



"Creativity makes human beings resilient in situations where artificial intelligence turns brittle, and allows them to out-compete and win in volatile, unstable domains." -- McConnell and Fletcher. (Graphic by the *NCO Journal*)

Creativity

The "Backbone" of Initiative

*By Richard McConnell, D.M. (U.S. Army Command and General Staff College)
and Angus Fletcher, PhD (The Ohio State University)*

<p>You were born creative. But to win, you must get more creative. To get more creative, you must think outside your perspective. To think outside, you must forget what has worked and seek what can. To seek what can work, you must dismiss your hopes and fears. You must embrace the strange, the unexpected, the exceptional. You must get in the habit of planning fast and re-planning faster.</p>	<p>You must forget about being perfect and strive only to get better. You must have many minds inside, including your enemy's mind. You must see defeat as a chance to plan again. And above all, you must have courage. Courage is trying new things. Courage is attacking the unknown. Courage is becoming a different person. Courage is innovation's root. With it, you will adapt and overcome (Fletcher, 2021).</p>
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No plan ever survives the first shot of combat. This old Army adage refers to battlefield surprises, or what Army doctrine calls unanticipated threats and opportunities that emerge during mission execution (Department of the Army, 2022, p. 6–4).

To face these unanticipated threats and opportunities head-on, the U.S. Army demands noncommissioned officers (NCOs) be equipped to take initiative in the absence of orders. This is central to the mission command philosophy. With that in mind, how do NCOs determine appropriate actions, in the absence of orders, during the heat of battle? These leaders must have imagination and creativity to meet a commander's intent even when the unexpected occurs, often outside the scope of their orders.

The NCO Creed, recited by new NCOs during induction ceremonies, states, "I will exercise initiative by taking appropriate action in the absence of orders." This is a very real expectation. So how can current and future Army leaders become more creative when things don't go as planned? Army University's Command and General Staff College (CGSC) faculty and staff believe they found the answer—narrative story science.

In the summer of 2022, CGSC conducted a mixed methods experiment across two campuses, the CGSC Satellite campus at Fort Belvoir, Virginia, and the main campus at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. In total, 254 students participated in the study.

The creative thinking study was based on a groundbreaking new science of creativity, pioneered at Ohio State's Project Narrative, with teams at University of Pennsylvania Psychology, University of Southern California's Brain and Creativity Institute, and University of Chicago's Polsky Center for Entrepreneurship and Innovation (Fletcher, 2021).

The science is rooted in psychology, so it's mutually reinforcing with current sports psychology techniques designed to develop resilience (Fletcher, 2021).

Resilience breeds confidence and optimism, which support creative thinking, which in turn produces positive outcomes that boost confidence and optimism, feeding resilience. The new science of creativity also emphasizes perspective-taking, situational openness, and cooperative teamwork, making it a strong match for anyone who wants to harness individual freedom and diversity in a controlled and disciplined manner for the public good (Fletcher, 2021).

Students were split into test and control groups. The test group received a two-hour experimental lesson designed to stimulate the creativity centers of the brain. The control group received a two-hour creativity lesson designed to simply discuss creative thinking concepts.

Overall, the test group outperformed the control group by demonstrating greater creative improvement when solving complex open-ended problems under a time constraint. The test group also demonstrated a 14-point increase in effective IQ, and researchers observed a nearly 20% increase in creativity in one 14-student group.

In the coming academic year CGSC will begin a pilot program using narrative story science for experimental lessons. Further research into study results will establish the lessons' overall effectiveness for its first academic year. Results will be disseminated once discovered.

Current findings from the initial summer study already proliferated through Army University and beyond. Two explanatory videos currently sit on the CGSC YouTube channel (McConnell, 2023b; McConnell, 2023a -- links provided in references) two articles explaining this study in detail should be available between March and May 2023 (McConnell et al., 2023; McConnell & Benveniste, 2023).

Anyone who seeks creative improvement should explore Fletcher's Creativity Field Guide, a book offering 30 simple drills designed to improve creativity (Fletcher, 2021). These simple drills, each averaging 15-30 minutes, could be incorporated into sergeant's time or hip pocket training. The initial summer study clearly shows Soldiers who received narrative science training demonstrated improved creativity. All it takes is an open mind and a little effort. But why is creativity so important to mission accomplishment?

One need only look at the Ukrainian/Russian conflict to see creativity proved itself a combat multiplier. Apparently, a smaller more creative force can punch above its weight, replicating more combat power and



U.S. Army Paratroopers assigned to the 82nd Airborne Division take a design thinking class at the Airborne Innovation Lab on Fort Bragg, North Carolina, Dec. 6, 2022. The design thinking class was led by East Carolina University staff and was centered around the process of identifying a problem and brainstorming creative solutions. (U.S. Army Photo by Spc. Rognie Ortiz Vega)

capabilities than a larger less creative force. In the future, creativity will be a requirement.

Fortunately for the Army, NCOs are not only its backbone, they are among some of its most creative thinkers. How many times have NCOs got up in the morning only to realize they had to creatively solve problems they did not anticipate?

Army NCOs are already creative.

Narrative story science research and its effect on Soldier creativity is clear. Considering what we observed in Ukraine with a smaller, more creative force accomplishing great feats against Russia, if NCOs could make themselves and their Soldiers more creative, why would they choose not to?

Why be more creative?

Because creativity is the human brain's power to adapt to fast-changing, life-and-death environments, overcoming emergent challenges and leveraging emergent opportunities. It's what enabled the human species to thrive in evolution's chaotic and uncertain ecosystems through natural selection.

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If NCOs could provide their officers with more creative, innovative, novel and surprising solutions that could help them anticipate what is coming next and seize the initiative from the enemy, why shouldn't they? The study findings resulted in tools NCOs can pull off the shelf and use in the field to make that happen. ■

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Richard A. McConnell, (Doctor of Management in Organizational Leadership, D.M., University of Phoenix) is a retired Army Lt. Col. and an associate professor in the Department of Army Tactics, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. He recently served as the principal investigator for the summer 2022 creativity study dedicated to exploring ways to improve creativity among students. McConnell has also published several articles on wargaming, creativity, and ethics related topics.

Angus Fletcher, (PhD, Yale), is Professor of Story Science at Ohio State's Project Narrative. In 2023, he received the Army Commendation Medal for helping to develop new training enabling soldiers to see the future faster. He recently published a book, *Storythinking: The New Science of Narrative Intelligence* (Columbia University Press, 2023).



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