To Make Army PME Distance Learning Work, Make It Social

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ARMY DISTANCE LEARNING (dL) for professional military education (PME) is not living up to its full potential. PME dL courses are seen as the poor relations of resident courses, and soldiers are counseled to avoid them if at all possible out of a belief that they will negatively affect career progression. With the return of competitive selection for resident attendance at Command and General Staff School, dL courses are likely to further sink in reputation and standing. This article proposes an immediate fix for dL PME courses to make them more relevant for participants and thereby enhance their standing in the PME hierarchy. The fix is to incorporate social learning, using a variety of resources to connect learners in conversation around professionally relevant content. The Army's soldier-student population is familiar with and prefers social learning over individual study. Moreover, the Army already has a robust social networking system established. Introducing a social component into dL PME can, if done properly, increase the relative value of these courses and bring those more into line with the Army's stated doctrine for learning environments.

The Mismatch of Doctrine vs. Reality

TRADOC Pamphlet 525-8-2, *The U.S. Army Learning Concept (ALC) for 2015*, emphasizes the importance of social learning, but even it falls short in applying that preference to dL. ALC 2015 stresses that social engagement and collaborative participation are growing in importance, so future learning models must incorporate more opportunities for both.[1] One means of doing so is via storytelling, which ALC 2015 notes is a time-honored educational tradition that increases learning and enhances transfer of difficult concepts. ALC 2015 emphasizes the idea of a "continuous adaptive learning model" that uses a mix of live and electronically delivered content in both resident and nonresident courses. A peer-based learning system is an explicit part

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PHOTOS: (U.S. Army)

of this model; ALC 2015 notes the "Web 2.0" explosion of user-curated content and how it has become a familiar part of life and learning for an increasing number of learners. However, when it comes to implementing this social learning model, proposed ALC 2015 actions overwhelmingly focus on traditional classrooms and do not address dL. One example is particularly noteworthy: multiple agencies are directed to "convert most *classroom experiences* into collaborative problem solving events" (emphasis added).[2] This deliberate exclusion of dL PME from the broader context of Army learning is symptomatic of a lack of social learning in dL programs.

Despite having well-established programs of instruction supported by significant infrastructure, most dL PME courses have no mechanism for enrolled students to engage with one another. The recently cancelled Phase I of the Captains Career Course was a dL module of 71 hours of "common core" training, for which completion was required for promotion. No discussion forum existed for that common formative experience for junior officers across the Army. An outside observer might argue that common core training is basic enough not to require collaborative learning, but several threads on various Army professional forums seeking assistance on unclear aspects of this module belie this assumption.

The dL version of Intermediate Level Education–Common Core (ILE-CC) likewise has no mechanism for social engagement among students. The broader ILE program does have a requirement for posting public engagement through means such as blogging or commenting on public forums, but the emphasis is on one-way communication rather than conversation. The Army War College's distance education website lists a similar requirement for "writing forum participation," but it is unclear whether this refers to an actual collaborative forum or simply a requirement to write and post material in an online space similar to that of ILE-CC.

The recently instituted Structured Self-Development for Army noncommissioned officers (NCOs) suffers from a similar lack of a social component. Structured Self-Development is envisioned as a lifelong learning tool, with automatic enrollment in each phase occurring after the completion of NCO PME schools such as the Warrior Leader Course.
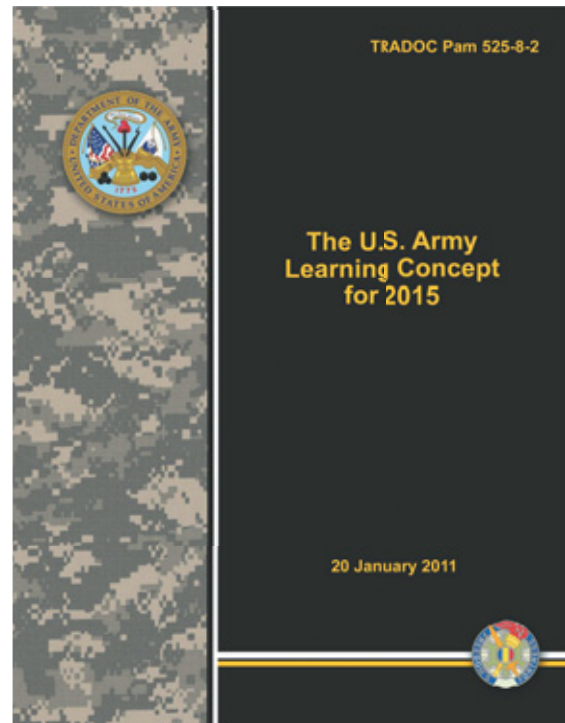
The U.S. Army Learning Concept for 2015,
TRADOC Pamphlet 525, 8-2.

