is not worth the driving. ... thus you will become your own students and until you learn how to teach yourselves, you will never be taught by others.*

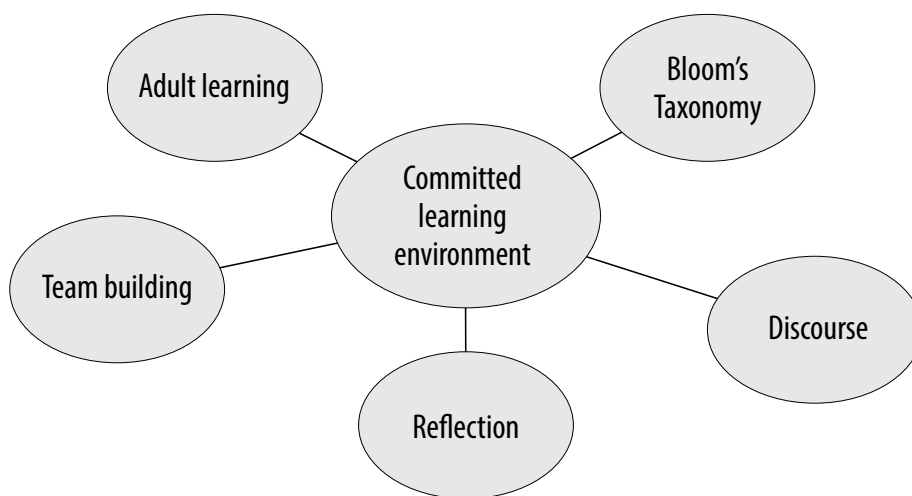
– J. F. C. Fuller

### Introduction

The above quote from a 1923 lecture by J. F. C. Fuller, a well-respected British military historian and educator, is on the wall of every seminar room at the United States Army War College (USAWC).<sup>1</sup> These words provide broad insights to an expected interaction among students and faculty that is associated with a committed seminar learning environment. To amplify the thoughts in Fuller's quote and provide insights on how faculty can help develop a committed learning environment from curricula, student, and seminar perspectives, this chapter examines five key educational subjects that support the inquiry-driven model of graduate study that is the basis of the college's education philosophy.<sup>2</sup> This chapter also provides the reader insights on different ways to establish a committed learning environment using examples from the college's curriculum and seminar dynamics associated with a student's ten-month residence educational journey, where they can earn a master's degree in strategic studies.<sup>3</sup>

This chapter describes broad differences between a committed versus compliant learning environment to provide context to apply five key education subjects associated with developing and executing curriculum. The first two educational subjects are properly applying the theory associated with adult learning and Bloom's learning taxonomy to collectively influence curriculum design and execution that creates an intellectual foundation for a committed learning environment. The third educational subject is associated with three different types of seminar discourse related to conversation, discussion, and dialogue. The proper use of these varied discourse types will help build a more committed student and seminar learning environment as it encourages the collective intellectual capacity and willingness to explore complex issues from multiple perspectives. The fourth educational subject is applying team-building principles to develop a more trusting seminar learning team, which is essential to enhancing a committed learning environment. Finally, the last educational subject is the importance of reflection, a key part of a student's commitment that helps frame their future thinking from synthesizing academic and practical experiences on curriculum subjects.

There are five key education subjects associated with a committed learning environment: adult learning, Bloom's taxonomy, discourse, team building, and reflection. These are chosen because properly applying them will directly influence developing a commit-



(Figure by author)

**Figure. Committed Learning Environment**

ted learning environment from curriculum, student, and seminar perspectives. Each of these subjects is significant in their own right, as numerous scholarly books and articles have been written about them. This chapter briefly examines each subject from an academic perspective and then provides practical examples on how a faculty member should apply them to create a committed learning environment when developing and executing a curriculum. These examples are from the author’s experience in educating students for almost two decades at the USAWC and recent discussions with faculty and students on commitment. These five educational subjects, if applied properly, combine synergistically to help create a committed learning environment from curriculum, student, and seminar perspectives. The figure provides a way to visualize the synergistic relationship of these educational subjects.

## **Committed Versus Compliant Learning Environment**

The educational, as well as the business literature, makes distinctions between creating and maintaining a committed versus compliant learning environment to enable a student/employee to become self-motivated. It describes these distinctions from both faculty/leader and student/employee responsibilities. An underlying thought in many of these articles is developing one’s emotional or self-motivated component to influence overall learning. Some articles use the word “heart” in the article’s title when making the distinctions between being committed versus compliant.<sup>4</sup> The most straightforward way to articulate the difference between a truly committed versus compliant student is

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that a committed student wants to learn versus being told what to learn, as they make the emotional attachment to the subject, faculty, or seminar.<sup>5</sup> While a student may be unfamiliar with a particular subject, the manner in which the subject is taught will create a committed learning environment over time. Faculty observations suggest that students with emotional attachment work much harder, since they feel responsible for others' learning within a seminar in addition to their own learning. This intrinsic motivation is often obvious in the creative ways students complete their assignments, and the additional research they willingly do during their studies.<sup>6</sup>

