A Relational Learning Approach to New Faculty Orientation in Professional Military Education

Megan J. Hennessey

U.S. Army War College

Abstract

This article explores the impetus behind and lessons learned from the redesign of the U.S. Army War College's (USAWC) 2019 New Faculty Orientation. The goal of the New Faculty Orientation is to meet new faculty's needs in a customized program by providing networking opportunities across all departments, schools, centers, and institutes in a positive and reflective environment. Foundational seminar-facilitation skills and adult-learning theories were introduced during the orientation and subsequently reinforced in a series of continuing workshops throughout the academic year. Additionally, the inaugural use of a digital and interactive new faculty handbook introduced a hybrid-learning component and provided an accessible introduction to the USAWC community before new faculty arrived at Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania.

The New Faculty Orientation (NFO) is often the first official introduction to the U.S. Army War College (USAWC) environment and culture for incoming faculty members. Each year, civilian and military faculty who are new to the USAWC come together in mid-July and participate in a multiday program intended to both orient and acculturate them into the educational environment at the Army's senior service college. This orientation is designed and executed by the Office of Educational Methodology, which is managed by the director of educational methodology, a credentialed faculty member, with the assistance of an instructional systems specialist. The effects of the NFO are far-reaching, as new faculty from all the schools, centers, and institutes across the USAWC are required to attend, including faculty who teach within both the on-site and distance education programs.

Faculty at the USAWC

When Frederick the Great established the first professional military education (PME) institution on record in 1763, the instructors were handpicked officers of the highest caliber, chosen for their professionalism and skills in warfighting (Arnold, 1993). Today, U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command Pamphlet (TP) 525-8-2, *The U.S. Army Learning Concept for Training and Education, 2020-2040* (U.S. Department of the Army [DA], 2017), defines faculty as "leaders, mentors, teachers, instructors, facilitators, training managers, and training developers who facilitate the development of individual and collective competencies through training and education" (p. 29). This definition applies to both civilian and military USAWC faculty. Indeed, according to TP 525-8-2 (2017), it is the Army's goal to "make faculty assignments coveted by top quality officers, warrant officers, noncommissioned officers, and civilians" (p. 18).

The faculty cadre at the USAWC in any given year is therefore an eclectic and expert mix of Joint Professional Military Education II-qualified active duty instructors with various military occupational specialties and leadership experiences (including international officers), federal civilians with experience as strategic advisors, and highly credentialed civilian academics with significant research profiles in public scholarship. Together with the highly diverse faculty profile, the personnel turnover between academic years—typically one third of the total faculty population—presents unique challenges for faculty development and new faculty orientation. Preparing faculty to engage students that retired U.S. Army Lt. Gen. Frederic J. Brown (1948) once called "bright-eyed beavers all set to solve all the world's problems" requires far more than a one-size-fits-all approach.

Relational Learning

With the Army learning environment concept's emphasis on developing students' agility, adaptivity, and innovation in competency-based training and education comes the need for enabling conditions in faculty preparation and development (DA, 2017). Schatz, Fautua, Stodd, and Reitz (2015) named five such conditions, including

Megan J. Hennessey, PhD, is the director of educational methodology at the United States Army War College. Previously, she held senior instructor and instructional systems designer positions at the Federal Bureau of Investigation Academy and the National Geospatial-Intelligence College. From 2010 to 2013, she was a faculty member in and acting department head of the Communication Department at the Expeditionary Warfare School, Marine Corps University. Hennessey earned her doctorate in higher education with a secondary specialization in Shakespearean andragogy from George Mason University.

the encouragement and empowerment of social learning. Put another way, PME at the senior service college level is—or should be—a relational learning environment, inclusively and inherently social with constant and dynamic thought partnership between faculty and students. Such an environment demands a different type of PME faculty member, one who relies on relationship building and, as Reed and Collins (2004) wrote, "self-synchronization over command and control" (p. 55).

This shift from transactional communication to shared dialogue in the classroom can be uncomfortable for some instructors, perhaps especially for those who have never taught adult learners before and may be less adept at managing the nuances of dynamic and unpredictable seminar dialogue. At the senior service college level, another confounding factor is the comparable demographics of military students and military instructors, with the two groups being near-peers (Stiehm, 2002). The situation of faculty from civilian academic backgrounds presents another unique opportunity for perspective taking, as, unlike their active duty instructor peers, they may not share quick bonds of camaraderie with their military students through shared warfighting experiences.