Each of its modules are structured with a series of tasks that mirror previously existing NCO Educational System courses. But just as in officer dL PME, Structured Self-Development is a solitary experience, with no social engagement with peers to facilitate the process. Its official catalog, published by the Sergeants Major Academy, is telling in this respect; interspersed throughout the catalog course descriptions are pictures of soldiers hunched over computers, presumably seeking out the "right" answers.[3] In the few pictures depicting more than one soldier, an individual is pointing to a portion of the screen, emphasizing the orientation of the course as a provider of knowledge rather than as a facilitation tool. Nowhere in the catalog does the reader see NCOs engaging in conversation with one another. Small wonder, then, that less than 15 percent of the soldiers enrolled in Structured Self-Development 1 are on track to complete the course prior to attending the Warrior Leader Course.[4]

MSG Laferral Stewart at Fort Bliss, TX, remotely teaches using a distributed learning facility at the 7th Army Joint Multinational Training Command's Distributed Learning classroom, January 2010, Vilseck, Germany.

The common thread running throughout all of these dL PME experiences is that, rather than connecting students with their peers and allowing for an exchange of ideas, these courses isolate the participants. These dL courses are structured more as an efficient means of content delivery to a recipient than true learning experiences. Nothing highlights this dissonance better than a recent column by Sergeant Major of the Army Raymond Chandler, who lauds the ability of the current generation of soldiers to connect via Facebook and Twitter, and then goes on to explain how Structured Self-Development will better communicate lessons to soldiers.[5] The column misses one of the central truths of social media: they are so wildly successful because they provide unprecedented opportunities for people around the world to interact and engage.

These observations of Army dL PME are not just anecdotal or snapshots; outside research of Army dL has also reinforced these findings. A recently released 5-year RAND study of Army distance learning noted that most Army dL has little to no student-instructor interaction.[6] The study makes no mention at all of peer-to-peer interaction, further underlining this serious gap in practice. Among its recommendations was to better link distance learning with the Army's Knowledge Management program as a way of opening dL students to a broader variety of perspectives. Unfortunately, the RAND report specifically emphasizes greater integration with knowledge management databases—huge impersonal repositories of knowledge—rather than broader engagement with other human beings engaged in learning.[7] Defining knowledge management exclusively in this manner ignores much of the recent research that places greater emphasis on the primacy of social aspects of learning.

Why Social?

A well-established and growing body of literature suggests that social learning is a vital component of all education, not just formal schooling. The common thread of schools of social learning is a persistent requirement to situate education

within a genuine practice that derives both from the legitimacy of the subject material and the engagement of peers and experts. For example, activity theory promotes designing courses that produce participant structures and supports; these, in turn, produce both learning artifacts and social participation that helps immerse learners in relevant practices.[8] Activity theory looks at the interchange of tools, rules, and desired objectives within a community of learners and a division of labor between those learners to produce specific outcomes. In the same vein, Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger's seminal work on apprenticeship and communities of practice emphasizes the central role of "legitimate peripheral participation" in creating and defining learning experiences for learners engaged in a common practice.[9] Legitimate peripheral participation is simply individuals engaging in knowing as an activity within a larger socio-cultural community that assists them in the construction of a learning identity within their practice.[10] These are just two of the better-known schools of social learning; an exhaustive list would be beyond the scope of this article and not particularly instructive to the reader.