Commitment is not just a student responsibility, as some have argued that student commitment to some or a great degree depends on the faculty's commitment to helping all students learn.<sup>7</sup> The faculty has the responsibility to develop the curriculum that is relevant to the students' future challenges and is focused on insights and ways to use what is learned. Key aspects of this faculty commitment are associated with being approachable, how you interact within and outside of formal classroom sessions, and the ways you show enthusiasm for the curriculum.<sup>8</sup> In addition, the manner by which faculty respectfully and reflectively listen to students, ask thoughtful questions, and encourage positives further contributes to a committed seminar environment.<sup>9</sup>

Before discussing how these five educational concepts are related to a committed learning environment from curriculum, seminar, and student perspectives, a short examination of the USAWC's seminar composition, faculty teaching team, and curriculum is warranted. This will enable the reader to better apply insights from this chapter to his or her own educational experiences.

### Seminar Composition and Curriculum

To appreciate how these five education subjects are applied at the USAWC, one must first understand the college's seminar composition and curriculum. The college's resident class has approximately 380 students divided into 24 seminars of 16 students

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each. The students are generally in their late 30s or early 40s, and have approximately 20 years of military or federal civilian service. Military officers are in the rank of lieutenant colonel or colonel, and civilians are in grades GS-14 or 15. Each seminar is selected deliberately to be diverse with students from different occupational backgrounds that range from infantry to intelligence to logistics to aviation to special forces. The average seminar has one GS-14 or 15 civilian, and officers at the rank of lieutenant colonel or colonel (or equivalent) from each of the services, with 1-2 coming each from the Air Force and sea services, 3-4 from our international partners, and 8-9 from the U.S. Army. Further, one or two students have National Guard or Reserve experiences. This seminar composition adds to a vibrant intellectual diversity as one's thinking is shaped in some way by one's prior experiences.

From each of the three academic departments there is one teaching faculty member assigned to each seminar, and collectively they have a mixture of practical and academic experiences to teach the college's core curriculum. In addition, a historian may be assigned to each seminar to ensure history is properly integrated throughout the academic year. Finally, other members of the college may affiliate with a seminar to provide their functional expertise when needed. In summary, there is considerable work that goes into developing the seminar's faculty team, with a balance between civilian and military officers and recent and veteran professors to further enhance a seminar's intellectual diversity.

The seminar stays intact for seven months from August through February to examine subjects described by the following core course titles: Strategic Leadership, Theory of War and Strategy, National Security Policy and Strategy, Theater Strategy and Campaigning, and Defense Management. During this seven-month period, students also take a regional studies course of their choice that examines one of seven geographic global regions. An average class day consists of approximately three hours of contact time with four lessons each week. This class is usually done in seminar format, though some instructional periods have a lecturer who speaks to the entire class prior to the seminar discussion. On occasion, the students engage in more interactive course exercises or war-games, and these are generally full-day classes.

The next three months, the seminar is no longer learning together. This timeframe begins with the oral comprehensive exams, where students are asked comprehensive questions by a different faculty team as they must demonstrate an ability to integrate core curriculum concepts, which is a requirement to graduate. Students then take ten credit hours of electives based on their specific interests. The college takes the students on field studies to New York City and Washington, D.C. to engage with leaders in business, media, the defense industry, and congress. For the final week, the seminar comes together for a short, high-level forum with civilian leaders from across the United States where national security issues are discussed. With this brief description of the seminar composition and curriculum focus, the chapter will now cover how adult learning is applied in curriculum design and execution with a committed learning focus.

## Adult Learning

The educational focus associated with adult learning is based upon research in the beginning of the twentieth century that was documented in the 1928 book appropriately titled *Adult Learning*.<sup>10</sup> The adult education paradigm and associated teaching methodology gained additional traction from work by Malcolm Knowles, and in 1973 he published the widely read book *The Adult Learner: A Neglected Species*.<sup>11</sup> He articulated the differences between educating adults, described as andragogy, and educating pre-adults, described as pedagogy. Adults, because of life experiences, are motivated to learn in different ways than younger students, which must be considered when designing and executing the curriculum. Knowles identified the following five broad assumptions to underpin this andragogy philosophy: (1) adults increasingly become self-directed in their learning approach; (2) their life experiences are a rich resource for learning; (3) their learning needs are closely related to changing social roles; (4) their time perspective to apply what is learned is more immediate; and (5) their learning orientation is more problem centered.<sup>12</sup> From this brief description of adult learning, a critical question that will now be answered is: *How do adult learning assumptions affect curriculum and faculty responsibilities associated with developing a committed learning environment?*

Knowles's first adult learning assumption related to self-directed learning is perhaps the most important to develop a committed learning environment. This self-directed approach is leveraged by a faculty advisor working with students to help them develop an individual learning plan during the first month of studies and execute it throughout the year with faculty mentoring. Hence, the students help design their educational journey within the college's overall educational framework. Another way this self-directed approach can be leveraged by faculty to increase student commitment is to provide them the opportunity to write about subjects that they want to conduct research on versus assigning students an exact writing topic. A colleague once said to me that "writing is a window to the mind" to emphasize this approach.