In this environment, faculty immediacy behaviors play a vital role in promoting learning transfer and fostering free and frequent emergence of ideas via seminar dialogue. Immediacy is the perception of a shared and positive physical and psychological relationship between communicators (Mehrabian, 1966). Faculty who are able to create a positive connection with students in relational learning environments cannot only improve the students' affective engagement with their own learning experience but can also encourage students to learn more about the subject matter outside of class time (Richmond, McCroskey, & Johnson, 2003). While immediacy behaviors—both verbal and nonverbal—can be taught in faculty development programming, the foundations of instructional facilitation in an adult-learning environment must first be in place.

Lessons Learned from Prior Orientations

Evaluations of past NFOs at USAWC reflected the importance of these foundations. Over multiple years, faculty reported that the most-valued presentations during orientation were sessions such as "Faculty Roles and Responsibilities" and "Facilitating a Socratic Seminar," which both explained the role of the instructor as a facilitator of learning in an adult-learning environment. The least-valued presentations were often technology-based sessions such as "Introduction to Blackboard," which introduced faculty to the use of the college's learning management system. Faculty evaluated these sessions as limited in utility when compared to opportunities to learn about classroom management and effective questioning in seminar dialogue.

Often, faculty also compared the orientation to a "fire hose" experience, one in which the immediate relevance of the information over the course of three full days was tenuous. The sheer volume of information also placed significant limitations on

attendees' working memories and abilities to recall key points later in the year. Conversely, there were other topics that faculty evaluations suggested were not covered in enough detail, such as institutional expectations of faculty behavior, the International Fellows Program, and military-faculty specific information.

New Design

For academic year 2019, the new design of the NFO took into account the aforementioned lessons learned from past orientations as well as best practices from the scholarship of teaching and learning. As Rice, Sorcinelli, and Austin (2000) explained, three consistent concerns emerge for early-career faculty or faculty who are joining academia for the first time: (1) lack of a comprehensible tenure system, (2) lack of community, and (3) lack of an integrated life. In planning for the new design, the Office of Educational Methodology used this framework to guide its assumptions about incoming faculty. These assumptions were that faculty would expect to learn about how they could develop personally and professionally while at the USAWC and the regulatory processes by which their performance and potential for reappointment would be clearly guided. The other assumptions were that incoming faculty would expect and desire inclusion into a collegial and respectful community while being granted the necessary flexibility and support to establish a healthy work-life balance.

To supplement these assumptions, the Office of Educational Methodology gathered data via a pre-NFO survey emailed to new faculty two weeks before the orientation began. The survey yielded a 47% response rate from incoming faculty and included narrative-based prompts such as "Briefly describe your experience, if any, as an educator in a classroom environment" and "What do you hope to learn, do, and/ or be as a result of attending New Faculty Orientation?" One-third of the respondents indicated they had no instructor experience, while others aligned somewhere in a range of experience that included teaching in PME, international, civilian undergraduate and graduate, and vocational institutions. The majority of respondents indicated they most wanted to understand the USAWC organization, policies, and curriculum as a result of attending NFO. The results of this survey were shared with all NFO facilitators before the kickoff orientation with the goal of customizing sessions as much as possible to the attendees' skill levels, backgrounds, and interests.

Of course, planning for NFO occurred far earlier than two weeks before its start date. Considering lessons learned from past NFOs and evidence-based suggestions from the literature, the director of educational methodology followed the USAWC's model of shared governance and briefed an initial redesign of the NFO at the college's semiannual Academic Planning Conference in January 2018. Following the recommendations of Scott, Lemus, Knotts, and Oh (2016), the briefing and subsequent formal proposal approved by the provost outlined the following goals for the future NFO:

- Meet new faculty's point-of-need in as customized of a program as possible.
- Introduce faculty to and provide networking opportunities across all departments, schools, centers, and institutes.
- Foster a positive and collegial environment, including time for reflection.
- Introduce and model interactive learner-centric teaching strategies and pedagogical approaches.
- Deliver only the most critical information at the time of need, while emphasizing an ongoing culture of faculty development realized at institutional, departmental, and individual levels. (pp. 15–22)

With these goals in mind, the iteration of the 2019 NFO differed from past years in that it focused only on the most critical elements of faculty roles, responsibilities, relationships, and the fundamental facilitation skills new faculty would need to succeed in leading their first residential seminar. Each goal will be further explained in the following sections.