> *NCOs tracked down what they perceived to be good sources of information and reflected with others on the value of that information…*

Far from being fads or buzzwords, these theories have great resonance when applied in the context of time-honored learning traditions. Many studies of the cognitive domain use Bloom's Taxonomy, a hierarchy of six levels of learning that range from simple knowledge to more complex evaluation. Social learning techniques, with their emphasis on exposing the learners to new viewpoints, are especially useful in bringing students through the higher levels of the taxonomy such as *application, analysis,* and *synthesis*.[11] Social learning is also a useful means of extending Socratic learning techniques

beyond a simple exchange between instructor and student. Classic Socratic classrooms use a dialectic approach that seeks to achieve an understanding of a complex topic through a series of questions and answers that provide a deeper analysis of the subject. Online discussion forums can expand this dialectic to a larger group of learners, allowing many participants to contribute to and benefit from the discussion.[12]

All of the above may sound very dry and academic, but Army studies have shown it to be an accurate representation of how the current and rising generations of soldiers learn best. A recent U.S. Army Research Institute study of self-learning habits among noncommissioned officers was blunt and to the point: "NCOs prefer approaches that are highly social and interactive."[13] The study found that most NCOs sought advice and feedback on their learning performance from peers and senior individuals whom they perceived as having valuable perspectives on the topic. Another popular learning strategy was information seeking, in which NCOs tracked down what they perceived to be good sources of information and reflected with others on the value of that information as compared to their own experiences. Even a little-used strategy of sense-making, when employed, primarily involved finding alternative and novel sources of learning and using them to summarize the individual's own learning. A monograph on officer learning habits produced similar findings, noting that a majority of participants in the study favored peer-to-peer learning approaches.[14] These approaches were perceived as having value for answering both open-ended problems and questions with discrete answers.

We Already Know How To Do This!

Indeed, this soldier preference for social learning potentially linked to enhanced dL is reflected in the growth and continued relevance of the Army professional forums, officially sanctioned and supported online spaces where soldiers can engage peers and subject-matter experts in conversation about specific practices.[15] The Army professional forums began with just a handful of forums totaling a few thousand users in the early 2000s; they now consist of dozens of forums with nearly 300,000 users from all components of the Army. Army

professional forum communities span the full range of Army practices and concerns and feature real-time development of elements of those practices. Conversations in the forums focus on real problems and timely solutions to those problems, generated by the communities themselves. Although some of the forums have a contract or volunteer facilitator, the professional atmosphere and grass-roots ownership of the community reduces the need for active moderation of discussions.

One example of the impact these forums are already having on Army learning is the Read2Lead program, hosted within the Army professional forum community and supported by the Center for the Advancement of Leader Development and Organizational Learning at West Point.[16] This innovative engagement draws upon the broader norms and conversations within the MilSpace community to support the established practice of professional reading. Members create a dynamic and interactive professional reading list by recommending books for reading, while voting and commenting on others' recommendations. The result is a professional reading list with a situated context to help readers understand the value of specific texts. In the first year of the program's inception, Read2Lead members recommended 88 books, voted hundreds of times on the value of those books, and posted 131 comments about how those books made a difference for them.[17]

Integrating a social component into Army dL PME will not require an entirely new doctrine or set of procedures; we already possess the institutional knowledge to make this work.

Cavalry Leaders' Course: A Case Study

A case study from the Cavalry Leaders Course at Fort Benning, Georgia, may help to better illustrate the utility of these techniques. The CLC, offered by the Armor School, exists to train soldiers involved in the planning and execution of reconnaissance missions how to synchronize and employ reconnaissance in today's current operating environment.

Brian Harris Feb 5, 2013 4:00 PM

Class 13-002: Learning from the Israeli experience

This question is **Assumed Answered.**

Tonight's reading involves an examination of the transformation of Israeli tactics and doctrine in a short period of time and its impact on how combat units were able to conduct operations. Address the following questions based on the reading and in-class discussion.