Knowles's second adult learning assumption of a person's experiences being a rich learning resource is realized by encouraging and leveraging relevant student experiences to create a committed seminar learning environment. Consequently, more often faculty need to facilitate subjects in seminar to bring out these rich experiences rather than directly teach subjects through lecture. Knowles's third adult learning assumption that learning needs are related to changing social roles is that students want to focus more on subjects that address their future leadership roles (their changing social role). Upon graduation, students will be interacting across higher organizational levels with greater responsibilities to include those at the strategic level. The college's curriculum focus at the strategic level and students' future leadership challenges address this assumption.

Knowles's fourth adult learning assumption related to a more immediate time perspective and fifth assumption of a problem-centered approach are very related in that

students want to study subjects and problems they are expected to address upon graduation. Hence, curriculum exercises or papers should focus on real-world challenges and what advice students should provide to senior leaders to address these challenges. For example, in the warfighting part of the curriculum, students conduct an exercise to address current strategic challenges in Southeast Asia when studying how to employ war planning concepts and processes. In the leadership part of the curriculum, students write papers on mission command or sexual assault prevention and response, which are examples of potentially relevant issues they will address upon graduation.

Research by other scholars in the educational community somewhat disagreed with Knowles's approach that broadly specified differences between andragogy versus pedagogy. They believed Knowles's learning differences and associated assumptions between pre-adults and adults were too general in nature and did not reflect an individual's learning approach. Instead, they applied adult-learning research to espouse an education philosophy under a framework called self-directed learning (SDL).<sup>13</sup> In this framework, adult learners gain greater learning independence, as they progress through different learning stages and accept greater responsibility for their learning. This greater interdependence more smoothly addresses an individual's personal learning process. Educational expert Dr. Gerald Grow articulated this SDL philosophy by developing a straightforward, four-stage learning model where the learner's motivation and self-direction changes from low to moderate to intermediate and finally to high.<sup>14</sup>

Grow's four-stage learning model identifies not only a learner's motivation and associated behaviors but resultant faculty perspectives, both of which are relevant to appreciating the characteristics of a committed learning environment. In Stage 1, the student is not interested in or familiar at all with the subject being discussed and is fully dependent on explicit faculty directions. In Stage 2, the student is interested in the subject and may be motivated to learn the material, which can occur from an inspiring lecture and guided faculty discussions. In Stage 3, the student is fully engaged and shows initiative and confidence when exploring subjects as the faculty primarily facilitate the resultant seminar discussion and dialogue. In Stage 4, the student takes ownership for learning and conducts independent research under faculty mentoring.<sup>15</sup>

Based on faculty experiences at the USAWC, Stage 1 is rarely encountered among the graduate student population. Stage 2 occurs from either Bliss Hall lectures, given by distinguished scholars and our nation's senior leaders, or by faculty in seminar describing complex Defense Department systems and processes used by senior leaders to make decisions such as the Planning, Programming, Budgeting and Execution process. Stage 3 is the most common seminar condition, as faculty often facilitate students' experiences and insights on a wide variety of subjects to achieve higher-level learning objectives. To develop a committed learning environment, an open-ended questioning approach should be used during this stage to gain insights by applying or evaluating what is taught. Stage 4 occurs when students

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complete their Strategy Research Project, which is a 5,000 to 6,000 word paper on a strategic issue with a faculty member in an advisor role.

Whether an educator prefers using Knowles's assumptions or Grow's four-stage SDL model to describe motivations and interactions between students and faculty, a key point for a committed environment is that students must take responsible ownership for their learning. The faculty must positively respond to that ownership with a facilitating and mentoring rather than a directing approach. The college's curriculum and associated learning environment are different from most students' earlier experiences from undergraduate studies or intermediate-level service colleges in two main areas. First, the curriculum explores issues at the strategic level that often have characteristics associated with being *ill-structured* or of a *wicked* nature within a strategic environment broadly described as volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity.<sup>16</sup> Second, the curriculum has to meet Joint Learning Areas that are predominately focused at the higher learning levels of Bloom's taxonomy; levels that require analysis or evaluation of subjects vice knowledge or comprehension.<sup>17</sup>

Another way the college addresses the self-motivated learning approach is in course assessments. Faculty formally assess students individually in each course on how well they achieved or exceeded standards in meeting course objectives in the three categories of seminar contribution, writing, and overall. The standards are quite substantial with the assessment criteria specified in a Course Directive and Communicative Arts Directive. Upon graduation, a number of students are recognized as distinguished graduates based on their ability to consistently exceed standards on core academic courses, research project, and comprehensive exam. Further, about twenty-five writing and research awards are presented at graduation to recognize significant individual work that adds to the academic body of knowledge. The college also provides numerous noontime lectures on a variety of subjects that are optional, but often widely attended. In total, this assessment approach develops a more self-motivated learning experience that encourages commitment. This learning focus is also enabled by how Bloom's taxonomy is applied as curriculum is developed and executed, which will now be covered.

