



Sgt. Daniel Chabot, an Advanced Leadership Course student, writes the important traits he and his classmates think leaders should have. Challenging learners to articulate and reflect helps them establish the skills needed for self-assessment, a critical step in self-development. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Thomas Alvarez)

Promoting Self-Development Through Unit Training

By Sgt. 1st Class Andrew R. Roland

Training with Industry – Guest Scientist, Los Alamos National Laboratory

Introduction

This article asserts self-development is the Army's most neglected learning domain. It aims to resolve this issue by demonstrating how leaders can exploit overlaps between the operational and self-development domains to encourage lifelong learning that prompts further self-development.

It briefly describes the Army Learning Concept (ALC) and Leadership Development Model (LDM) before

identifying points in operational training in which leaders can reasonably shift the onus of learning to developing Soldiers. This strategy, executed holistically, will arm learners with knowledge, skills, and behaviors to continue self-development.

Promoting Self-Development Through Unit Training

The Army is committed to embracing the latest advances in learning science and educational technology, preparing the next generation of warfighters for

competition and conflict. The ALC for Training and Education partially captures this learning environment's lines of effort (TRADOC Pam 525-8-2).

However, self-development, an essential domain in our learning concept, must be addressed in comprehensive training plans. This article provides a pathway for incorporating self-development activities into unit training to improve training and encourage continued self-development.

Army Learning and Leader Development

Army Learning Policy and Systems (TRADOC Regulation 350-70) identifies three Army learning training domains: institutional, operational, and self-development. While these may seem separate entities of the Army Learning Environment (ALE), DA Pam 350-58 wisely acknowledges that the boundaries separating them are less precise than commonly accepted (Department of the Army, 2013).

The ALE suggests that learning occurs through “a combination of **training, education, and experience**” through the three domains (TRADOC, 2017b).

While training and education approaches tie into the operational and institutional domains, self-development is mainly unregulated. Meaningful attempts to self-develop (e.g., “learning languages” and analyzing “tactics, techniques, and procedures of potential adversaries,” per ADP 6-22; Department of the Army, 2019) are often best supported by formal education products and not solely through experience.

While taxonomic attempts defining the intricacies, nuances, and overflows of such learning environments would take an entire paper to explore, it's essential to understand that Army learning occurs in complex

environments with overlapping approaches.

These domains give Soldiers ways to develop the attributes and competencies in the Leadership Requirements Model (LRM). Specifically, Soldiers can deliberately develop competencies, while attributes “encompass enduring personal characteristics, which are molded through experience over time” (Department of the Army, 2019).

While ADP 6-22 offers guidance on how Soldiers can leverage the self-development domain to prepare themselves, self-development's purpose is primarily to round out leader development from the operational and institutional domains. It fills gaps in more systematic learning and allows Soldiers to manufacture the meaningful experiences necessary for continuous development at times and in ways that are most important to them.

However, FM 6-22 points out the main issue with relying on self-development as a pillar of leader development: The Army isn't responsible for self-development activities (Department of the Army, 2022). Resulting self-development attempts, while well-intentioned, could be ineffective, counterproductive, or a waste of time.

In short, self-development grants additional opportunities to cultivate competencies and create interactions that mold personal attributes. Experiences in the self-development domain are unregulated by the Army but overlap with training in the operational domain. But why is the overlap significant, and how does recognizing its presence further our opportunities for leader development?

Problems in Self-Development

As noted, there's a consistent, almost programmatic, neglect of the self-development domain. Outside of Structured Self-Development (now more appropriately called Distributed Leader Courses), the responsibility for self-development is placed firmly on learners.

Regulatory guidance is somewhat contradictory, acknowledging the need for self-development plans to be supported by learners' leadership while simultaneously recognizing “prepares self” as individualistic acts. In either interpretation, this means an entire arm of the learning environment is altogether unregulated.

Standardization on how self-development should occur is feeble, and no method tracks whether self-development is happening. Unlike in the institutional and operational domains, where or with whom failure lies in this neglect is unclear. The concept of self-development is



54th Security Forces Assistance Brigade Soldiers use their operational experience to prepare a simulated casualty for medical evacuation during field operations at Fort Moore, Georgia. Soldiers can practice skills necessary for self-development in perceptively designed operational training events. (U.S. Army photo by Maj. William Carraway)

aligned with a worrisome “experiences may vary” admission; some leaders are talented at promoting self-development while others are not.