Q1: What self imposed challenges did the IDF face during the 2006 conflict in Lebanon? How did it affect unit performance? (BN and below)

Q2: Describe Hizbollah as a hybrid threat. Use the three characteristics presented by MAJ Bowers article of what defines a hybrid threat.

Remember, this isn't a literary review, but a discussion of relevant/ current information regarding how we conduct operations and how our enemies may face us in the future.

HardLessonsLearned.pdf(261.2 K)

160 Views

Reply

Average User Rating ★★★★★ (0 ratings)   My Rating ★★★★★

David Fisher Feb 5, 2013 4:53 PM (in response to Brian Harris)

Re: Class 13-002: Learning from the Israeli experience

The challenges faced by IDF Soldiers came from the strategic approach to training and doctrine. The effects based operations (campaigns) were believed to replace the need for ground forces to the point that no units larger than brigades would be needed in the future. Doctrine and terminology was changed to support the belief that the IAF could bomb their enemies into submission and achieve victory through targeted air strikes. (This mentality is similar to the one we adopted after WWII and it caused problems for us in the beginning of the Korean War.) By redirecting the focus and then the budget away from ground forces the shift caused the deterioration of basic Soldier skills. Commanders did not have the budget or equipment to maintain the formations and were hamstrung by unusable doctrine. They did not train mission command above the brigade level because it was not expected to be needed. This caused failures of mission command while Soldiers were in contact or planning missions. They would receive conflicting orders that were confusing and often would change

Instructors at the Cavalry Leaders Course post articles and questions nightly on the milSuite platform. Students reply to questions on the message board and the responses are used as conversation starters the next day in class.

Students in the course include active and reserve component soldiers in grades ranging from E-7 to O-5, as well as marines of comparable grade. Every student is issued a laptop during the course to facilitate the use of electronic learning materials. The course itself is a fast-paced 15 days, which includes two separate company-level orders processes as well as an adaptive planning exercise. An environment of this intensity requires opportunities for reflection and synthesis of the course material.

The course uses the milSuite platform to host online professional discussions and share course content with members of the reconnaissance community. Each night, the students are presented with a discussion question along with supporting articles, doctrine, and case studies, which are posted on the message board. The message board, found on the Cavalry Leaders Course milBook page, enables students to extend discussions beyond the classroom and onto a professional forum accessible by leaders throughout the Army. This process allows students to learn not only from each other, but also from other leaders outside the classroom. The boards also allow students to remain in contact with one another

> *The message board…enables students to extend discussions beyond the classroom and onto a professional forum accessible by leaders throughout the Army.*

after the conclusion of the course as they return to their units. These collaborative online discussions enhance the learning experience of the students while also generating additional topics and ideas for the instructors to use in subsequent class discussions.[18]

A recent Cavalry Leaders Course milBook discussion illustrates the power of this social learning model. The instructor began the discussion with a prompt, derived from an assigned reading:

> Q: How has the emergence of hybrid threats created new challenges for company/troop level commanders vs. previous threat models

(i.e., Cold War/Soviet doctrine)? What methods can be used to overcome or mitigate these challenges (i.e., training, operational, planning . . .)?

Over the next 24 hours, students post responses that seek to answer the question from a variety of perspectives, including some drawn from the students' own experiences:

> Simulations will have to be leveraged extensively to train both combined arms maneuver [CAM] and wide area security. Though often tedious, commanders will have to squeeze every ounce of value out of these systems in order to ensure that their formations are already operating at a high level when they do get to conduct FTXs, LFXs, MREs, etc. [field training exercises, live fire exercises, and mission rehearsal exercises].

> The complexity of modern military operations has caused [U.S. forces] to rely on technology to increase their effectiveness or capabilities. At the same time, this opens up new lanes which hybrid enemies can use to strike at [U.S. forces].