### Bloom's Taxonomy

One needs to understand Bloom's taxonomy within the cognitive domain to gain a greater appreciation of how lesson and course learning objectives are related to a committed learning environment.<sup>18</sup> Within the cognitive domain, Bloom specified six levels of learning, which sequentially go from the lower knowledge level, to comprehension, to application, to analysis, to synthesis, and finally to evaluation. Since lesson authors and course directors use verbs associated with these six different cognitive learning levels to specify lesson and course objectives, understanding and applying this taxonomy helps



one better integrate adult learning assumptions. In the college's core course learning objectives for Academic Year 2014, five were at Bloom's first two levels, ten were at the second two levels, and seven were at the highest two levels. This overall stratification reflects the college's graduate-level education focus and the joint chiefs of staff's learning criteria for joint professional military accreditation at senior service colleges.<sup>19</sup>

The first cognitive level, called knowledge, focuses on knowing something, such as a definition or raw data. Learning objectives use verbs such as define, describe, or know to identify this basic level. The next level, called comprehension, focuses on grasping the meaning of the information presented or being able to describe it in your own words. Learning objectives use verbs such as explain, comprehend, or understand to identify this level. Some of a lesson's readings, and when faculty introduce a subject to first start the seminar discourse, are mainly at these two basic cognitive levels. The link to a committed learning environment is that this allows everyone in the seminar to have a common knowledge or comprehension level on a subject before proceeding to the higher levels of learning as a lesson and course progresses.

The words application and analysis describe the next two Bloom's taxonomy levels. Application is the ability to apply that lesson's knowledge or concepts to actual problems or issues. Verbs that identify learning objectives for this third cognitive level are use, apply, or solve. Analysis is the ability to break down the whole into component parts and see how they are interrelated or interact. Verbs that specify this fourth cognitive level are analyze, appraise, or examine. The link to a committed learning environment is that, as students and faculty discuss the readings and integrate their experiences and insights, the seminar is at these middle two learning levels. More course learning objectives focused at this level are in line with adult learning assumptions.

The words synthesis and evaluate describe the last two higher cognitive levels. Synthesis involves creating a new meaning or rearranging the ideas covered into new paradigms. Verbs that identify this cognitive level are combine, develop, or synthesize. The highest cognitive level of evaluation results in informed judgments about the value of ideas or concepts. Verbs that specify this level are evaluate, conclude, or appraise. These highest learning levels require a mastery of the other learning levels and the ability of a student and even the seminar to reflect. Individual lessons generally do not address these two higher levels unless they involve case studies or an exercise. The integration of the various lesson material and seminar discourse from all of the lessons enables the achievement of the higher course learning levels, which are essential to a learning environment appreciated by committed adult learners.

In total, achieving different learning levels defined by Bloom's taxonomy depends to a great deal on the type and quality of seminar discourse. To achieve different learning levels associated with lesson and course objectives requires an understanding and application of the characteristics associated with different seminar discourse types, a subject now examined with a committed learning environment perspective.

## Discourse

Conversation, discussion, and dialogue are three distinct types of communication that comprise seminar discourse.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, discussion can be further categorized in two different ways by the words *persuasion* and *democratic*.<sup>21</sup> Each one of these discourse types has different characteristics and purpose, but when properly used, they all contribute to developing a committed learning environment and achieving learning objectives at different levels of Bloom's taxonomy.

The first and most basic discourse in seminar is conversation. This occurs from the first day as seminar members first start to learn about each other. Conversation helps start the implicit bonding process where diverse individuals begin to engage with each other to develop into a team. Generally, conversation seeks equilibrium and is a pleasant exchange or bantering of thoughts and feelings about an issue that is less formal and structured. Conversation evolves as seminar members get to know one another better and continues all year with different levels of human interest where the "best conversations maintain a tension between seriousness and playfulness."<sup>22</sup> Overall, conversation focuses primarily at Bloom's lower two learning levels. A link to a committed learning environment is that faculty should have conversations with students before or after a lesson as this begins the processes to develop committed interactions with students and their learning, as it helps identify a faculty's needed approachability.<sup>23</sup>

Discussion is the next type of seminar discourse that is more structured than conversation, which enables the seminar or student to get closure on an issue. Discussion focuses on an intellectual give-and-take when analyzing issues or applying concepts from varied perspectives. Peter Senge, in his book *The Fifth Discipline*, compares discussion with the words percussion and concussion due to root word similarities and argues that in discussion "you fundamentally want your view to prevail."<sup>24</sup> In essence, this perspective implies a type of discussion that primarily builds on other's ideas to support your views. Overall, the adjective *persuasive* best describes this type of discussion. While discuss is a verb initially recognized under the comprehension learning level, seminar learning that most often reflects persuasive discussions are Bloom's middle levels of apply and analyze, but it can go to the next higher levels depending on that discussion's underlying purpose. To enable student commitment, faculty should facilitate discussions of students in seminar versus being persuasive in providing their views so as not to anchor students' thinking with a "right" answer. Further, faculty must ensure when discussing an issue that all views are fully valued and examined, even if most in the seminar disagree with a particular view. This can minimize the potential adverse impact that too many persuasive discussions may have on a committed learning environment.

