



Sluss-Tiller Tests the Cultural Competence Special Operations Forces Need

Louise J. Rasmussen, PhD

The clock is creeping up on midnight in Pineland. The temperature has dropped what feels like forty degrees in just a few hours. A four-man team huddles with their coaches outside a small cabin. Inside, they just wrapped up a perplexing meeting with a local religious leader.

It is four days into Operation Sluss-Tiller, the three-week culminating exercise for the Army's civil affairs program.¹ Sluss-Tiller is a human-engagement intensive, simulated military operation designed to test everything the students have learned during their nine-month Civil Affairs Qualification Course (Q Course).

Over the past few days, this team and about thirty teams like it have completed more than two dozen engagements with members of the indigenous population in Pineland. These natives are often angry, injured, frightened, or a combination of all the above. They are convincingly portrayed by cultural role players from all over the world speaking several different foreign languages.

Soldiers assigned to the U.S. Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School speak with indigenous civilian role players 18 July 2019 during Sluss-Tiller, the culmination exercise for civil affairs students, at Camp Mackall, North Carolina. The soldiers were trained in culture, language, social sciences, civil analysis, and planning in complex ambiguous environments in order to carry out civil affairs operations and succeed in the special operations community. (Photo by K. Kassens, U.S. Army)

Many of the engagements, like this one, take place late in the night and into the early morning. The students are tasked with developing relationships with the Pineland natives so they can start putting together an accurate picture of what is going on with the people in the region. Their goal is to come up with a plan to provide assistance, promote stability, and reduce the impact of military operations on the civilian population.

In the debriefing, a couple of team members appear to be struggling to avoid falling asleep where they stand. Even so, the engagement with the religious leader seems to have gone well. He did not get upset, and the team was invited back.

A sergeant who listened in and took notes as another teammate led the engagement is eager to discuss what happened. When the religious leader had described in rapid-fire Arabic how the Americans could help his organization, the sergeant had turned her head and noticed a set of contextual clues—clues implying that this local leader might not be “a good guy.”

Louise J. Rasmussen, PhD, is lead author of *Save Your Ammo: Working across Cultures for National Security*. She has interviewed hundreds of Department of Defense professionals with extensive experience serving in roles that require intensive intercultural interactions. She is a founder and principal scientist at Global Cognition, where she works to advance cultural competence in demanding environments through research, training, and assessment.



“I want to talk about the elephant in the room,” she says. “I didn’t know how to bring this up without making it contentious,” she continues.

The sergeant’s dilemma highlights an inherent challenge in preparing personnel for high-intensity situations when working in the human domain. Making progress developing relationships and doing business does not simply rely on the ability to avoid being clumsy with regard to understanding and respecting cultural traditions.² Instead, people in such fields face thorny decisions when it comes to tactfully engaging local populations, leaders, and foreign partners. The concepts of good and bad, right and wrong, are murky. Personnel must be able to decide when to accommodate foreign beliefs and practices and when to put their foot down and say, “This isn’t going to work.” They need to decide when to show respect and when to accrue respect. To walk this line effectively, they need to be able to see their decision space clearly.³

Sluss-Tiller as a Criterion Task Set for Training

In the fall of 2017, I spent two days in Pineland observing Operation Sluss-Tiller. Along with my team of researchers, I also interviewed students from all Army special operations forces branches (ARSOF), including

Soldiers assigned to the U.S. Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School speak with indigenous civilian role players 3 April 2019 during Sluss-Tiller at Camp Mackall, North Carolina. (Photo by K. Kassens, U.S. Army)

civil affairs (CA), Special Forces, and psychological operations. In addition, we talked to some of their instructors and coaches at the John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School.

These efforts were part of an analysis we conducted to determine the cultural training needs of ARSOF operators.⁴ We were supporting new instruction development in the Special Warfare Education Group’s (SWEG) Language, Regional Expertise, and Culture (LREC) program. The researchers were brought on because SWEG leadership suggested that the Adaptive Readiness for Culture (ARC) competence model serve as the basis for the culture component within their courses (see table, page 109).

