



Command Sgt. Maj. Jimmy Sellers, commandant of the NCO Leadership Center of Excellence passes the unit colors to Command Sgt. Maj. David Lee, signifying the passing of responsibility of the United States Army Sergeants Major Academy (USASMA) from Command Sgt. Maj. Nuuese Passi during ceremonies Feb. 1, 2019. (Photo by David Crozier NCOL CoE & USASMA)

A Pathway Forward

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Deeper learning in the context of military leadership emphasizes the use of a leader's core competencies: the ability to formulate military concepts and principles, and the capability to solve problems and disseminate ideas. Deeper learning is synonymous with Army learning as "Army learning is the act of acquiring, maintaining, or improving knowledge skills, and attitudes to achieve required performance" (U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, 2017b, p. 21).

The graduates of the United States Army Sergeants Major Course (USASMA) will be able to think critically, apply knowledge, and solve problems under uncertain, complex, and chaotic operational environments. More importantly, according to the *Army Learning Concept* (2017b), it is important for the students to gain deeper understanding because "Effective critical and creative

thinking are essential for successful application of all three Army Planning Methodologies: Troop Leading Procedures, Mission Decision Making Process, and the Army Design Methodology" (U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, p. 21). Yet in today's schoolhouse environment, there is currently no way to measure the critical thinking skill set that is desperately needed. To remedy that, the proposed qualitative action research study seeks to understand USASMA students' perceptions of the Joint Interagency Intergovernmental Multinational (JIIM) curriculum and will determine the impact of student-centered summative assessments on students' critical thinking skills after the recommended Phase III JIIM Mission Readiness Exercise.

The goals of this research are to help students increase their knowledge, skills, and abilities to achieve higher levels of cognition during their pursuit of one

of the most fundamental learning outcomes (Evaluation), and to aid their development and metacognition in the JIIM discipline. Paul and Elder's (2007) framework for critical thinking and Anderson's et al. (2001) *A Revision of Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives*, are crucial to ensuring the JIIM curriculum sets the conditions for future senior enlisted leaders to learn at maximum capacity in the 21st century.

Background of the Problem

As USASMA educators, we are required to educate and evaluate each student on JIIM curriculum (i.e., a minimum of every six weeks for a total of six semesters). We, as instructors, realize that the gap that exists between theoretical learning and the practice within the force, creates significant inconsistencies. This need motivated us to expand our exposure to literature on curriculum theory, curriculum design, and assessment strategies that converge in andragogy theoretical educational principles in order to construct a research study to measure these deficiencies, and then propose solutions to fix them.

According to Noddings (1983), John Dewey often advised, "Any subject freely undertaken as an occupation as a set of tasks requiring goal-setting, means-ends analysis, choice of appropriate tools and materials, exercise of skills, living through the consequences, and evaluating the results—is educative" (p. 193). As members of an all-volunteer force, Army senior enlisted leaders freely accept the demands of their occupation; however, many are denied a complete education when they are required to



Students from the Department of Joint, Interagency, Intergovernmental, and Multinational are working on a notional mission analysis of the southern caucasus region. The students are from all three Army components and the multinational partner of Japan. (Photo by David Crozier NCOL CoE & USASMA)

follow a one-size-fits-all mentality within the operational enlisted force that, by design, does not consider the nature of the students' past experiences, learning preferences, environment, or personal background.

The Army Institutional Noncommissioned Officers Professional Development System's rote research methods and summative assessments currently limit the ability to educate senior enlisted leaders at Bloom's top level of evaluation. John Dewey (1929) believed rote memorization to be ineffective and that educators should devote their time "training the child's power of imagery and in seeing to it that he was continually forming definite vivid, and growing images of the various subjects with which he comes in contact in his experience" (p. 38). Summative assessments and associated rubrics, if modified, provide an opportunity to go from strict analyzation to instead allowing the student to evaluate the effectiveness between theories of metacognition and constructivism.

Dewey's constructivist theory is just as important to adult learners as it is to children, but knowledge construction, left to itself, risks reinforcing erroneous data. For these reasons, this proposed action research study aims to improve senior enlisted leaders' education regarding curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment through a thought-infused and guided constructivism. The research study is based off of Dr. Richard Paul and A. J. Binker's teachings (Socratic Questioning, n.d.):

What we need to do, in contrast, is to stimulate student's thinking right from the start, especially about the most basic ideas in a subject so that they are motivated from the beginning to use their thinking in trying to understand things, and so that they base their thinking on foundational ideas that make sense to them. (p. 372)



