

Fort Hood Sets Example for Use of Writing Software during Basic Leader Course

By Clifford Kyle Jones - NCO Journal

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A year-old pilot program to help new NCOs improve their writing was first rolled out at the III Corps NCO Academy at Fort Hood, Texas, and it has rapidly become just another way the cadre works to boost Soldiers' performance and help their careers.

The program, called Criterion, is a web-based service that scores writing samples almost instantaneously and provides students with an overall score, as well as annotated diagnostic feedback on elements of grammar, usage, mechanics, style, organization and development.

"Fort Hood is one of the largest forces command posts, and we train approximately 250-300 students at the academy every 22 days, so it was an ideal place as far as location to conduct these tests here," said Command Sgt. Maj. Joseph McFarlane, commandant of Fort Hood's NCOA.

The academy was given wide berth in the implementation of the program, which Training and Doctrine Command rolled out last summer as part of the 22-day Warrior Leader Course — now

the Basic Leader Course — at four sites, including Fort Hood.

Now Criterion is in use at all the Army's NCO Academies, although many have struggled to launch and use the program effectively.

"Across the Army, we are looking for ways to improve NCO education in general," Liston Bailey, Learning Innovations and Initiatives Division Institute for Noncommissioned Officer Professional Development chief at TRADOC headquarters, said when the program first launched at Fort Hood. "What we are actually attempting to do is transform the NCO education system into an NCO professional development system that will take into account training that sergeants do in every single domain; that includes the unit, self-development and in the institution."

Through trial and error, the cadre at the III Corps NCOA have determined some best practices.

"We're figuring out little ways to make it better," said Sgt. Maj. Salvador Montez Jr., the NCOA's deputy commandant. "Like this last class, we figured out little flaws we have to accommodate into our training calendar, as part of our training. The first time we just threw it out there."

At Fort Hood, the assessment is administered on Day 1 of BLC, immediately after students check in on Day Zero. Taking the test early ensures that instructors have enough time to work with students who need help developing their writing skills and that students who miss the initial assessment have time to make it up.

"We've kind of organized the way we implemented for our cadre so they can go step by step, as well," said Sgt. 1st Class Amber DeArmond, a senior group leader at the Fort Hood NCO Academy who led the implementation of the Criterion program.

For the students, she said, "We do a registration process."

"So in Criterion, we can see how many individuals successfully enrolled in the program for our student activity. Then once we determine how many successfully enrolled, we only do the writing attempt for those students on Day 1," she said. "After Day 1, when we do our first attempt, then we try to rectify the problem within 24 hours with the other students who weren't successfully able to log on to the domain or (participate) for whatever reason. Then we do attempt No. 2 on Day 6."

DeArmond said the academy has also changed the registration process since its inception to avoid using students' names, so their personally identifiable information is protected.

The Criterion program gives students 45 minutes to write an essay on one of 400 possible topics. When they're done, their essays are uploaded and the Criterion software gives each student's essay a holistic score of up to six points. When students score ones or are given ranks of "advisory" because the software couldn't score the essays, Fort Hood cadre know they need to spend extra time with those Soldiers. Usually fewer than 5 percent of the students

need to spend extra time with these Soldiers. Usually, fewer than 5 percent of the students score one or below.

“It gauges how to employ the cadre, especially when we go through our communicative writing lesson plan,” DeArmond said. “We can tell who needs additional assistance and how we can be of assistance by looking into how they scored and where their errors occurred.”

She said BLC Soldiers’ scores have averaged about a 3.5, and she believes the target should be about a five.

There are no minimum requirements for essay scores as part of BLC; the Criterion grading is merely an assessment tool. However, BLC students receive a block of instruction on how to effectively write an NCO Evaluation Report (DA Form 2166-8), an award (DA Form 638), a sworn statement (DA Form 2823) and a memorandum for record, so the early assessment tool can be beneficial in identifying students who might benefit most from extra help during those exercises.

“These students are going to do this again a couple more times,” McFarlane said. “This is the Basic Leader Course, formerly known as WLC, and then they’re going to take it again in Advanced Leader Course, with College Level Writing 1. And then they’re going to take it again in the Senior Leader Course, with College Level Writing 2. And then the Sergeants Major Academy, which is like executive level.