The ARC model was developed for the Defense Language National Security and Education Office. The basis for the development of the ARC model is that Department of Defense (DOD) personnel are deployed to multiple regions throughout their careers, but they cannot

be expected to become regional experts in all the places they are required to work.⁵ They need a general set of skills that supports them in quickly gaining the ability to work in new cultures. The ARC model has been recommended as a framework to guide culture training across the DOD.⁶

The ARC model consists of twelve culture-general competencies, organized into four domains that support maintaining a diplomatic mindset, cultural learning, cultural reasoning, and intercultural interaction.⁷ Each of the twelve ARC competencies includes a set of knowledge, skills, and behavioral strategies that enable the competency.

The ARC model was developed based on a field study of the cultural skills and knowledge used by more than two hundred culturally experienced conventional and special operations personnel from the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, and other supporting agencies. The sample included personnel in a wide range of jobs such as diplomats, F-16 fighter aircraft pilots, tactical air controllers, construction engineers, pest control managers, convoy commanders, criminal investigators, chefs, logistics planners, Navy SEALs, Special Forces, intelligence analysts, interrogators, explosive ordnance disposal specialists, submarine commanders, and others. Thus, it is possible that the ARC model is too general and does not give a good description of the aspects of cultural competence that are needed for specific jobs and missions, such as those associated with ARSOF. On the other hand, it is also possible that the model captures specific training needs for the most part but requires customization for best alignment with specific learner groups.

We examined the alignment between ARC and ARSOF training needs by analyzing Sluss-Tiller, the

CA culminating exercise. We selected Sluss-Tiller because it comprises a criterion task set designed to replicate ARSOF missions and test students' skills in the face of real-world job demands. Another consideration was that CA missions require intense and sustained analysis and intercultural engagements. Therefore, the training needs we could observe in

Sluss-Tiller can be taken to represent an upper bound of cultural difficulty that captures the needs of all ARSOF specialties, including Special Forces and psychological operations.

Our goal was to examine the extent to which ARC competencies were required for successful performance in Sluss-Tiller, and thereby establish whether ARC is a reasonable basis for culture-training requirements in SWEG's LREC program.

Cultural Competence Requirements in Operation Sluss-Tiller

The demands of Sluss-Tiller were very closely aligned with the competencies and supporting knowledge and skills described in the ARC model. During my two days in Pineland, I observed more than one hundred instances where students used the ARC model competencies to support analysis and engagement, or the ARC competencies were encouraged or reinforced by coaches during planning and feedback sessions. When I reviewed my observations with my team, we

also noted that students could use additional reinforcement and practice to hone many of these skills and to facilitate transfer to new situations.

In the following sections, I give some specific examples of how the ARC supports analysis and engagement performance required by ARSOF job demands as they were revealed in Sluss-Tiller.

Table. Adaptive Readiness for Culture Competencies

Diplomatic mindset
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Maintains a mission orientation 2. Understands self in cultural context 3. Manages attitude toward culture
Cultural learning
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. Self-directs own cultural learning 5. Develops reliable information sources 6. Reflects and seeks feedback on intercultural encounters
Cultural reasoning
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 7. Copes with cultural surprises 8. Develops cultural explanations of behavior 9. Takes perspective of others in intercultural situations
Intercultural interaction
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 10. Acts under cultural uncertainty 11. Plans intercultural communication 12. Engages in disciplined self-presentation

(Table by author)



ARSOF have to manage culture-mission conflicts. Building and maintaining relationships with foreigners is a critical aspect of ARSOF missions. Building rapport can seem like an intuitive skill that does not need to be trained. However, building rapport in the intense and often stressful context of ARSOF missions can be a significant challenge. My observations during Sluss-Tiller suggest that students would benefit from additional systematic training on building rapport in intercultural situations. The first ARC competency, *maintains a mission orientation*, includes specific knowledge and skills that support building and maintaining rapport for the sake of mission advancement.

A challenge that students consistently faced with respect to rapport was how to manage furthering mission objectives when “locals” made demands or asked for things that were unexpected, out of their purview, or counter to their mission goals or personal beliefs. These situations put students in challenging positions. They need to maintain rapport with the locals to further their mission objectives. However, saying “no”

Special operations forces establish the first community defense initiative site July 2009 at Nili Village, Daykundi Province, Afghanistan. Successful accomplishment of what is now commonly known as village stability operations requires mastery of the competencies taught at the U.S. Army’s Civil Affairs Qualification Course and validated during the Sluss-Tiller exercise. (Photo courtesy of the Office of the Command Historian)

to a local could jeopardize the relationship he or she is trying to build. Most students took a noncommittal approach with the goal of “being nice” or “showing respect.” While this is a valid approach in some cases, in others it can lead to a stalemate and hinder the accomplishment of mission objectives.