Customizable

The eclectic mix of faculty backgrounds, areas of expertise, and qualifications is a strength of the USAWC but also a challenge for institution-wide faculty development such as the NFO. Active duty military instructors at the USAWC are guided by USAWC Regulation No. 600-10, *Military Faculty at the U.S. Army War College*, to provide value to the institution via "leadership, teaching of relevant topics, practitioner experience, and professional diversity" (U.S. Army War College [USAWC], 2017, p. 2) and are required by that same regulation to have completed senior-level education, have experience working at the strategic or high-operational level in joint, interagency, or multinational environments, and demonstrate refined communication skills, among other criteria. Civilian faculty are guided by USAWC Regulation No. 690-12, *Civilian Personnel Employment under Title 10, United States Code, Section 4021*, and "must adhere to standards similar to those required of faculty members at civilian institutions" (USAWC, 2016, p. 3). An earned doctorate degree is the "standard of excellence" for these positions, and "such scholars bring to the institution depth of knowledge and scholarly ability; the best of them are also outstanding teachers and colleagues" (USAWC, 2016, p. 3). With these different expectations for each faculty population, the redesign of the NFO had to encompass the needs of both military and civilian faculty and bridge the potential scholar-practitioner gap (when necessary).

To do so, the NFO focused not just on fundamentals of adult education with a one-hour introduction to "adult-learning theory and applications" led by the director of educational methodology but also on fundamentals of teaching at the USAWC specifically. To do so, an active duty military instructor and a well-respected USAWC department chair led a 90-minute session on "Faculty Roles and Responsibilities." This

session covered information pertinent to both military and civilian faculty of all levels of expertise, experience, and academic credential. Attendees were further encouraged to ask questions and engage with practical examples and scenarios that aligned with not only their individual interests but also their departments at the USAWC. This engagement continued with a 90-minute faculty panel, where attendees could interact with and ask members from every department (within the USAWC's School of Strategic Landpower) specific questions.

The most drastic change that benefited customizability, however, was the decision to turn the NFO into a hybrid experience. Video-based and other multimedia components linked within an inaugural *New Faculty Orientation Handbook* were digitally accessible via the Blackboard learning management system and offered new faculty the opportunity to—at their convenience and dependent upon their own interest—learn more about additional topics that were traditionally covered synchronously during past NFOs. This handbook was available to faculty before they ever stepped foot on campus. Creating a hybrid NFO experience ensured asynchronous, accessible content while meeting the needs of a diverse and geographically dispersed incoming faculty cadre.

Organizational representatives throughout the USAWC were invited by the Office of Educational Methodology to contribute video recordings featuring short overviews of the USAWC mission and pertinent information for new faculty. These videos were recorded in a variety of ways, ranging from the use of the formal USAWC recording studio with audio/visual team assistance to clips from the video-based discussion tool Flipgrid. The videos were hyperlinked in the *New Faculty Orientation Handbook*, which was well-received by faculty, staff, and the Process for Accreditation of Joint Education review team, who commented in *Process for Accreditation of Joint Education: U.S. Army War College Joint Studies Program* that "the *New Faculty Orientation Handbook* has valuable content on adult learning and teaching methods that is valuable to new and veteran faculty" (Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, July 2018, p. 15). Indeed, following the Process for Accreditation of Joint Education team's advice, the handbook will be rebranded and expanded in future years to make it applicable to all faculty and not just incoming personnel.

Networking and Collegiality

By transitioning some traditionally face-to-face sessions of the NFO to the online modality featured in the *New Faculty Orientation Handbook*, time was opened in the usually packed three-day schedule. An effort was made to protect and encourage faculty networking during these times and opportunities were also built specifically into the schedule for continental breakfast, coffee socials, lunch, and a USAWC-wide social at the Carlisle Barracks Morale, Welfare, and Recreation facility that was open to all faculty, staff, and families. Returning USAWC faculty were encouraged by the

Office of Educational Methodology to join in the NFO sessions whenever possible, and one session—"How Learning Works" with guest speaker Dr. Chad Hershock of Carnegie Mellon University—was specifically marketed toward all faculty at the US-AWC. These opportunities allowed new faculty to interact with their peers from across the entire institution rather than only their department, following Washburn's (December 2004–February 2005) description of nonhierarchical mentoring systems that are flexible and can occur across multiple relationships and multiple times.

The cohort-driven and collegial nature of the NFO was also emphasized in its re-design, and attendees were encouraged to not only network with returning faculty and staff but also with their fellow NFO participants. In this way, the NFO became a type of team-based professional development experience, which Poyas and Smith (2007) cited as influential for faculty in sharing both like and diverse research interests. These relationships were enhanced as new faculty progressed together through a continuum of faculty development workshops throughout the remainder of the academic year.

