

No "Approved Solutions" in Asymmetric Warfare:

Nurturing Adaptive Leaders in an Outcomes-Based Training Environment

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GENERAL PATTON'S WARNING

As he advocated the concept of mobile warfare in the 1920s, General George S. Patton, Jr. complained that many officers were "seeking too hard for an approved solution that will avoid the odious task of thinking."¹ Instead, he urged Army leaders to "[l]et your best thought and keenest ingenuity based on principles and untrammelled by all the labored memory of past tactical details be bent to the employment of the instruments of combat . . . in the best way most suitable to kill the enemy."²

In the asymmetrical warfare of today, there likewise are no "approved solutions," so what is the best way for commanders to prepare their units to succeed in that environment and develop leaders who can master the chaos of modern combat? The answer may just lie with a new approach to training and individual development known as Outcomes-Based Training and Education (OBT&E), best described as "developmental training" or the development of the individual within the training of a military task. It nurtures adaptability, initiative, and self-confidence by focusing on achieving a desired outcome rather than perfecting the execution of a prescribed method, technique or procedure. Exactly how the desired end-state is achieved is irrelevant, as long as the "solution" is appropriate to the situation.

Today at West Point, the outcomes-based approach is being implemented during the planning and execution of Cadet Field Training and in the classroom with our Military Science curriculum. This is just one aspect of DMI's efforts to implement the principles of OBT&E, but it provides a clear illustration of how the Academy is adapting to the contemporary operating environment and better preparing our graduates to fight, lead and win on our current battlefields.

outcomes-based approach to training, ALM focuses on the fundamental principles (the "why") and encourages experimentation and innovation. Aspiring leaders are allowed to try, and sometimes fail, as they struggle to solve increasingly complex tactical problems. Each individual is tested through a crucible of decision-making exercises and communication drills that require the cadets to brief and then defend their decisions against focused criticism from their peers and instructors.

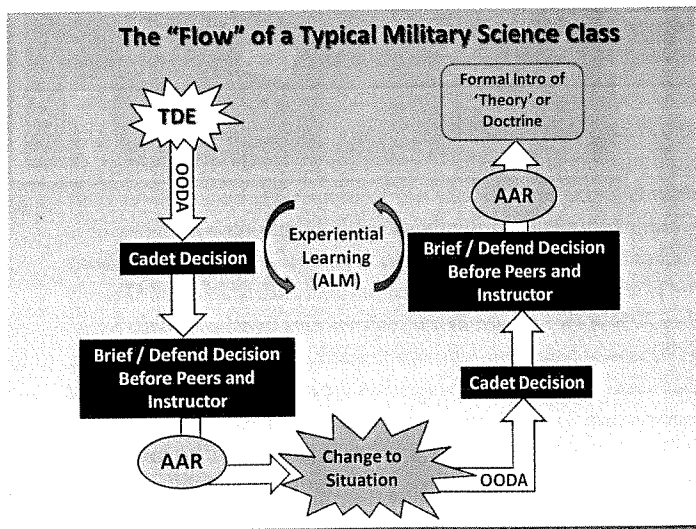
Above all, ALM nurtures effective decision-making and adaptability through experiential learning. Experimentation first comes through the execution of Tactical Decision-Making Exercises (TDEs). After receiving the scenario, cadets are given a very short amount of time (sometimes as little as 30 seconds) to make a decision or to formulate a plan. The cadets then must brief their decisions, plans or orders, explaining their reasoning to the class. This leads into a free discussion requiring the cadet briefer to respond to the criticism of his or her peers and instructor. Following this discussion, the instructor facilitates an intense after-action review (AAR). The "teaching" is accomplished through these AARs as the students discover for themselves the concepts and principles involved. Only after this has occurred is the "theory" or doctrine formally introduced by the instructor. The students generally find themselves saying something like: "Wow! That is what you call it!" There are no preparatory reading assignments or lectures prior to the execution of the TDE. Instead, these readings come afterward, allowing the cadets to more effectively absorb the information within the context established during their experimentation in the classroom (see Figure 1).⁴

Each TDE consists of a scenario summary (that the instructor can issue in written form or verbally) and a map with graphics. With limited time and information, the cadets make their decisions and complete their plans. Under stress, they discover for themselves that delaying decisions until one has "perfect intelligence" is both unrealistic and ineffective. Various types of combat and combat support units and weapon systems are included. As in combat, ever-changing situations are the norm as instructors issue fragmentary orders (FRAGOs) that require the students to make new decisions. In this way, the TDEs nurture adaptability and flexibility as chaos becomes commonplace.