As part of the first ARC competency, ARC prescribes the skill of recognizing when mission objectives conflict with cultural norms and managing that conflict. Adopting this skill as an LREC training requirement would help students identify conflicts between their missions and intercultural situations. Systematic instruction would provide students with the opportunity

to think through, develop, and practice conflict management strategies beyond “being nice” or “showing respect” in order to facilitate maintaining rapport while also moving mission objectives forward.

ARSOF has to learn about culture in a self-directed way. In Sluss-Tiller, students were frustrated when they did not know basic customs for interacting with the different cultural groups they encountered during the training scenarios. They often described this challenge as a failure on the part of the LREC program.

A closer look at students’ negative evaluation characterizes it not as a failure but rather as an effective scenario design in Sluss-Tiller. ARSOF soldiers face the inevitable reality that they will be deployed to countries outside of their region of expertise—regions where they will not be familiar with local language and customs. In these situations, students need strategies to help them quickly identify key cultural information that will help them with their missions. Instilling a mindset of self-directed cultural learning will enable students to seek out learning opportunities on their own and to not exclusively rely on formal training.

The ARC model includes three competencies to support cultural learning: *self-directs own cultural learning*, *develops reliable information sources*, and *reflects and seeks feedback on intercultural encounters*. Adopting ARC as a basis for LREC requirements would introduce students to a set of learning skills that could help them get more out of their qualification training experience, future overseas deployments, and sustainment training.

ARSOF has to interpret perplexing cultural behavior. ARSOF missions require analysis of the host population as well as face-to-face engagements with individuals from a target culture. The ARC competency *develops cultural explanations of behavior*, connects analysis and engagement, providing the skills needed to understand cultural behavior so it can be anticipated and influenced.

Sluss-Tiller included many instances where students had to figure out what was behind locals’ behavior. Building functional explanations of cultural behavior that support analysis and engagement is a complex skill that requires systematic development and practice.

We noted instances where students developed functionally limited explanations of behavior that did not support effective decision-making. For example, when a local doctor in Pineland made a surprising decision about how to dispense medication, one student proposed that

“he must be incompetent.” Based on this interpretation, the team decided to distribute the medication themselves. However, generating any alternative explanation for the doctor’s behavior would have enabled students to see other options for handling the situation.

The ARC competency *develops cultural explanations of behavior*; is supported by a set of knowledge and skills including multiple, alternative explanations of behavior; uses local cultural concepts when constructing explanations of native behavior; and develops integrated (deep causal) explanations of cultural behavior.

Teaching students to develop multiple explanations that incorporate cultural knowledge relevant to what is going on in a situation has benefits both for students’ cultural engagement and analysis capabilities. First, learning to come up with multiple explanations for behavior would increase the likelihood that students can understand, anticipate, and identify the levers for influencing behavior as part of their engagements. Second, appreciating the application of cultural information to engagement should give students a framework for determining what information they want out of an analysis process and why, which should increase their motivation to conduct a thorough cultural analysis.

The engagement with the local doctor also shows that the team neglected to try to understand the local doctor’s perspective. They did not think about his social and cultural background or his potential constraints or motives. That means the students were not applying the ARC competency *takes perspective of others in intercultural interactions*.

The need for this ability and the current low level of student competence were pointed out to me by a training coach as well. I watched this coach repeatedly remind students to take the perspective of the locals when they were planning for an engagement. Despite these reminders, several groups of students almost exclusively focused on their own information requirements and what they wanted to get out of conversations. This left them without options for adapting their engagement strategy based on the demands and responses of the locals.

ARSOF has to be deliberate about how it engages people from other cultures. “When he opened the door, man, you were right there—in his face. Notice all that stuff on your front?” The student points to the canteens,

radio, and other gear on his teammate's chest. It altogether seems to stick out about a foot.