Model Behaviors

In their book *Coming in from the Margins: Faculty Development's Organizational Development Role in Institutional Change*, Schroeder, Blumberg, and Chism (2010) explain the faculty developer's evolving role as an institutional change agent. The US-AWC Office of Educational Methodology likewise influences the culture of teaching and learning at Carlisle Barracks and does so with a foundation in, as Schroeder, Blumberg, and Chism (2010) summarize, a "conceptual understanding of: philosophy of learning and teaching; teaching-learning dynamic; learning-centered teaching; learning outcomes; outcomes assessment; course assessment; course alignment; trends in higher education; and organizational change strategies" (pp. 173–174). In this way, the educational methodology team strives to model instructional strategies that exemplify the USAWC's "mission to educate and develop leaders for service at the strategic level while advancing knowledge in the global application of landpower" (USAWC, n.d.) through innovative and experiential pedagogies.

While the director of educational methodology and the instructional systems specialist within the office led some NFO sessions, other facilitators were specifically recruited for their reputations as innovative and effective instructors, their ability to connect with the USAWC student population, and their willingness to mentor other faculty. Each facilitator was thoughtfully chosen and expected to model the professional and effective behavior that the USAWC expects of all its faculty. Specifically, facilitators were asked to ensure their sessions were as inter-active as possible and were encouraged to avoid the traditional briefing or "death by PowerPoint" in favor of more experiential and discussion-based delivery. This same guidance applied to contributors of the *New Faculty Orientation Handbook*,

who were also recruited based on their positive reputation as effective educators through peer and supervisor recommendations.

Point-of-Need

Faculty time is valuable and should be respected; the demands on faculty time are many and intense, and the faculty cadre across the entire enterprise are often involved in various teaching, scholarship, and service activities that both limit their availability for professional development and sometimes take them away from Carlisle Barracks for any period of time. Limitation on time is a known barrier to faculty development (Caffarella & Zinn, 1999). With this in mind, a relational approach to faculty development recognizes such barriers to mutual exchanges of information and ideas and actively works to effectively operate within known confines and propose actionable alternatives.

To this end, the redesign of the NFO sought to maximize participants' attendance during the three-day workshop while also scheduling additional faculty development opportunities according to the point-of-need within the academic year. Based on feedback from prior NFOs and returning faculty and administrator input, only the sessions most critical to new faculty at the beginning of the academic year were included in the NFO agenda. This decision aligned with the finding from Hennessey (2018) that new faculty—and active duty faculty in particular-are burdened by faculty development content that is either superfluous or overnuanced, which actually detracts from their ability to immediately prepare for seminar instruction. As one O-6 (colonel) instructor participant from Hennessey's study put it,

> I think some of the faculty development sessions start off, the first time it's like, "Ok, we're going to talk about this subject." Haven't been here, haven't taken the course here, don't have a real big understanding of that in particular … But in execution of those early faculty development sessions, you're talking about ninja level stuff. Super bowl level stuff. When the new instructors are down here at junior high football. (p. 119)

The goal for the Office of Educational Methodology during the first year of incoming faculty's tenure at the USAWC therefore became to ensure that new faculty had the instructional skills necessary to successfully facilitate learning within a seminar environment, irrespective of content area, and relying upon fundamental facilitation skills specifically in place at the USAWC. The NFO was only the beginning and introduced participants to faculty roles and responsibilities, adult-learning theory and applications, Socratic seminar facilitation, instructional strategies for teaching International Fellows (which make up about 20% of the resident class), and the basics of how the adult brain processes new information (or "How Learning Works").

Other workshops were scheduled in a progressive sequence according to the point-of-need aligned with the academic calendar. For example, sessions on "Feedback and Coaching in Adult Education" and "Introduction to Student Assessment and Rubrics" were scheduled before faculty graded the resident students' first written assignments. Likewise, "Facilitating a Comprehensive Exam" was scheduled before faculty would proctor and assess students' oral comprehensive exams in March. Meeting faculty at their point-of-need in such a way follows the best practices of instructional design and decreases cognitive load on faculty (Sweller, Van Merrienboer, & Paas, 1998).

Summary

The Office of Educational Methodology at the USAWC redesigned the NFO to meet the institutional challenges of an annual 33% faculty turnover rate, competing and consistent demands on faculty time, and the diverse instructional backgrounds of incoming faculty. By focusing on relational learning for both faculty and students, the redesigned, hybrid NFO became a customizable and collegial opportunity for incoming faculty to connect with the USAWC community and engage with developmental programming specifically planned for faculty's point-of-need, including ample time for self-reflection. After the academic year concludes, the Office of Educational Methodology will continue examining effects of the redesign on student-learning outcomes and faculty performance and satisfaction. ❧

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