Others, who do not agree with discussion's underlying persuasive motivation described in the preceding paragraph, describe discussion as being a more open exchange of ideas and use the adjective *democratic* to describe it. Brookfield and Preskill in their book, *Discussion as a Way of Teaching*, described nine different classroom

discussion dispositions under the heading, *Discussion in a Democratic Society*. These nine different dispositions are hospitality, participation, mindfulness, humility, mutuality, deliberation, appreciation, hope, and autonomy.<sup>25</sup>

These dispositions can be useful and more effective than persuasive discussions in creating a committed learning environment that focuses on achieving Bloom's two middle learning levels, while allowing learning to smoothly transition to the next two highest levels. Hospitality occurs within a seminar when everyone feels invited to participate, which enables one to take risk and share strongly held views. Participation involves sharing views that add to depth and subtlety, while realizing that not everyone need say something, as respectful silence is valued. Mindfulness is associated with paying close attention to what precisely is said and being aware of the overall context. Humility builds on mindfulness when one acknowledges his or her limited knowledge and values learning from others' different views. Mutuality occurs when seminar members realize that everyone's learning is important to create a spirit of goodwill. Deliberation involves offering arguments and counterarguments supported by evidence and logic to convince others. Appreciation involves expressing gratitude to another for their insights that raises the level of respect for other perspectives. Hope involves reaching a new level of understanding or perspective. Finally, autonomy involves being willing to take strong stands or have the courage to hold views not widely shared.<sup>26</sup> Again, faculty need to facilitate seminar discussions in an open manner that enables all of these discussion dispositions to occur to develop both student and seminar learning commitment.

Dialogue is the final type of seminar discourse that tends to be more exploratory in nature than discussion and focuses more on inquiry. Dialogue causes one to be more inclined to ask "why" when exploring an issue, and this takes learning beyond one's own understanding to have a freer flow of exploration from multiple perspectives as one becomes an observer of their thinking.<sup>27</sup> In essence, dialogue enables students in seminar to gain deeper insights on complex issues that could not occur from individual work. As such, seminar dialogue focuses more on the higher learning levels to first fully analyze and then evaluate issues.

To develop a team-learning discipline associated with dialogue, which allows students and seminars to reflect upon their individual and collective thinking, requires three basic conditions.<sup>28</sup> The first condition is the willingness to suspend assumptions. This is the key difference when comparing dialogue with discussion's persuasive or democratic characteristics. Suspending assumptions means explicitly being aware of your assumptions, being aware of how they influence thinking, and holding them up for reexamination. While difficult to do, suspending assumptions does not mean discarding them. The second condition for dialogue to occur is that seminar members must see each other as colleagues, be fully open, and create the positive energy in properly questioning others or ideas. The last condition for dialogue to occur is the need for a facilitator, who holds the issue's context and flow and asks the right questions to spur positive inquiry. Being a facilitator is an important faculty responsibility. Achieving and

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maintaining these three conditions for dialogue are hard work that requires disciplined intellectual thought, which enables a committed student and seminar by the willingness to explore others' perspectives before determining your own.

All three discourse types exist within a seminar with conversation starting the initial contact, discussion in either persuasive or democratic forms that is more structured and enables closure, and dialogue that is more inquiry and exploratory focused. Depending on where you are when examining an issue, there may be times for all types of seminar discourse to synergistically enhance one's overall commitment and seminar learning. However, more of the seminar discourse needs to be focused on democratic discussion and dialogue to enable student and seminar commitment. Understanding and applying characteristics associated with all discourse types provides one the ability to better reflect on and take responsibility for a committed student and seminar learning environment. Further, knowing the sign posts for each type of discourse helps with applying team-building insights to enable a committed seminar learning environment, a topic now covered.

### Team Building

The previous section examining different types of seminar discourse is one aspect for gaining insights on ways to develop committed learning habits and techniques and build a seminar team. A seminar, like other small groups, will grow and evolve as the year progresses. Small groups, according to research by Bruce Tuckman in the 1960s, develop through sequential stages described by the following four simple words: forming, storming, norming, and performing.<sup>29</sup> He and others a decade later added a fifth stage called adjourning, which signifies completion. Organizational insights and behaviors associated with these stages are useful to help create a committed learning environment.

The forming stage of team building at the USAWC begins when the seminar initially meets with members introducing themselves, learning about others' backgrounds, becoming acquainted with the college's opportunities, and clarifying expectations. At this stage, people are normally polite, operate somewhat independently, and cover issues superficially. The collective seminar learning that occurs at this stage is predominately at Bloom's lower two levels, although individuals based on their internal motivation can achieve a higher level. Generally, the seminar quickly moves beyond this forming stage, which is needed to begin to develop a committed seminar learning environment.