"Imagine having someone like you, right in your face with all that stuff. Maybe just back up a little when they open the door next time."

Sluss-Tiller repeatedly challenges students to think about how they appear to the locals during their engagements. On a couple of occasions, I overheard students and coaches discuss the relative value of a deadpan, or emotionless, face in different situations. In some contexts, it is good (e.g., if one is standing guard). It is not good, however, for building rapport.

The ARC competency *engages in disciplined self-presentation* is supported by a set of knowledge and skills that enable personnel to present themselves in a way that achieves an intended effect with an audience with a different cultural background.

Every time a team gets ready to go into an engagement in Sluss-Tiller, they do a huddle to talk through how they want the conversation to go. These planning huddles are opportunities to think about what someone from a different culture might want or need. They are also opportunities for the students to talk through where they already have common ground with the people they are about to engage with—and where they do not. Doing this allows them to deliberately frame their messages and the language they use to communicate them.

I noticed several instances where students did not adapt the way they were speaking to their audience. In one instance, a civilian leader in Pineland asked a student to describe his plan for getting supplies to them. The student responded, "We need to establish your capabilities first." He received a blank stare. In another instance, a student told a group of locals that some nongovernmental organizations and intergovernmental organizations would come in to help with a problem they were having. In both these cases, these students received feedback from their coaches that they needed to be mindful of military speak and the language they use in general.

Sluss-Tiller challenges the students' ability to think in advance about how to tailor and adjust communication to audiences with different cultural backgrounds—from their word choice to the persuasive arguments they use. Adapting communication content and means of expression is critical in intercultural engagements, and the skills and knowledge related to this ability are captured in the *plans intercultural communication* ARC competency.

It can be very easy to forget to think about how one appears to others and what other people are thinking, and to take the time to come up with alternative explanations for their behavior, especially in the intense and stressful engagements civil affairs students experience in Sluss-Tiller.

Our observations indicate that although students are exposed to knowledge and skills like those in the ARC model, students were not consistent in their use of the competencies, and they were not always effective in enacting them. This is not surprising. These are complex cognitive skills that require a great deal of reinforcement and practice under varying conditions to successfully transfer to real-world situations.⁸

Cultural Training Needs

The engagements students are confronted with in Sluss-Tiller appear to present the same cognitive and cultural challenges that DOD personnel encounter in real-world operations. Just like in the real world, in Sluss-Tiller engagements, students are confronted with shocking, surprising, and ambiguous intercultural situations that are often morally challenging, where the stakes are high, and where decisions must be made quickly.

Also, in Sluss-Tiller, like in the real world, the cultural issues are murky. That is, it is not obvious where "the culture" is. It does not just boil down to taking off one's sunglasses or not showing the bottoms of one's feet. Culture is built into the actions and motivations of the role players—which makes it harder to see, just like in the real world. This means that students cannot simply follow a few simple dos and don'ts and still "get it right."

We confirmed that Sluss-Tiller provides a good criterion task set for defining ARSOF cultural training needs. We also established that the ARC model provides a good description of the key competencies students need in Sluss-Tiller. This validates the model as providing a sound basis for culture training requirements in SWEG's LREC program. In other words, our observations suggest that using the ARC model as a framework for defining what students are expected to get out of LREC instruction should result in students who are better prepared for their culminating exercises and better prepared to go out to the operational force.

Recommendations

Make cultural competence part of the ARSOF narrative. Cultural competence is often talked about in

ways that make it difficult to see its value for national defense. That makes it seem like it might be hard to teach. To successfully cultivate cultural competence in the force, the narrative about what it is needs to change.

Cultural competence is not about being nice, sensitive, cosmopolitan, or ethnorelative. It is not something a person is; it is something a person does. Cultural competence is a set of skills that allows a person to see alternative ways to interpret, interact with, and act on

at all levels should recognize and reward instances of “smart decisions” associated with cultural competence, even if it is just with positive attention.

Use the ARC model to teach cultural competence and provide professional development for staff. We recommend that ARC competencies be used to define expectations for cultural competence learning outcomes in LREC programs of instruction. To provide students with the sustained practice of the skills and knowledge under-

“Cultural competence is a set of skills that allows a person to see alternative ways to interpret, interact with, and act on the foreign human elements in his or her environment.”

the foreign human elements in his or her environment. These are critical skills that help a person be smart about what his or her options are in a complicated decision space so that he or she can build lasting relationships and find solutions that make a real difference in the environment he or she is working in.