> Planning and training for every contingency is impossible . . . cavalry is best suited to cover as many bases as possible and is already headed in the right direction with training mounted tasks as they would against a peer threat . . . in addition to the forces that fall into "the sweet spot" . . . of the more contemporary IED [improvised explosive device] defeat and insurgent/dismount team type fight.

At this point, the discussion has already spanned almost twice the time that would have been available to engage the topic in the classroom, while gathering 21 responses to the prompt. One student then poses a challenge to the conceptual framework of "hybrid warfare" proposed by the author of the article:

> I'm somewhat disappointed in the term of hybrid threat. While a compound threat has a clear definition (strategic coordination between regular and irregular forces), the hybrid threat relies on an entity to fit a "sweet spot" of maturity, capability, and complex terrain . . . Attempting to identify the hybrid threat has the potential to create a "planning trap" if the leadership isn't careful. It is very

easy for planning to come to a standstill [when we have] difficulty identifying where an entity fits in the sweet spot.

The instructor in a conventional classroom, faced with the time crunch to cover all of the material, would have to choose one of several choices. He can attempt to answer the student's question himself; he can throw out the question to the group to discuss; or he can table the question and promise to come back to it later. Instead, this instructor chose to go straight to the source material and invite the author himself to join the conversation. The author replies:

As [the student] points out, hybrid adversaries should definitely be examined and understood from a "macro" strategic-level approach. . . . That said, there is no magic threshold where an adversary is an inept armed mob just this side of it, and a ten-foot-tall hybrid threat that fights in a radically different way on the other. To again echo [the student's] comment, time spent nitpicking over whether a particular adversary is or isn't technically a hybrid threat is ultimately a red herring, at least from a tactical standpoint. The simple truth is that any adversary with access to advanced modern weapons and capabilities and the knowledge/training to use them effectively will make you glad you trained for CAM, or wish you had if you didn't.

Not entirely satisfied with the answer he received, the student presses the author further, invoking some of the author's own evaluative criteria to make the point:

I agree 100% that CAM is our best tool in attacking the stand-off fires "capability" of a hybrid threat. That should be our tactical focus. However, capability is only one variable of a hybrid threat. What role does a company or troop commander have in combating maturity and complexity of terrain (specifically human terrain)? Are there not other agencies (for example, State Department or the special operations forces community) that should focus on combating these other variables? Are we asking too much of these young officers to be warriors, diplomats, and politicians?

From start to "finish," the exchange on this topic spanned six days and 27 posts. The term "finish" is in quotes because, in an online discussion forum, the conversation is never truly finished. Unlike conventional classroom conversations, which end when the instructor assesses that the discussion has served its pedagogical purpose, this discussion will remain available on milBook to the members of the class into the future. The discussion will also be available to future students, who can use the reflections in the forum as starting points for their own thinking on the topic.

How to Go Social

Every Army dL PME course should be assessed for potential integration of a social component, even ones that may not seem to readily lend themselves to that approach. It is true that not every course will be appropriate for a social approach; but the default question should be "Why *shouldn't* we try a social addition?" not "Why should we?" A useful start would be to look at the elements of the course through the activity theory lens depicted in the activity theory model.[19]

