



An instructor counsels a student during an exercise at the NCO Academy Hawaii at Schofield Barracks, Hawaii in 2008. (Photo courtesy of U.S. Army Garrison-Hawaii)

From the Field: NCOs and their effectiveness as teachers

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Delivering instruction and training is at the heart of the NCO's role in the Army. Because leading troops and supporting operations are critical jobs for noncommissioned officers, training and mentoring never stops, even during operations. The Army's NCOs, then, have a duty to sharpen their skills and increase their capacity as instructors throughout their careers.

Since the types of future operations aren't certain and their challenges can't be anticipated, we need Soldiers who can learn quickly to adapt to a variety of situations. The Army understands this. In 2011, the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command published

TRADOC Pam 525-8-2, *The U.S. Army Learning Concept for 2015*. Its stated purpose is to "re-examine the Army learning model" and propose a new one more aligned with current trends and future realities.

In the pamphlet, TRADOC proposes a "Continuous Adaptive Learning Model" with two pillars: better face-to-face instruction, and extended learning through networked technologies. The pamphlet outlines a shift from the current model designed to train a peacetime Army to a future one that:

- is learner-centric
- is collaborative
- is contextual and problem-based

- uses facilitators rather than traditional instructors
- relies more on technology to be efficient
- uses virtual training environments
- finds a balance between tech-delivered instruction and high quality face-to-face interaction

Much of the new doctrine derives from recent scholarship in the field of learning science, a field that has concerned professional teachers in the civilian world for decades. The Army, too, has long been interested in effective training practices, but has suffered from two tendencies in my view. The first is a bias in favor of experience, acknowledged in the *Learning Concept for 2015*. The second is, as pointed out by Sean Lawson, a security studies professor at the University of Utah, that the military is an organization that has to respond to — and perform best in — crises. It is risky to employ new strategies during these high operational tempo periods, and the Army tends to avoid experimenting during these periods.

Despite its anticipation of persistent conflict, the Army has recognized the need to change its teaching model precisely in order to maintain its advantage in the spectrum of operations. NCOs will be key to effectively implementing the new model.

Good Teacher = Good NCO

There has been a long debate about what makes for effective teaching. With the billions of dollars that are poured into K–12 public education in the United States, valid and reliable findings about the return on that investment has interested administrators, parents and taxpayers for some time. But only recently have studies and measures been developed to answer the questions that get at the heart of what it means to be an effective teacher.

Ronald Ferguson, a senior lecturer in education and public policy at Harvard University’s Graduate School of Education, has made some important discoveries about how to measure teacher effectiveness. Traditionally, teachers have been evaluated by their superiors during formal observations, much like NCOs. But more recently, many are being evaluated according to their students’ performance on tests.

Ferguson wanted to know if student evaluations could be used to reliably measure teacher effectiveness. Through his own research and studies commissioned by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the evaluation tools he created predicted quite reliably what is “value added” regarding student learning. In other words, the surveys that students used to evaluate their teachers articulated the variables that indicate teacher effectiveness.

Ferguson’s measure consists of what he calls the “Seven Cs,” and just a quick description of those responsibilities shows that a good teacher is synonymous with a good NCO. They are the things good trainers must do when delivering instruction; they must: care, control, clarify, challenge, captivate, confer and consolidate.

Care

Caring refers to the lengths to which NCOs will go to ensure their students learn. It shows investment in their students. It is, to paraphrase the NCO Creed, placing the needs of students above the NCO’s own. “Caring goes beyond ‘niceness,’” Ferguson said. Caring teachers work hard and go out of their way to help. They signal to their students, “I want you to be happy and successful, and I will work hard to serve your best interest.”

We understand that leaders need to show compassion and the type of care that servant leadership demands. “Soldiers can sense when their leaders genuinely care about them, and this builds trust,” said retired 1st Sgt. Cameron Wesson in an October 2013 *NCO Journal* article. “This trust forges a bond between all and solidifies the team. That bond is all-encompassing.”

Control

An example of a student survey item measuring control is, “Our class stays busy and doesn’t waste time.” In the parlance of K–12 education, “control” means classroom management, and it is the strongest predictor of student learning, according to Gates Foundation research. Control does not refer to a kind of manipulation of behavior or restriction on choice. Rather, it refers to the appropriate channeling of classroom energies toward a particular plan. Often, classes that seem chaotic can be very well managed.

Army instructors generally have adequate classroom management. That is, they rarely have disruptive discipline violations and can spend their time and energy in the classroom on getting their students to learn, instead of managing behavior. This is an enormous advantage Army instructors have over civilian counterparts, but it comes with the responsibility of using that time and energy on increasing learning. NCOs in teaching positions, whether in a classroom or in the field, need to keep their students on-task and on-mission.

Clarify

Good teachers know that simply presenting information doesn’t equate to student learning. In order for students to learn, they have to understand material in their own ways, according to their own previously acquired knowledge. “Interactions that clear up confusion and help students persevere are especially important,” Ferguson said. Sometimes, this means getting multiple perspectives, but other times it means taking control.

One thing that the best teachers and instructors realize is that, though they may be experts in the content, their students probably aren’t. Indeed, instructors may have given a particular lesson or block of instruction dozens of times, but more often than not, their students are learning it for the first time. “To be most effective, teachers should be able to diagnose students’

skills and knowledge, and they need multiple ways of explaining ideas that are likely to be difficult for students to grasp,” Ferguson said.