The storming stage of team building, as the word suggests, is characterized by intra-group conflict. This occurs as different ideas or students actively compete for their views to be accepted, disagreements over decisions are passionately voiced, and frustrations are visible, all of which may cause one to shut down. This can occur if

persuasive discussions routinely dominate seminar discourse, which occurs if members are mainly focused on wanting their individual views to prevail and become leaders within the seminar. Furthermore, some issues may have emotional connotations that are not readily apparent based on the topic, but can elicit an unexpected personal response from someone. A helpful seminar technique when emotions rise is to “talk to the center of the room,” so a response is not taken personally but examined collectively. A technique when an issue generates emotion is to ask students to “count to three” before responding, so their response is not overly reactive and allows time for thinking. As indicated in some of democratic discussions’ dispositions, it is “ok” to share strongly-held views, disagree after carefully listening, and hold views not widely shared. However, if seminar behaviors are focused too much at the storming stage then a committed learning environment will begin to degrade.

The norming stage of team building occurs as seminar members adjust their behaviors, begin to work more smoothly and effectively together, share learning, and begin to create a greater collective trust, and leadership within the seminar is sorted. Simply, collective trust is needed for a committed learning environment.<sup>30</sup> Students’ and faculty’s professional characteristics and motivations enable this stage to occur smoothly and quickly at the USAWC. A negative condition of a norming stage is that sometimes members will not offer contrary views, and a condition called *groupthink* may occur from a desire for harmony.<sup>31</sup> Another expression often heard to describe decisions when conformity is desired over proper dissent is: *We are on the bus to Abilene*. A way faculty can address groupthink is to encourage an opposite perspective and ask to identify its strengths and weaknesses in an open manner. While an individual’s learning can be at different Bloom’s taxonomy levels, the collective seminar learning at this team-building stage is most often at the middle two levels.

The performing stage occurs when productive teamwork is evident, as members willingly take initiative and responsibility while balancing autonomy with interdependence, all of which is reflective of a committed learning environment. A performing stage results from the dedication and hard work of all team members—students and faculty. Collectively, the seminar has the capability to achieve the highest learning levels at this stage, as there is an appreciation of everyone’s intellectual contributions and achievements. Dissent can occur during this stage, but it will be positively resolved, sometimes with humor or with an open-ended questioning approach. The one caution is that once a seminar achieves this performing stage, and my experiences reveal USAWC seminars will achieve it, internal monitoring must still take place. This internal monitoring ensures the seminar stays at this stage, since a natural tendency toward complacency or a norming stage may try to assert itself.<sup>32</sup>

The adjourning stage occurs when a group is no longer together, and this can create an element of anxiety or sadness. A way to describe this at the USAWC is graduation day. However, seminars often stay in contact through a variety of electronic means to keep updated on member’s actions or even have reunions, reflecting those

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strong bonds developed during the year. Some seminars set up groups on Facebook and LinkedIn just before graduation to enable learning to continue. These strong bonds are the result of a committed learning environment. Hence, collective seminar insights and learning can continue well beyond graduation.

Seminars go through these team-building stages with some stages more quickly passed through than others depending on interpersonal and institutional dynamics, as well as shared learning cultures developed from other educational or operational experiences. Furthermore, seminars sometimes go back and forth among these stages. This can occur when major changes affect the existing learning rhythm, such as different group tasks, new course material, or different faculty. However, when a seminar is at the performing stage it is more likely to stay there. The travel through these stages identifies an important individual and seminar responsibility, which is the need to self-monitor either implicitly or explicitly, to ensure needed cohesiveness and trust for a committed learning environment. This last point of self-monitoring brings to the forefront this article's last point, the importance of reflection.

### Reflection

The subject of reflection was included because many senior leaders, when addressing USAWC students in Bliss Hall, have spoken passionately about their senior service college experience a decade or more earlier as a valued opportunity to view issues from many different perspectives and shape their thinking.<sup>33</sup> In essence, they had the opportunity to reflect on complex national security issues rather than make time-critical decisions or lead organizations associated with their previous responsibilities. While reflection has many different definitions, a useful one is: *the thought, idea, or opinion on a subject from consideration or meditation.*<sup>34</sup> Reflection requires hard work, as rigorous, disciplined thought is required, which is related to an individual's commitment.

A reflective learning approach can be organized into the three categories of subject, personal, and critical.<sup>35</sup> The subject category deals with specific insights one gains for future use from lesson or course material on a particular subject. This occurs as students gain insights from the wide variety of material in core courses and electives. The personal category deals with the concept of what you are learning about your own thinking or insights. This occurs as one's thinking is challenged or insights are gained about the habits of the mind from varied seminar discourse during core courses and after class in other social or academic settings.<sup>36</sup> The critical category deals with the learning associated with challenging one's assumptions and beliefs, even if those beliefs and assumptions do not change. Reflective learning associated with each of these three categories have different outcomes, but they are synergistic in nature in enabling a student's commitment as one considers issues within different contexts and they combine to shape future decisions.