Consequently, it’s no surprise many developing Soldiers and NCOs rely on the structure inherent in the institutional and operational domains. In these domains, senior leaders program learning events throughout learners’ careers or quarterly in service of strategic-level aims. In such arrangements, learners only need to show up and receive instruction – a far easier task than identifying and executing self-developmental plans.

This argument takes for granted that the more accessible a task, order, or suggestion is, the more likely it’s to be executed, followed, or accepted. For example, people are far more likely to recycle when recycling bins are near trash cans. If they must search for separate receptacles, they will likely throw away their recyclables rather than recycle them.

By extension, developing leaders are much more likely to follow the structured development plans designed for them than to design plans themselves. While this is somewhat inconsistent with Army ideals, which emphasize doing what’s “right” over what’s “easy,” these ideals do not entirely override human nature.

We are ultimately driving toward shifts in individual behavior or, ideally, cultural overhaul. Despite deeply ingrained values, encouraging the spontaneous self-generation of development plans faces an uphill battle against habitual patterns, social and environmental factors, lack of knowledge or motivation, and delayed gratification/incentives.

It follows, then, that if self-development is difficult, there are more straightforward approaches to learning. If there’s little consequence for *not* self-developing, then learners will seek other avenues for learning and forego this domain altogether. Equally, it’s a fair conclusion that explicitly teaching the knowledge, skills, and behaviors necessary to self-develop will make a daunting challenge much more accessible to a broader array of developing leaders (in essence, moving the recycling bin next to the trash).

In the following sections, we explore “cognitive apprenticeship” as a model for distinguishing points in a typical training sequence where self-development skills and behaviors can be exercised and refined.

Adding Self-Development to the Operational Domain

The operational domain encompasses training activities at the Soldier’s unit, at Combat Training Centers, during large-scale exercises, and while deployed. *Training* is:



Command Sgt. Maj. Roderick Upton with the 300th Sustainment Brigade provides guidance to Sgt. Justin Suarez, who is attending the Basic Leadership Course at Camp Buehring, Kuwait, Feb. 12, 2019. Currently, no method tracks self-development, but leaders can mentor their Soldiers to pursue self-development outside of structured training or institutional curriculums. (U.S. Army Reserve photo by Capt. Jerry Duong)

“A learning event designed to develop, maintain, or improve the capability of individuals or units to perform specified tasks or skills. As viewed through the prism of ‘psychomotor, cognitive, and affective learning,’ training is largely defined through psychomotor learning and fosters mastery of established performance standards in the operational environment” (TRADOC, 2017a).

This discussion focuses on unit-level training, where leaders can most freely adjust content and approaches supporting objectives. While task lists are typically associated with mission sets and dictated above the unit level, commanders and their NCOs are primarily responsible for reaching proficiency in their specific context.

Unfortunately, simply adjusting the task lists to look more toward overall competency rather than individual skill execution would be a monumental deviation. Training would become even more time-intensive, the task list would expand toward infinity as training sought to capture competency in every possible scenario, and training proficiency ratings (T, P, U) would be more ambiguous.

Commanders need methodologies that supplement training without significantly extending schedules or requiring major organizational shifts in reporting.

Cognitive apprenticeship is one such methodology. It’s an instructional model based on Situated Cognition Theory, which, in turn, is a “brand” of dominant constructivist learning theories (create new understanding and knowledge through experience and

communication, integrating new information with what they already know).

It acknowledges complex learning environments, individualistic and social processes in constructing meaning, needs for authentic contexts and occasional support, and progression through increasingly complex tasks. By recognizing this model is a rough approximation of what's already happening in relationships between leaders and developing Soldiers, trainers can use it to clarify points where budding leaders assume learning responsibilities.

Modeling

While modeling typically involves an expert demonstrating “what right looks like,” here, leaders can assign initial research on tasks to learners. As a “pretest,” it's most useful for Skill Level 1 and 2 learners. It shortens the learning curve as Soldiers do not engage with the material for the first time during the planned period of instruction. They come armed with a basic understanding.

Leadership is tasked only with correcting misconceptions as opposed to starting from scratch. This approach also promotes independent research skills necessary for sustained self-development.

Coaching

Coaching (i.e., “try this”) can refer to subtly guiding learners toward a correct answers or desired behaviors, challenging them to look outside their comfort zone, or encouraging self-selection of topics.