For instance, courses could be evaluated to identify specific practices that students routinely struggle with or fail to fully integrate. Course managers may be able to identify specific tools in the practice that students may benefit from broader use of in a social context. Additionally, managers could single out specific divisions of labor that would help implement those tools. It is vital to *first* identify what the objectives and desired outcomes of a social component would be *before* jumping into how to do it. A grafted-on social component isolated from the core purposes of the course will feel inauthentic and will lack support. Fortunately, many of the course management systems in use for dL programs already contain social software such as discussion forums or blogging platforms, so the additional costs of adding social components will largely be for manpower. When establishing social learning platforms, picking the right person to manage them is as important, or even more important, than the platform used for the discussion. While the S6 may always be the "go-to" person when the task involves automation, a better choice would be someone who not only knows how to navigate the Internet but also has a passion for professional development.
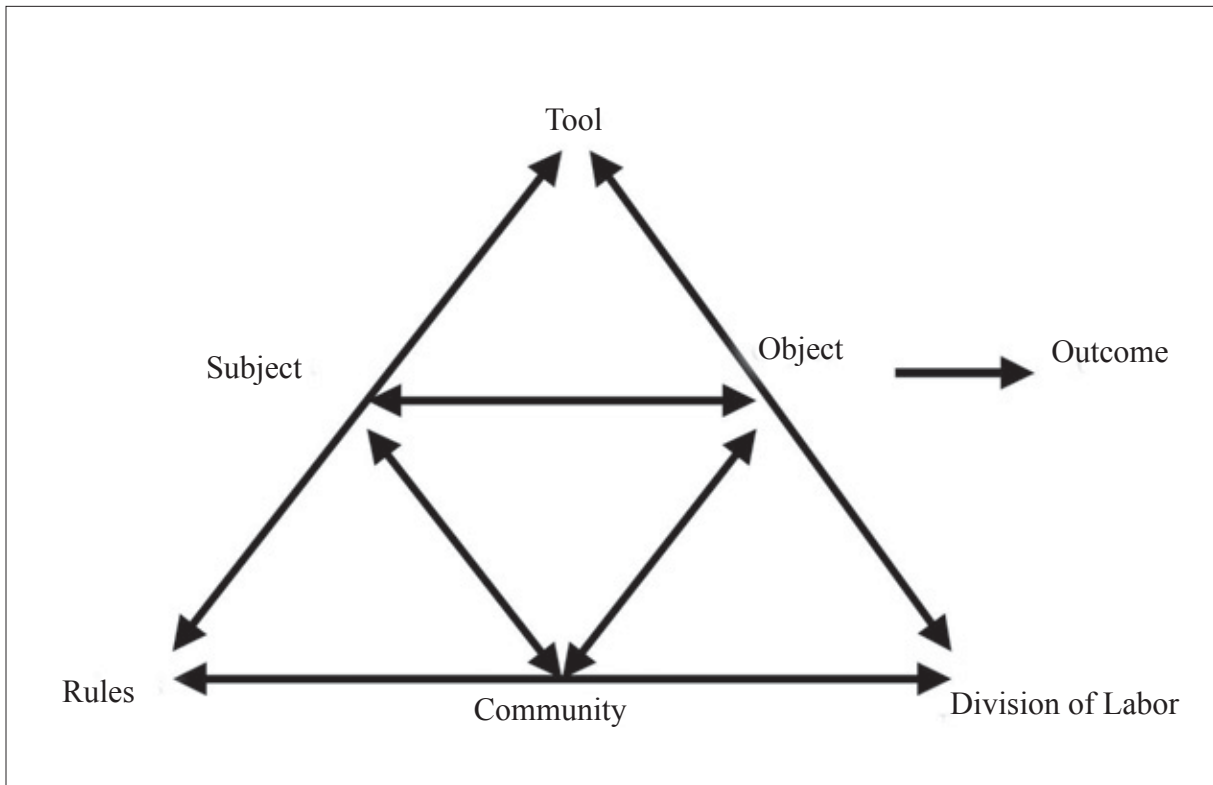
The activity theory model.

Once the page is established and members have joined, the next step is content development and engagement. If the instructor comes across an article he thinks would be beneficial for the development of the class or their peer group, the article can be posted online. The instructor should ask questions that require responses beyond showing simple understanding, thereby driving discussion that accelerates the learning process. In addition to articles, instructors can also post and share other products and tools with students, which will increase the utility of the discussions.

Frequency of online interaction and relevance of posts should also be addressed when discussing implementation. If students are constantly required to sit in front of their computers reading and answering discussion questions, they may begin to feel overburdened by professional development, resulting in diminishing returns. Instructors should limit the frequency of responses to a reasonable interval driven by the needs of the course, with the exception of opportunities that might arise based on current events or trends within the Army.