Adult learning assumptions, Bloom's taxonomy, seminar discourse types, and team-building stages address these three broad reflection categories, all of which influence one's learning commitment. Subject reflection occurs as the adult learner considers and evaluates relevant curriculum subjects. Personal reflection occurs more often when achieving lesson and course learning objectives at the higher levels of Bloom's taxonomy, which are helpful to spur reflective inquiry. Seminar discourse associated with discussion that combines openness, careful listening, and logical give-and-take contributes to reflection on both subject and personal categories. Seminar discourse associated with dialogue, which requires one to suspend assumptions, deals more with the critical reflection category. Faculty can enable reflection by asking more "why" versus "what" questions and exploring "how one could" use curriculum concepts in the near future. Achieving the team-building stage of a performing seminar contributes to all three reflection categories, both individually and collectively, to help develop students' commitment.

Individual techniques that enable reflection in all three categories include asking questions of yourself, keeping a journal, updating a learning plan, and doing independent research. Ask yourself questions such as: *What did I really learn today?* or *How did this experience change my thinking?* Another way to develop reflective judgment is to keep a journal focused on what was learned versus what was taught. Insights written down stay longer in one's collective memory, and these insights can later be explicitly reviewed. While the USAWC requires students to develop an individual learning plan within the first month, updating this plan as the year progresses helps spur reflection and one's commitment to learning. Writing and research experiences, especially the college's strategy research paper and the opportunity to write a personal experience monograph, provide different opportunities to reflect more deeply in all categories.

## Conclusions

This chapter broadly examined education subjects associated with adult learning, learning taxonomy, discourse types, team building, and reflection, all of which in different ways contribute to a committed learning environment from curriculum, student, and seminar perspectives. Informed by the author's educational experiences at the Army War College over almost two decades, the chapter broadly applied these education subjects to identify the conditions for a committed learning environment from curriculum, student, and seminar perspectives.

In summary, when developing curricula, faculty need to integrate adult learning assumptions and focus on higher levels of Bloom's learning taxonomy to help set the foundation for a committed learning environment. When executing a curriculum, faculty need to facilitate seminar discourse that seamlessly transitions from conversation to discussion to dialogue as the issue is being examined at higher Bloom's taxonomy learn-

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ing levels, but there should be a greater focus on democratic discussions and dialogue. In doing so, faculty must ensure that all students' views are valued, multiple perspectives are encouraged, and an open-ended questioning approach is used. Faculty need to encourage team-building behaviors to get to the performing stage, while creating the collective trust and mutual respect for other's views needed for a committed seminar learning team. This committed seminar team environment enables the student and seminar to collectively examine an issue at higher Bloom's taxonomy learning levels, while encouraging the student to reflect on issues from personal, subject, and critical categories by asking more "why" versus "what" questions. While developing and executing the curriculum, faculty also need to be available to students outside of seminar and create flexibility in course assignments focused on topics students want to research to continue to enhance a committed learning environment.

The chapter's overall intent was to provide insights to help shape student and faculty thinking on how best to approach and complete an educational journey with a committed learning focus. While these insights are from the author's teaching experiences at the Army War College, many of them are applicable at other educational institutions and classrooms. Finally, reflecting on this article's concepts will provide additional insights into what J. F. C. Fuller's opening quote implies both individually and collectively in a seminar learning environment. ❧

*The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Army, Department of Defense, or the U.S. government. It builds upon an earlier faculty paper by the author used for faculty development at the U.S. Army War College.*

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## Notes

**Epigraph.** Peter G. Tsouras, *Book of Military Quotations* (Minneapolis: Zenith Press, 2005), 274.

1. *Ibid.*, 274.

2. "Academic Programs Academic Year 2016," U.S. Army War College, 12, accessed 7 March 2018, <https://www.carlisle.army.mil/kmn/home/AcademicProgramsAY2016.pdf>.

3. The college is accredited by the Middle States Commission of Higher Education.

4. The heart is mentioned in Mac McIntire, "Commitment vs. Compliance: Ten Reasons Why You Need Your Workers Hearts Not Just Their Hands," Innovative Management Group (website), accessed 5 March 2018, [http://www.imglv.com/articles/Commitment\\_vs.\\_Compliance.pdf](http://www.imglv.com/articles/Commitment_vs._Compliance.pdf); Kathleen Stinnett, "Compliance vs. Commitment: The Heart of the Matter," Zenger Folkman (blog), 29 September 2010, accessed 5 March 2018, <http://zengerfolkman.com/compliance-vs-commitment-the-heart-of-the-matter/>.

5. Author's insights from seminar teaching experiences and articles on committed environments.



6. Michael Beck, "Compliance vs. Commitment," Michael Beck International (website), 11 March 2014, accessed 5 March 2018, <http://www.michaeljbeck.com/leadership/4784>.

7. Ben Johnson, "Student Commitment Depends on Teacher Commitment," Edutopia (website), 14 July 2011, accessed 5 March 2018, <http://www.edutopia.org/blog/student-commitment-depends-on-teachers-ben-johnson>.

8. Center for Excellence in Teaching, University of Southern California, "Showing Commitment to Teaching and Learning," *The TA Handbook 1997-98* (Los Angeles: Center for Excellence in Teaching, University of Southern California, 1998 [now obsolete]).