While ADP 6-22 uses the term differently, leaders can use coaching to promote follow-on studies that interest learners or address gaps in understanding. In unit training, evaluators may request self-assessments of lanes before suggesting publications or case studies as part of critiques.

Listing deficiencies merely identifies what's wrong in a particular case. Learners discover what made *this* action right or wrong on *this* iteration, but that doesn't necessarily promote a definitive process for determining the correct action in *any* environment.

In self-development, developing leaders learn to diagnose gaps or personal interests and the positive consequences of pursuing knowledge outside of structured training or institutional curriculums.

Scaffolding

Scaffolding, at first look, doesn't readily translate to self-development. It's a technique where “more

knowledgeable others” provide the minimum required support for learners to navigate challenges outside their ability to accomplish alone.

In a unit-level context, this could occur using an established squad or team leader in a team member role for developing leaders. There's support, but the more knowledgeable others scale back until candidates can handle the challenge themselves.

Remember, though, while self-development may begin “with the motivated individual,” it's “supplemented by a concerted team effort” (Department of the Army, 2019). ADP 6-22 continues: “Part of that team effort is quality feedback ... to establish self-development goals and self-improvement courses of action.”

As a “scaffold,” leaders can encourage self-developmental behaviors by presenting challenges (indirectly setting goals) that are slightly out of reach for learners. Successfully attaining these goals enables learners to continually stretch for more demanding but rewarding outcomes.

Articulation and Reflection

We can examine articulation and reflection together because of their shared responsibility in promoting metacognition (the process of being aware of one's own thinking).

According to Seel (2002), articulation is the verbalization of thought processes, while reflection is the “evaluation of thought processes by comparing them with others.” Together, these parts of the cognitive apprenticeship model help encourage understanding one's thought processes (e.g., *Why did I engage instead*



54th Security Forces Assistance Brigade Soldiers confronted multiple challenges to test their problem-solving abilities during a 48-hour field training exercise in Fort Moore, Georgia. Explicit approach to training relies less on the leader's abilities to teach complex processes, resulting in Soldiers who can take lessons learned from multiple training iterations and synthesize solutions to new problems. (U.S. Army photo by Maj. William Carraway)

of calling for fire? Why did I choose line and not column? Why did I flank right and not left?).

This awareness is crucial in developing logical processes that account for a scenario's variables, not mindlessly executing a checklist that worked the last time.

Regarding self-development, challenging learners to articulate and reflect helps them establish the skills needed for honest self-assessment (another critical step of learning in the self-development domain).

While Project Athena may assist in this regard, developing leaders can only be expected to identify areas of weakness if they can unequivocally relay their internal thoughts.

Take a moment and attempt to self-assess the disparity between your ability to employ engaging communication techniques and the established ADP 6-22 standard *without* articulating your private thought process on what it means to communicate or reflecting on how it relates to guidance in official publications.

It's a futile task that serves as its own argument for promoting a deliberate practice of articulation and reflection behaviors. Developing leaders should practice conveying their internal processes early and often.

Exploration

Exploration is the ultimate operational domain outcome of including cognitive apprenticeships in unit-level training. Executed properly, the process results in Soldiers who can take lessons learned from multiple training iterations and synthesize solutions to new problems.

This more measured, explicit approach to training relies less on the leader's abilities to teach complex processes, shifting the load of knowledge construction to learners. Exploration is analogous to coaching or scaffolding in which leaders say, "Look at what you can do! Now try this more difficult thing."

Self-Development and Lifelong Learning

To recap, self-development is vital to the Army Learning Environment. However, it needs more structured products in institutional and operational domains. So, the experience of an entire domain could be more consistent across the Army.

Luckily, the self-development domain overlaps with the operational domain in such ways that, using cognitive apprenticeship as a model, there are multiple points where self-development can occur without



Staff Sgt. Kevin Rhodd, an Observer Coach/Trainer, 188th Infantry Brigade, discusses zero qualification techniques and breathing tactics during an M4-rifle range. Leaders can use coaching to promote follow-on studies that interest learners or address gaps in understanding. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Darryl Briggs)

significantly altering existing training.

The key is making opportunities for these learning activities explicit so leaders have templates for encouraging self-development in their formations, ensuring Soldiers have the same opportunities to grow.

