



Sergeants Major Course students conduct research at the NCO Leadership Center of Excellence & U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy. (U.S. Army photo)

How Might NCO Courses Improve Output?

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Over the past few years, significant changes were proposed in the way the U.S. Army approaches its education and training. In 2011, Training and Doctrine Command published [The U.S. Army Learning Concept for 2015](#), a publication designed to support the Army operating concept and "drive change through a campaign of learning."¹ In April 2017, the Army published an updated version of [TRADOC Pamphlet 525-8-2: The U.S. Army Learning Concept for Training and Education 2020-2040](#).² Both of these publications refer to the learner-centric environment.

As a result of these publications and others like [Army Doctrine Publication 7-0, Training Units and Developing Leaders](#), leaders across the Army look for

ways to improve noncommissioned officer courses. In other words, what goals and objectives can be applied to these courses to improve performance?

As the Army continues to revise curriculum in NCO professional development courses, leaders should consider addressing pre-assessments, educational distance traveled, and levels of knowledge to improve output from these leadership courses.

Pre-Assessments

Army Learning Concept 2015 highlights how the Continuous Adaptive Learning Model not only expands learning opportunities but also requires pre-tests to "allow Soldiers to test out of instruction they have already mastered."³ Without conducting effective pre-assess-

ments, NCOs may find themselves attending courses or conducting training which fails to challenge them.

Creating sensible pre-assessments will open opportunities for NCOs to demonstrate their proficiency, capabilities, and understanding based on the curriculum while identifying areas where they need improvement. Through practical measurement, a targeted approach can be developed toward learning based on an NCO's knowledge, as opposed to completing the curriculum based on the standardized course. Tailoring curriculum that allows learners to attend courses based on pre-assessment also supports the learner-centric environment recommended by ALC 2015 and adult learning principles.⁴

"Testing out" of classes is nothing new. Many colleges and universities allow students to "test out" of courses using college-level examination program exams.⁵ CLEP exams require the student to demonstrate knowledge they already possess. Utilizing the same approach through pre-assessments will allow for increased rigor within military courses. Instead of NCOs attending classes covering content they already mastered, they can select from a variety of opportunities tailored to their knowledge and experience.

We must also focus on improving our leaders so the military achieves a return on its investment. As Dr. John M. Persyn, assistant professor in the Development Division of the U.S. Army [Command and General Staff College](#), Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, and Cheryl J. Polson, associate dean of the Kansas State University Graduate School and director of Fort Leavenworth Graduate Education and Outreach, Kansas State University, Manhattan, Kansas, explain in their article, "Evolution and Influence of Military Adult Education":

"Military education programs encompass almost every adult education component from basic skills training through graduate-level higher education....To ensure that this extensive workforce is well prepared for the challenges of their important roles in national defense, DoD budgets, since the fiscal year 2003 [through 2012], have included more than \$10 billion annually for training and education programs."⁶

As the costs of having Soldiers away from units, providing instructors, and maintaining facilities continue to rise, training and education across the Army cannot just validate what NCOs already know but must increase their knowledge.

Distance Traveled

Increasing the knowledge, skills, and abilities of every Soldier who attends a course should not be just a goal,

but a mandate. Leaders should consider this as taking "a value-added approach" when it comes to course/training development.⁷

This added value should be reciprocal between NCO course instructors and their students, as well as between the students themselves. Part of a learner-centric environment is not just the meaningful value students receive from the instructors, but also what students learn from each other.

Conducting effective pre-assessments and post-assessments will help Army course managers understand the "distance traveled" for each NCO and how well the curriculum or training plan achieves its objectives.⁸ "Distance traveled" is a non-formal term used to describe the cognitive gap between the learning state in which the student begins training and where we, as educators, elevate them upon graduation.

Students arrive at NCO courses with varying degrees of critical, creative, and analytical skills. It should be every educator's goal to improve upon this baseline and shorten the distance to a mastery-level achievement. For some students, this is a very short distance, while the gap for others is much larger. In either case, students will leave the institution with greater self-awareness of their scholarship abilities and intellectual aptitude.

By changing Army culture so we assess leaders in a significant manner before and after each course, the Army can evaluate whether the return on investment is worth the expense.

Furthermore, recognizing the educational distance individuals need to travel, helps shape classroom management and teaching styles. It may also alter organizational motivations and culture for attending classes. Requiring baseline knowledge to attend each course, then tailoring the curriculum for individuals based on flexible classes, will improve the distance traveled by each student, and benefit the Army.

Basic, Advanced, and Honors Classes

As an example, consider how a logistics NCO attending the Master Leader Course may require a more challenging and advanced curriculum, in comparison to an NCO who has a limited logistical background. Pre-assessments can help generate flexibility in NCO professional development.

Mandating that this logistician attend a basic level logistics class along with everyone else is a wasted opportunity. Providing an advanced course for logisticians, or the option to take an elective in the area where the NCO tested poorly during the pre-assessment, would better support the learner-centric approach to training and education.

This same method, based on course's learning outcomes, would benefit the learner and the organization by adding value and return on investment for the force.

Conclusion

"To meet the military's education needs," said Persyn and Polson, "the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force have all integrated adult learning principles and theory to increase their organizations' effectiveness and address their learners' educational needs."⁹

Capitalizing on the opportunities that pre-assessments and post-assessments illuminate will allow the Army to increase the learning distance each NCO travels by not only creating additional opportunities but also by helping them develop plans to make better use of their

time. As time is a precious resource for all leaders, using it more efficiently not only improves organizational performance but also relocates it to other high priority areas.

Adopting a learner-centric environment is one of the most important areas in the U.S. Army Learning Concept that can help increase the organization's effectiveness. We simply need to apply technology and assessments in a way that allows the curriculum to address learners' needs while adding value by making them more effective leaders. ■

Notes

1. U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, The U.S. Army Learning Concept for 2015, (Fort Monroe: U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, 2011), i.

2. U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, The U.S. Army Learning Concept for Training and Education 2020-2040, (Fort Eustis: Training and Doctrine Command, 2017), <http://www.tradoc.army.mil/tpubs/pams/tp525-8-2.pdf>.

3. U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, The U.S. Army Learning Concept for 2015, 28.

4. Malcolm S. Knowles, "Andragogy: Adult Learning Theory in Perspective," *Community College Review*, vol. 5, no. 3 (January 1, 1978): 5-20.

5. "About CLEP," collegeboard.org, n.d., <https://clep.collegeboard.org/about-clep>.

6. John M. Persyn and Cheryl J. Polson, "Evolution and Influence of Military Adult Education," *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, no.136 (2012): 6.

7. Siddharth Kulkarni and Jonathan Rothwell, "Beyond College Rankings: A Value Added Approach to Assessing

Two-and Four-Year Schools," Brookings Institution website, last modified April 29, 2015, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/beyond-college-rankings-a-value-added-approach-to-assessing-two-and-four-year-schools/>.

8. Ryan Craig, "Distance Traveled: A New Metric for Colleges and Universities," *Forbes* website, May 6, 2015, accessed December 27, 2017, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ryanraig/2015/05/06/distance-traveled-a-new-metric-for-colleges-and-universities/#8d11fdf3ba47>.

9. Persyn and Polson, "Evolution and Influence," 6.

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