NCOs need to break away from routine ways of explaining material and a one-size-fits-all approach to describing concepts. The new learning model recognizes that learners are individuals, with unique ways of perceiving the world. As such, NCO instructors should spend time trying to understand how students interpret course material by asking questions that check for understanding.

Research indicates that checking for understanding is most effective in the K-12 setting when teachers ask questions at least every few minutes. It is not enough to wait until a lesson break for a standardized “check on learning” that seems to come pre-packaged into every Army PowerPoint lesson. Instructors should be asking randomized questions about the material to gauge how well their presentation is going. Questioning techniques are not meant to assess the students; rather they assess whether the instructor is teaching well. The doctrine also suggests giving students more opportunities to learn in small groups, which will give students opportunities to learn from peers in a variety of ways.

Challenge

Just as stressing the body’s muscles in a systematic, controlled way increases physical strength, creating cognitive challenges develops thinking and results in learning. To increase the cognitive challenges during instruction, Ferguson writes that teachers “may ask a series of follow-up questions intended to elicit deeper, more thorough reasoning.”

NCOs are used to training to a standard, but the new learning model recognizes that future conflicts, enemies and rules of engagement will not be as well defined. Thus, NCOs will have to adapt their instruction to get Soldiers to think more deeply about their tasks instead of simply meeting a baseline standard.

Teachers face the same challenge. Though school curricula are often standards-driven, effective teachers differentiate. That is, they give their students different learning opportunities, allowing high-performing students to excel, while still maintaining standards for first-time or struggling learners. Likewise, *Learning Concept for 2015* asserts, “Leaders and facilitators must gain an appreciation for learning differences among Soldiers in their command.”

TRADOC Pam 525-8-2 makes clear that *adaptability* is the new standard. The Army will need Soldiers who can think creatively and critically and who will exercise “the ability to make rapid adjustments based on a continuous assessment of the situation,” the pamphlet states. “They must be comfortable with ambiguity and quickly adapt to the dynamics of evolving operations over short and extended durations.”

Army training is full of challenges. But NCO instructors need to think about the cognitive challenges that future operations will demand, in addition to the physical challenges.

Captivate

Simply put, good instructors make lessons interesting. It is pretty well a settled point that engaging lessons sink in deeper and produce learning that is more enduring. The new doctrine reaffirms as much, railing against “death by PowerPoint.” We all understand this instinctively, yet how often do we rely on slide presentations as a rote exercise before we get to the “real learning?” Civilian teachers discover quickly that students don’t learn well under such uninteresting circumstances; discipline problems often skyrocket and achievement frequently plummets.

In Army training, good discipline among Soldier students masks the ill effects of poor instruction. Army instructors need to remember that a slide presentation is only a medium for learning, and is not by itself real instruction. The learning occurs through the interaction between and among NCOs and their students. “Instructional guidelines suggest a dramatic reduction or elimination of instructor-led slide presentation lectures,” the new doctrine states.

But even if NCOs are required to deliver slide presentations, there are ways they can improve them by making them more interactive: Ask questions. Make students devise questions. Get them moving. Get them acting. Put them into small discussion groups. It is good teaching and now it is doctrine. *Learning Model for 2015* instructs NCOs to “provide more opportunities for collaboration and social learning.”

Confer

Ferguson has students rate their teachers on the following: “My teacher gives us time to explain our ideas.”

Good teachers know that students drive their own learning. Likewise, Army doctrine prescribes a learning model that gives learners opportunities to explain and share ideas. One of the more radical innovations in *Learning Model for 2015* is the nod to Soldier-created content: “The 2015 learning environment is characterized by a flow of information across networks between the learner and the institution. This flow goes both ways. Learners will possess tools and knowledge to create learning content, such as digital applications, videos, and wiki updates to doctrine.”

The Army’s challenge of managing such a democratization of knowledge is beyond most NCO teacher-trainers. But the principle should be in play during classroom instruction. One technique I’ve used successfully in my classes has been to ask students to deliver mini lessons themselves. Not only does this give the class the opportunity to hear something presented in a different way, but it engages students and lets them know that their knowledge is valued.

Instructors also need to feel comfortable being challenged by their students. Finally, students need ample opportunity to bounce ideas off each other and their instructors without fear of being made to feel inadequate.

Consolidate

Effective teachers consolidate lesson material. Ferguson describes consolidation as practices that “include reviewing and summarizing material at the end of classes and connecting ideas to material covered in previous lessons.” Education research suggests that such activities “enhance retention by building multiple mental pathways for retrieving knowledge and for combining disparate bits of knowledge in effective reasoning,” he said. Effective reasoning is the aim of *Learning Model for 2015* so that “learning transfers from the learning environment to the operational environment.”

Consolidating must be done consciously. Civilian teachers often use very short, simple assessments that

connect multiple lessons, or larger projects that force students to integrate various knowledge domains. Asking students to make predictions is one way to consolidate, as are “learner trackers” that put small lessons into the context of larger courses and domains.

NCOs are the teachers of the Army, and teaching is one of our most important functions. The Army has explicitly recognized that knowing discrete units of information will not be sufficient in the future. Instead, Soldiers will have to learn faster and better than our future adversaries in order to maintain our advantage. It is a mistake to think that *any* competent NCO is good at training by virtue of their experience, because experience alone will not meet the demands of training and teaching Soldiers. Teaching is a skill like any other that may be learned and honed. Under the Army’s new learning model, NCOs who want to contribute their expertise should take opportunities to improve their teaching. ■

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