Command Sgt. Maj. Harold A. Reynolds Jr. (bottom center), director of the Sergeants Major Course at the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy, Fort Bliss, Texas, briefs members of the Malawi Armed Forces College on the particulars of the U.S. Army's senior noncommissioned officer course, Jan. 25, 2016. (U.S. Army photo by David Crozier NCOL CoE & USASMA)

Problem Statement

In the United States Army senior enlisted profession, leaders are assigned to organizations where they are required to be the subject matter experts regarding their ability to provide advice to their respective officer counterpart. Their lack of critical thinking skills, tied to a curriculum that only expects a student to reach the analysis learning level, limits the senior enlisted leader in providing advice that is sound and articulated in a manner that allows for common understanding at the lowest levels of command. A senior enlisted leader must be able to both analyze and evaluate in an environment associated with mission command (Department of the Army, 2014a).

Purpose of the Study

Understanding USASMA students' perceptions of curriculum leads to an understanding of the level of thought Sergeants Major Course students' apply towards the subject. It also lends clues as to how summative assessments might be used in a traditional behaviorist curriculum.

The following research questions, representing separate iterations of the action research cycle, are the recommended guiding principles of this proposed qualitative action research study:

1. What are USASMA students' perceptions of JIIM curriculum concerning the experiential learning model and andragogy principles?
2. What is the impact of summative assessments on the critical thinking skills of USASMA students regarding Bloom's taxonomy in Phase III of the JIIM Readiness Exercise?

The study's goal of helping students develop a standard of critical thought leading to practice is fundamental to the study, and it is fueled by additional recommendations that are being purposed to encourage continual intellectual growth that would help Sergeants Major Course students further develop their abilities throughout their senior leader careers.

Methodology

This action research study follows a qualitative design that is guided by the following research question: What are the USASMA students' perceptions of the efficacy of education in their professional military educational experience while attending USASMA?

This study proposes using two iterations of the action research cycle to understand students' perceptions of the



The "Hall of Honor" at the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy recognizes individuals who meritoriously contributed directly to USASMA. (Photo by David Crozier NCOL CoE & USASMA)

curriculum and to determine the impact of the experiential learning model and summative assessments on their performance and critical thinking abilities. Informal survey data would be captured from 16 USASMA students during the first action research cycle. After an inferential analysis of the data, an action plan informs the second action research cycle where during the second semester, 16 more students (i.e., "MSG X," "MSG Y," and "MSG Z") are selected for semi-structured interviews and would participate in a guided summative assessment during phase III, Mission Readiness Exercise. In addition to the semi-structured interviews, data collection during the second cycle would include participant/researcher-developed field observations and informal interview data.

Hypothesis

If action research is conducted in a two-phase scenario using a control group in the first semester made up of 16 USASMA students and an experimental group during the second semester of 16 more students, the results would show that the experimental group would reach a higher level of learning and evaluation. This would be achieved by using the dependent variables of the phase III Mission Readiness Exercise and the independent variable being the associated modified curriculum and rubric to facilitate and perform a final summative assessment.

In the first semester, the control group would receive no treatment and would only be monitored and evaluated based on the current curriculum plus an informal survey data. When the first semester finishes, the experimental group would be evaluated with the treatment and then evaluated based on the modified curriculum and rubrics set in place for the second-semester evaluation. The difference being during the final assessment the students would be asked questions



Sgt. Maj. Daniel Dailey, the 15th Sergeant Major of the Army, speaks to the crowd, June 22, 2018, gathered for the graduation ceremony of Sergeants Major Course Class 68, at the Abundant Living Faith Center in El Paso, Texas. Dailey was the guest speaker for the graduation which totaled 705 students, including 59 international students from 46 countries as well as members of the United States Marine Corps, Air Force and Coast Guard completed their 10-month course and will take positions throughout the Army as senior enlisted leaders. (U.S. Army photo by David Crozier NCOL CoE & USASMA)

associated with the learning level of evaluation. From these questions, and subsequent follow-on interviews with both groups, the research results would show that the experimental group reached a higher level of learning achievement and critical thinking ability.

Conclusion

A change in JIIM curriculum is needed in the USASMA portfolio to guide students' development of deeper learning and critical thinking skills that go beyond just analysis, and rise to the level of profound evaluation and creation. This requirement is born of the need for a USASMA student to critically evaluate all facts and scenarios and provide sound advice to superiors, peers, and subordinates concerning the commanders' intent, especially in combat zones. Ultimately, the goal is to educate all future senior enlisted leaders to a level equal to the top tier of Bloom's Taxonomy. This will decrease the amount of mistakes on the multi-domain battlefield, resulting in fewer Soldier deaths due to poor mission planning and negligence. ■

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