Before posting articles and questions, instructors should also provide clear requirements for participation. Requirements should address length or quality of posts, expectations for content (quality and relevance of posts), and timeliness. This can be done by creating a document that contains guidelines for conduct and content on the unit message board.[20]

Conclusion

The Army has always "done" social learning for PME; the vibrant discussions of formal NCO and officer development programs or informal after-hours unit calls are a persistent example. Discussions about the Army profession and its various practices in social settings have been a prominent feature of face-to-face PME for decades. If soldiers are our credentials, we owe it to ourselves to connect those soldiers in every way possible, and PME should be no exception. We have the expertise, the technology, and the imperative to do this now; seizing this opportunity could transform popular perceptions of dL PME and open new vistas of learning for the Army as a whole. **MR**
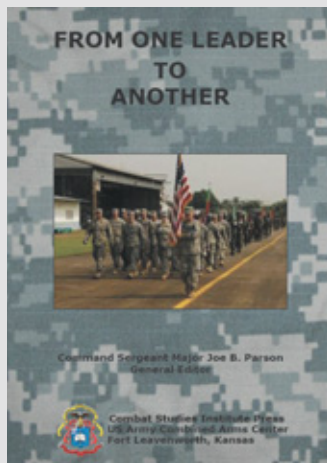
1. U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC), TRADOC Pam 525-8-2, *The U.S. Army Learning Concept for 2015* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2011), 12.

2. Ibid., 35.

3. H.U. Mason, 2011, *Structured Self Development Course Catalog*. ed., United States Army Sergeants Major Academy, Fort Bliss, TX.

4. Raymond F. Chandler, "Structured self-development will propel NCOs to success," *The NCO Journal* 20, no. 7 (2011): 4.

5. Ibid.

6. Michael G. Shanley, James C. Crowley, Matthew W. Lewis, Susan G. Straus, Kristin J. Leuschner, and John Coombs, *Making Improvements to the Army Distributed Learning Program* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2012), 19.

7. Ibid., 117

8. Sasha A. Barab, Michael Evans, and Eun-Ok Baek, "Activity Theory as a Lens for Characterizing the Participatory Unit," in *International Handbook On Communication Technologies*, ed. David H. Jonassen (Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 2004), 199-214.

9. Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* (Cambridge, UK & New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 29.

10. Ibid., 52.

11. T. Rick Whiteley, "Using the Socratic Method and Bloom's Taxonomy of the Cognitive Domain to Enhance Online Discussion, Critical Thinking, and Student Learning," *Developments in Business Simulation and Experiential Learning*, 2006, 33: 65-70, 66.

12. Ibid., 68.

13. Thomas Rhett Graves, Gary Rauchfuss, and Michelle Wisecarver, *Self-learning Among Army Noncomissioned Officers: Experiences, Attitude, and Preferred Strategies* (Fort Belvoir, VA: U.S. Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences, 2012), 46.

14. Devon F. Adkinson, "Peer-to-Peer Learning and the Army Learning Model" (MMAS, Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 2011).

15. To further explore APF, visit <https://forums.army.mil>. An Army Knowledge Online account is required. As of this writing, the APF are in the midst of transitioning to the MilSuite platform, <https://www.milsuite.mil>.

16. CALDOL is the creator of the CompanyCommand and PlatoonLeader professional forums and serves as a research and development arm for APF.

17. CompanyCommand—Building Combat Ready Teams. 2012. "Read2lead: The professional reading list by and for company-level officers," *Army* 62, no. 2: 51-55.

18. For more information on the CLC, see Ryan J.Gainey, Joe Byerly, and Brian J. Harris, "Cavalry leaders' course: More than 25 years of training cavalry professionals," *Armor: Mounted Maneuver Journal* 122, no. 1 (2013): 12-14.

19. Barab, Evans, and Baek, 203.

20. Many of these practices are derived from suggestions in Services, Academic Technology, and Creative, 2009, "Online discussions for blended learning best practices," ed., California State University Sacramento,1-8.