Additionally, Soldiers like to win, and if, at this point, it needs to be clarified how using unit training to encourage self-development would benefit the Soldier, one need only compare the performance of young leaders who are self-developing to those who are not.

By acknowledging those who commit to guided self-development in the operational domain, leaders have an easily identifiable metric to help separate dedicated talent from less motivated individuals. In this sense, self-development is encouraged as much as a means to succeed and not be left behind.

Furthermore, this argument is consistent with the Army's goals to embed a career-long learning culture (TRADOC, 2017b). By increasing the amount of guided and personal self-development in the operational domain, developing leaders will become familiar and comfortable with seeking resources and solutions alone.

This situation supports meta-learning in the operational environment, where developing leaders learn how to learn and focus on specific tasks. In such circumstances, agile and adaptive leaders are born. Preparing for every scenario is impossible, but cultivating the skills to gather and process information to support unique solutions to emerging threats is entirely within our grasp.

On top of promoting equity in personal development and encouraging lifelong learning, cognitive apprenticeships increase overall training quality even

in situations where they fail to impart continuing behavioral shifts toward self-development. Research shows cognitive apprenticeships:

1. Encourage authentic activity and assessment
2. Motivate and engage learners
3. Encourage more significant levels of knowledge retention and transfer
4. Facilitate higher-order reasoning (Orey, 2010)

Such positive impacts make a strong case for including cognitive apprenticeships in the operational domain, regardless of how well they promote long-term self-development behaviors.

Conclusion

The self-development and operational learning domains overlap, and Soldiers can practice skills necessary for self-development in perceptively designed operational training events.

Furthermore, the comprehensive learning environment must address the self-development domain. (The institutional and operational domains receive disproportionate attention from leadership and learners.)

Self-development experiences vary greatly across Army formations, meaning chance guides a full pillar of leader development. Unit commanders can incorporate constructivist approaches, like cognitive apprenticeship, into their unit training plan.

These approaches will serve double duty, increasing the quality of planned training while sharpening skills necessary for continued self-development. In short, they promote lifelong learning.

Finally, by introducing skills necessary for self-development in a structured format and explicitly drawing a connection to positive outcomes in training, leaders provide both the tools *and* incentive for practicing self-development in the future. ■

References

- Department of the Army. (2013). *DA Pamphlet 350-58: Army leader development program*. https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/pdf/web/p350_58.pdf
- Department of the Army. (2019). *ADP 6-22: Army leadership and the profession*. https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/ARN18529-ADP_6-22-000-WEB-1.pdf
- Department of the Army. (2022). *FM 6-22: Developing leaders*. https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/ARN36735-FM_6-22-000-WEB-1.pdf
- Orey, M. (2010). *Emerging perspectives on learning, teaching, and technology*. CreateSpace Independent.
- Seel, N., Al-Diban, S. & Blumschein, P. (2002). Mental models & instructional planning. In J.M. Spector & T.M. Anderson (Eds.), *Integrated and holistic perspectives on learning, instruction, and technology* (pp.129-158). Springer.
- TRADOC. (2017a). *TRADOC Regulation 350-70: Army learning policy and systems*. <https://adminpubs.tradoc.army.mil/regulations/TR350-70.pdf>
- TRADOC. (2017b). *TRADOC Pamphlet 525-8-2: The U.S. Army learning concept for training and education*. <https://adminpubs.tradoc.army.mil/pamphlets/TP525-8-2.pdf>
- TRADOC. (2019). *TRADOC Pamphlet 350-70-1: Training development in support of the operational training domain*. <https://adminpubs.tradoc.army.mil/pamphlets/TP350-70-1.pdf>

Sgt. 1st Class Andrew Roland is an explosive ordnance disposal technician at Los Alamos National Laboratory in the Army's Training with Industry Program. As a former small group leader at the Logistics Noncommissioned Officer Academy (LNCOA), Roland discovered a passion for creating rewarding learning environments. He holds a master of education with a concentration in learning design and technologies from the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College at Arizona State University. He is pursuing a doctor of philosophy in educational leadership policy from the College of Education at Texas Tech University. His current research focuses on value-added modeling for the Educational Policy Evaluation and Analysis Research Lab (EPEARL).



<https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/NCO-Journal/>
<https://www.facebook.com/NCOJournal>
<https://twitter.com/NCOJournal>

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the NCO Journal, the U.S. Army, or the Department of Defense.