“So this is the first step, the base line,” he said. “The end result is to create a senior-level NCO who can communicate effectively and clearly, inside large organizations or outside, even talking to the media and the press, trying to develop them as they grow up into the senior levels.”

DeArmond agrees and notes that the Soldier’s performance on the assessment will follow him or her through the Army Career Tracker system.

“I think the program is a good implementation inside of NCOES,” she said. “It’s designed from the lowest level to the top, and it’s designed to ensure that these junior Soldiers are progressing at a level equivalent to their skills. So by the time they reach the goal of becoming a command sergeant major or sergeant major, they’re able to apply themselves using the literacy and competency they need. Writing skill is one of the main tools that they’ll need to be successful.”

As the program progresses from pilot to full implementation, Montez predicts that “not only is the program going to change the students, it’s going to change the instructor prerequisites.”

“You have to have some college; you have to have some type of ability to write as cadre,” he said. “You can’t just be working with the program if your punctuation and grammar are sideways also.”

Montez and McFarlane acknowledge that the III Corps NCO Academy is fortunate to have trained and highly educated NCOs, such as DeArmond, who is about to complete her

trained and highly educated NCOs, such as DeArmond, who is about to complete her doctorate.

“Going back to education, you have to have some oversight,” Montez said. “We have Dr. DeArmond here, but [everyone will] have to have somebody with a degree who can see things, so another member of the cadre can say, ‘Hey, this is what I see. Do you see the same?’ Someone who understands that verbiage: a dangling modifier, you have a noun in between two verbs, and explain to the students which verb does it fall to. How do you hear about all that?”

McFarlane notes the need, but also sees the changes happening already.

“Back when we were young, the officer corps had all the education,” he said of himself and Montez. “They all came out of West Point or had their four-year degrees or even more. And then you had the enlisted force that pretty much had a high-school diploma or GED. They were the guys and gals who were turning the wrenches in the motorpool or cleaning the gun tubes on the tanks, executing the guidance given by the officers. And now it’s merging to the center where everybody has a whole bunch of education, the officers and the senior NCOs. ... You had the blue-collar force and the white-collar element, but where are we at now? It’s some kind of light blue.”

Even after the formal education, NCOs may have some learning to do to understand the way young, junior enlisted Soldiers communicate.

McFarlane noted that many of the younger Soldiers going through BLC are more accustomed to texting than writing formally. The transition from abbreviations and emojis to scoring well on the writing assessment can be tough.

“If I have a student write a sentence into Criterion with hashtags and ‘lol,’ even though everyone understands it, the program will say the student fails,” Montez said. “The students, that’s how we’re getting them now.”

To illustrate the differences to students, Montez works to break down the process.

“Sometimes, I’ll tell them just to write something like they’re talking to me, just a normal conversation, just write. And then we’ll pick it apart,” he said. He tells them, “ ‘Give me a sentence right now, tell me something like you’re speaking to me.’ And they’ll come out there, ‘Hey, Sergeant Major, let’s keep it on the down low and go dis way and you know ...’

“Meanwhile, I’m like, ‘OK, all right, write it down,’ ” he said. “I get them involved and then articulate it.”

DeArmond has worked to incorporate corrective behavior into the instruction before the students even start writing.

“Part of it is organizing,” she said. “The more organized you are in delivering the information

and breaking it down step by step, the better. One idea that the deputy gave for how to write a memo is take them through the brainstorming process first. So we give them a topic, two or three students in the class will start off by brainstorming and researching what an organization or program is about.”

In this and myriad other ways, DeArmond wants to ensure that Soldiers get the most out of their time at the NCO Academy.

“When noncommissioned officers come to NCOES, this is their prime opportunity for institutional training. ... They get opportunities to progress here. They get the newest information here. They learn the newest material here. This is the opportunity in NCOs’ careers when they actually get the time to solely focus on institutional training. A lot of benefits come out of this academy.

“They don’t know what is out there to help them and set them up for success,” she said.

“There’s not one clear pathway for an NCO to say this is the way you succeed. So opening the doors to different opportunities is what the academy is about.”