

Building Adaptive Leaders: The Army Can Adapt Its Institution (Pt. 1)

Donald E. Vandergriff

Warfare has evolved to the point that the central idea is that small unit leaders in direct contact with the enemy can see and react to situational changes much faster than could the more senior leaders in the rear. This occurs despite the advent of information technology. This technology laid over an Industrial age hierarchal force structure confined with leaders developed through an industrial age personnel system can make it tempting for leaders to micromanage. Thus, the decision cycle slows down. But, warfare now demands something different. Small unit leaders who were once only concerned with choosing which battle drill now make decisions which have strategic implications. The question arises, how can we evolve the current way of developing leaders and Soldiers (Marines as well) that prepares them earlier to be complex problem solvers?

The Army acknowledges the need for change. The Army has begun an evolution in the way we develop—train, educate, assess, promote and select—leaders, specifically how do we evolve adaptability. It is now implementing two training and leadership development models. In part I, I will discuss the Adaptive Leader Methodology (ALM) as an approach to develop adaptability and decision making skills. In part II, I will discuss Outcomes Based Training & Education (OBT&E). One may view ALM as a way to teach in an OBT&E environment (*SWJ* has provided a link to the excerpt from “Chapter 6 Training (and educating) Tomorrow’s Leaders and Soldiers,” from a book, *Manning the Legions of the United States: Finding and Developing Tomorrow’s Centurions* (Praeger, October 2008) I recently wrote that describes both in the context of today’s environment).

In the past, the “Competency theory” of learning dominated course curriculums, and there remain signs of it continuing today in leader development. A good example of competency theory is “Leave no child behind.” It prescribes what to think and not how to think—“teaching the test.” Order and control are central to Programs of Instruction (POIs) that use the “Competency theory” as its foundation. They also produce faster results, which are desired by a bureaucratic and linear culture that focuses on the “means” rather than the “outcomes” in order to produce quick results.

Leader development for Asymmetric war must be based on quality, not quantity, at every grade level. The rule should be, “Better no officer [leader] than a bad officer [leader].”¹ Schools must constantly put students in difficult, unexpected situations, and then require them to decide and act under time pressure. Schooling must take students out of their “comfort zones.” Stress—mental and moral as well as physical—must be constant. War

games, tactical decision games, map exercises, and free-play field exercises must constitute bulk of the curriculum. Drill and ceremonies and adhering to “task, condition and standards” (task proficiency) in name of process are not important. Higher command levels overseeing officers’ and NCOs’ schools must look for courses adhering to a few principles, while allowing instructors to evolve their lesson plans using innovative teaching techniques and tools to an ever changing environment. Those leaders who successfully pass through the schools must continue to be developed by their commanders; learning cannot stop at the schoolhouse door.

Current research—the work of Dr Gary Klein— tells us the most frequent type of decision making for leaders in a time critical environment is recognitional which requires a large amount of experience.ⁱⁱ Research also tells us that competence in decision making is solidified by making a large number of decisions in a stressed environment (Vandergriff 2006).ⁱⁱⁱ Dr. Robert Bjork, Dean of the School of Psychology at the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) tells us that the way we thought we learned is wrong through his presentation “How We Learn Versus How We Think We Learn: Implications for the Organization of Army Training.” Dr. Bjork emphasized that currently,

As instructors, we can often be misled in this determination because what is readily available to us is the performance of our students during instruction, which can be a poor indicator of how much durable learning is actually occurring. If, for example, all we consider is the rapidity and apparent ease of learning during training and instruction, we can easily be led into preferring poorer conditions of learning to better conditions of learning. Additionally, as learners, it seems that we do not develop--through the everyday trials of living and learning—an accurate mental model, so to speak, of those operations that result in learning and those that do not. And, furthermore, we are fooled by certain indices—such as how fluently we process information during the re-reading of to-be-learned material—into illusions of learning and/or competence that then leads us to prefer poorer conditions of learning to better conditions of learning.^{iv}

Leaders must understand that deciding when and how to close with an enemy may be the least important decision they make on an asymmetric battlefield. Instead, actions that builds and nurture positive relationships with a community, local leaders and children may be the defining factors for success, as well as the primary tools that contain an insurgency, build a nation, or stop genocide. True tactical prowess often entails co-opting the local population’s will while shattering the cohesion of Asymmetric adversaries. The Army, and for that matter the other services, with exceptions have focused on the Competency model which produces leaders that are good at “what to think,” but as Dr. Bjork stresses,

When instruction occurs under conditions that are constant and predictable, learning appears to get what we might call contextualized. It looks very good in that context, but doesn’t support retention later when tested in other contexts and the learning acquired in the original context does not transfer well to different contexts. In contrast, varying conditions of practice, even just the place where you study, for example, can enhance recall on a later test. *Might mention that*

these findings fly in the face of the usual advice given to students that they should find a quiet convenient place to study and then do all their studying in that place.