9. Tom Drummond, "A Brief Summary of the Best Practices in College Teaching," Tom Drummond Resources and Writings (website), accessed 7 March 2018, <https://tomdrummond.com/helping-other-adults/best-practices/>.

10. Sharan B. Merriam, ed., "Andragogy and Self-Directed Learning: Pillars of Adult Learning Theory," chap. 1 in *The New Update on Adult Learning Theory* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001), 3–4.

11. *Ibid.*, 3–5; Malcolm Knowles, *The Adult Learner: A Neglected Species*, (Houston: Gulf Publishing, 1978), ix.

12. Knowles, *The Adult Learner*, 108–110; Merriam, *The New Update on Adult Learning Theory*, 5.

13. Merriam, *The New Update on Adult Learning Theory*, 9–10.

14. Gerald Grow, "Teaching Learners to be Self-Directed," accessed 15 May 2015, <http://www.longleaf.net/ggrowsSDL/Model.html>.

15. *Ibid.*

16. For more information on ill-structured problems, see Patricia M. King and Karen Strohm Kitchner, *Developing Reflective Judgment* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994). For more information on wicked problems, see John C. Camillus, "Strategy as a Wicked Problem," *Harvard Business Review* (May 2008). For more information on the strategic environment, see Stephen J. Gerras, ed., *Strategic Leadership Primer*, 3rd ed. (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College [USAWC], 2010).

17. Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff Instruction (CJCSI) 1800.01E, *Officer Professional Military Education Policy* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office [GPO], 29 May 2015). A review of joint learning area objectives at service intermediate level college showed that 37 out of 43 objectives were at the comprehend level. For Senior Service college, there were no joint learning objectives at the comprehend level and 16 out of 26 objectives were at the evaluate level.

18. Donald Clark, "Bloom's Taxonomy of Learning Domains," Big Dog & Little Dog's Performance Juxtaposition (website), last updated 12 January 2015, accessed 7 March 2018, <http://www.nwlink.com/~Donclark/hrd/bloom.html>; "Bloom's Taxonomy: Learning Objective Verbs at Each Bloom Taxonomy Level," Air War College, accessed 7 March 2018, <http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/edref/bloom.htm>. Material on the taxonomy and verbs in this paragraph and others come from these sources and the author's experiences. There is now a seventh level of taxonomy called creating.

19. The Bloom's taxonomy joint learning taxonomy specified in CJCSI 1800.01D, *Officer Professional Military Education Policy (OPMEP)* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, 15 July 2009 [now obsolete]). For senior service colleges, 4 were at apply, 6 at analyze, 1 at synthesize and 12 at evaluate. The USAWC passed Joint Chief of Staff Accreditation that reflects these July 2009 learning levels. The most recent CJCSI 1800.01E (19 May 2015), has similar joint learning taxonomy levels.

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20. Stephen D. Brookfield and Stephen Preskill, *Discussion as a Way of Teaching* (San Francisco: John Wiley and Sons, 1990), 1–7.

21. *Ibid.*, XV–5; Peter M. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline* (New York: Currency Doubleday, 1990), 240. Senge used the adjective persuasion while Brookfield used the adjective democratic to describe discussion.

22. Brookfield and Preskill, *Discussion as a Way of Teaching*, 4–6.

23. Center for Excellence in Teaching, University of Southern California, “Showing Commitment to Teaching and Learning” in *The TA Handbook 1997-98*.

24. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*, 240. Senge attributes most of discussion and dialogue’s characteristics to physicist David Bohm, a leading quantum theorist.

25. Brookfield and Preskill, *Discussion as a Way of Teaching*, XV–8. The authors used the word democratic to broadly categorize these classroom discussions that reflect the principles of civil discourse associated with a democratic society that “emphasizes the inclusion of the widest variety of perspectives and a self-critical willingness to change what we believe if convinced by the arguments of others.”

26. *Ibid.*, 8–18. The nine dispositions in the above paragraph are summarized from ten pages in the first chapter of *Discussion as a Way of Teaching*.

27. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*, 241–242.

28. *Ibid.*, 243–247. The three conditions covered in this paragraph are summarized from Senge.

29. Bruce W. Tuckman, “Developmental Sequence in Small Groups,” *Psychological Bulletin* 63, no. 6 (1965): 384–399. The linkage to discourse types and Bloom’s taxonomy covered in the following paragraphs are the author’s views.

30. Beck, “Compliance vs Commitment.”

31. Glenn M. Parker, *Team Players and Teamwork* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008), 141.

32. *Ibid.*, 143–144.

33. Author’s insights from listening to Bliss Hall lectures over the past decade and a half.

34. *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, 10th ed. (1994), s.v. “reflection.” This definition combines two of nine different definitions.

35. Patricia Raber Hedberg, “Learning Through Reflective Classroom Practice,” *Journal of Management Education* 31, no. 1 (February 2009): 10–12.

36. *Ibid.* Habits of the mind are discussed in this article.