This means that cultural competence is a central component of many of the functions civil affairs, ARSOF in general, and conventional forces use in order to complete missions. It should be talked about this way, and it should be taught this way.

Right now, many ARSOF students believe cultural competence is about showing respect and accommodating foreign customs and beliefs indiscriminately. However, others may dismiss the need for these skills because they do not see its relevance to their jobs. In our interviews, we heard the following sentiments expressed: “I don’t need to know this culture stuff. I’ll get a briefing before we go that will tell me what I need to know”; and “There’ll be someone else on my team who’s responsible for this.”

We recommend that civil affairs, ARSOF, and the military in general change the narrative around cultural competence. The new narrative should talk about it in a way that makes it clear that it is a core job capability.

Further, to make cultural competence part of the national defense narrative, it should be included and described in clear, actionable language in doctrine, guidelines, mission and vision statements, plans, and other documents that define expectations. Organizations

lying the ARC model that is needed to promote transfer, ARC competencies should be introduced and subsequently practiced in all LREC training courses, including language and regional analysis. This would further serve to provide students a cohesive LREC training experience.

To be consistent with adult-learning principles, and to combat the perception among students that “this isn’t essential,” such instruction should explicitly demonstrate to students the relevance and value of cultural skills and knowledge to accomplishing their tasks and missions.⁹ Cultural competence is an aspect of what the work-military personnel already do (when they do it well).¹⁰ It should be taught as an aspect of military practice. This means that instruction and practical exercises should build and evaluate cultural skills and knowledge in the context of mission-essential tasks.

To ensure that instruction provides a space for students to practice ARC competencies and not just acquire theoretical knowledge, we recommend adopting a pedagogical approach that incorporates problem-based instruction. In problem-based instruction, students practice culture-general competencies by reading, discussing, and self-directing exploration of complex real-life scenarios.

Problem-based learning has two advantages for target learners who are focused on application. First, it emphasizes active, transferable learning. Second, it tends to generate lively class discussions that engage and motivate students.¹¹

To make the implementation of such a curriculum transformation possible, we further recommend that

LREC staff receive professional development that teaches them what ARC is and helps them understand why these cultural skills and knowledge are important for their students to learn.

Finally, staff should receive training to help them become familiar and comfortable with a Socratic, facilitation style of teaching. This is important because the goal of a program that teaches ARC competencies is to develop cultural adaptability in students. That means the program should develop in students the thinking and learning skills needed to get up to speed and figure out how to engage in any new, unfamiliar culture. To realize this goal, instructors must be able to facilitate dialogue between students and must be comfortable asking and answering questions designed to stimulate critical thinking, draw out divergent perspectives, and examine assumptions.

Use the ARC model as a common language for describing human-domain capabilities. When ARSOF students join the operational force, they will inevitably be expected to be assets in engagements that involve people with different beliefs, values, and perceptions. These engagements are fundamentally intercultural in nature.

Developing cultural competence is not a one-shot enterprise. It takes time and practice. No single book,

article, workshop, course, exercise, or even immersion gets the job done. ARSOF needs a coherent program of instruction that deliberately and systematically cultivates and sustains the skills soldiers need to collaborate with, influence, and disrupt people with divergent worldviews.

We recommend that ARSOF considers using the ARC model as a framework and common language for promoting and describing the skills required to operate in the human domain. Doing so could provide the basis for developing a standardized rubric across the Q courses and beyond that express what is expected of ARSOF soldiers. This would, in turn, provide a basis for giving meaningful, objective performance feedback in this area. Adopting the ARC model as a unifying framework would also provide a consistent language for talking about the human-domain capabilities taught in the Q courses and for effectively communicating the value CA and ARSOF, in general, bring to the rest of the Army. ■

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Notes

1. Sluss-Tiller is an independent exercise designed to assess civil affairs learning outcomes. However, there are plans to in the future run the culminating exercises for the Civil Affairs, Special Forces, and Psychological Operations Qualification Courses concurrently to replicate the interaction of Army special operations soldiers in real-world operations.

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