If when trying to learn several things, you intertwine the learning of those things in such a way as to cause interference among them during learning, long-term performance on them will be enhanced. This is the one desired difficulty that I am going to illustrate with experimental results, so will say more about it later. Massing (such as cramming for exams) supports short-term performance; whereas spacing (distributing presentations, study attempts, training trials, etc.) supports long-term retention.^v

Parallel to this research Army Capability Integration Center Forward (TRADOC) developed the Adaptive Leader Methodology (ALM) based on the cadre's work at Georgetown University Army ROTC.^{vi} ALM is a cultural change rather than a specific set list of exercises. ALM develops adaptability through the Rapid Decision Making (RDM) process using the experiential learning model through scenario based learning. ALM is a system that promotes self-actualized learning via weakly structured situational problems. Additionally, ALM parallels the latest findings of the academic world in leader and cognitive development. The ALM program of instruction (POI) employs techniques that are "desirable difficulties" as pointed out by Dr. Robert Bjork in his keynote presentation at the TRADOC hosted "Science of Learning Workshop" August 1, 2006. ALM espouses institutionalized inductive reasoning in order to prepare leaders for the complex wars of the future.

To date the Basic Officer Leader Course (BOLC) II courses at Fort Sill, OK and Fort Benning, GA have been using ALM for the past 18 months. The last year has intensified the demand for information on ALM as well as the workshop "Deciding Under Pressure and Fast" that teaches ALM. Since January 2008 trips to brief ALM and conduct the workshop have been to San Diego, CA (Joint Conference on Military Ethics), Fort Huachuca, AZ; Fort Benning, GA; Fort Monroe, VA; Fort Knox, KY and the United States Military Academy (USMA) at West Point, NY.

ALM has become institutionalized as Lieutenant General Benjamin C. Freakley, Commander U.S. Army Accessions Command, signed a policy letter, dated 24 April 2008 titled "Basic officer Leader Course (BOLC) Policy and Guidance," mandating ALM certification for BOLC instructors. The Asymmetric Warfare Group (AWG) has also used ALM in its incentives, and it hosted its first Adaptability Conference 3-4 June 2008 with Day 1 focusing on ALM's workshop while day 2 focused on Outcome Based Training & Education (OBT&E). And finally, the Army Chief of Staff, General George Casey handed out the above mentioned "Chapter 6" at the 2-star general officer conference in July to read and provide feedback, spreading the concepts throughout the Army.

What is Next? With ALM being institutionalized by Accession's Command, and now being used by BOLC II, the Department of Military Instruction (DMI) and Behavioral

Science and Leadership (BS&L) courses at USMA, as well the beginning of implementation by several BOLC III (officer basic courses) and Captains Career courses, requests for the ALM workshop “Deciding Under Pressure and Fast” have increased. DMI at USMA conducted a certification of all new instructors in early August 2008, followed by other workshops and lectures at Fort Benning, GA; Fort Huachuca, AZ; and, recently in early December 2008, Fort Sill, OK, Fires Center of Excellence hosted a week of workshops on “how to” with ALM and OBT&E. The Army is now implementing both models challenging the old saying that you can “teach old dogs new tricks.”

Major Donald E. Vandergriff, US Army (Ret.) is a teacher, writer and lecturer who specializes in leadership education and training. His book, [Raising the Bar: Creating and Nurturing Adaptability to Deal with the Changing Face of War](#) has been adopted by West Point's Department of Military Science as the model for teaching problem solving. Major Vandergriff visited West Point several times in the spring and summer of 2008 to assist the Department in how to implement his Adaptive Leader Methodology.

ⁱ This comes from the German approach to officer accessions, derived from my work with Dr. Bruce I Gudmundsson and William S. Lind on officer and NCO education. I don't have the original citation from the Germans.

ⁱⁱ Dr. Gary Klein, *Sources of Power: How People Make Decisions* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 1999 ISBN 0262611465

ⁱⁱⁱ Donald E. Vandergriff *Raising the Bar: Creating and Nurturing Adaptability to Deal with the Changing Face of War*, Washington, D.C.: Center for Defense Information, 2006. ALM is referenced in Chapter 3 as Adaptive Course Model (ACM), and was changed by Army Capabilities Integration Center Forward to ALM.

^{iv} Dr. Robert Bjork, “How We Learn Versus How We Think We Learn: Implications for the Organization of Army Training,” unpublished briefing presented at Science of Learning Workshop, (Los Angeles, CA: UCLA, 1 August 2006), p. 2.

^v Bjork, “How We Learn,” p. 5.

^{vi} The original study, *Raising the Bar*, based on our work at Georgetown ROTC and read by General Kevin Byrnes, TRADOC Commander 2003-2005, can be found at <http://www.d-n-i.net/vandergriff/rotc/rotc.htm>.

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