THE BOYD CYCLE: AN AREA OF EMPHASIS

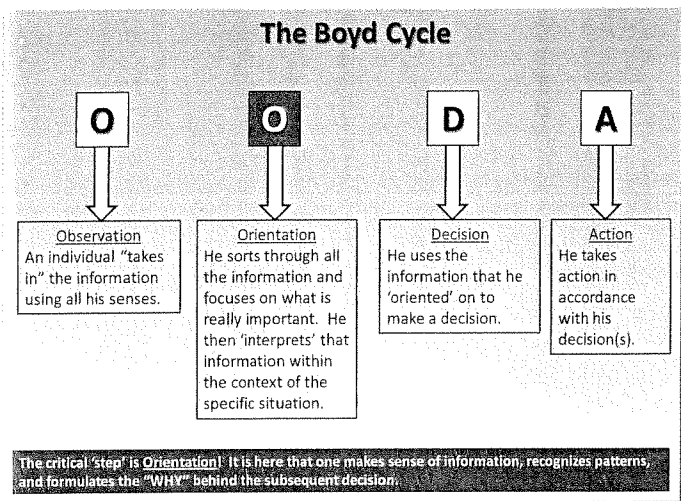
A specific area of emphasis for instructors is how cadets use the information at their disposal. Can they distinguish between information that is pertinent and that which is insignificant? Can they do so quickly? Do they understand why that information is important and how they should use it? This is the essence of the Boyd Cycle, a four-step theory of decision making first articulated by COL John R. Boyd following his study of fighter pilots in combat during the Korean War. Commonly known as "OODA" (observation, orientation, decision, action), the Boyd Cycle provides a framework for the assessment of cadets throughout the course. We focus on the critical step of "orientation", because this is when the cadet attempts to make sense out of the information at hand. The decision is important, but how the cadet arrived at it is just as important (see Figure 2).

This approach to teaching often inspires anxiety in those who have grown comfortable with past methods of instruction. The most



THE ADAPTIVE LEADER METHODOLOGY (ALM)

It is easy to proclaim the need to build adaptive leaders, but it is more difficult to determine how to accomplish it. The Adaptive Leader Methodology (ALM), however, offers a "how to" guide for leader development and instruction within an OBT&E environment.³ This methodology emphasizes nurturing effective decision-making and adaptability through experiential learning. In keeping with the



common complaint is that "we should teach the basics first!" After all, the critics argue, how can we teach a cadet how to plan an ambush before we teach them the task organization of the infantry squad? What they fail to understand is that students learn much more effectively by experimenting and making mistakes than by having the "answers" spoon fed to them beforehand. With ALM, students learn through immersion. By executing a TDE that requires them to employ an air assault infantry platoon to conduct an ambush, cadets learn not only the principles behind planning an ambush, but they also learn about the assets at their disposal.⁵ Without a single PowerPoint slide or lecture, they learn several complex tactical concepts simultaneously.

**ACCEPTING AMBIGUITY:
THE CHALLENGE OF EVALUATING PERFORMANCE**

Developing an effective evaluation and assessment plan is often the most difficult aspect of course design because of the tendency to seek easily quantifiable methods of grading. In an environment like West Point, where much depends on a cadet's academic standing, there is often a desire to eliminate [the] subjective in favor of a rigid, mathematical grading rubric. But how can one quantify the intangibles of leadership and adaptability? How can you assign a number to creativity and initiative? One thing is certain: fill-in-the-blank and multiple choice tests are woefully inadequate for measuring effectiveness. Since the ability to memorize information is not a good indicator of one's decision-making skills, there is no reason to use this criterion. Instead, examinations must focus on things that are much more difficult to quantify, placing a great deal of the responsibility on the individual instructor.

Regardless of the technique or format of the assessment, the tactical scenario also must allow for multiple "correct" ways to solve the problem. For the assessment to be truly effective, the cadets must actually make a decision on their own and formulate a plan rather than apply a pre-determined "template." If tests fail to allow for creativity, the cadets become focused on identifying the "approved solution" rather than on thinking for themselves. To permit freedom of thought, scenarios used must include a significant amount of ambiguity in the way information can be interpreted. Of course, this does not preclude "wrong" answers. Violations of the Commander's Intent, unethical conduct, poor communication, or an unrealistic course of action all constitute a failure. Additionally, failure to make a decision (the worst of all possibilities) also means a failing grade. These "automatic failure criteria" are absolutely essential in communicating to the cadets that they cannot achieve success by employing a template or checklist.

The intentional ambiguity in the scenarios necessitates other efforts to ensure consistency in grading without imposing an overly-restrictive grading rubric that would eliminate judgment calls by the instructors. To effectively "calibrate," all instructors participate in a free exchange of ideas regarding the key concepts of the test. Prior to administering the exam, instructors take the test and participate in an open discussion regarding the content and how to approach grading. The Course Director compiles the applicable notes into a short set of grading guidelines. Because these guidelines are the product of a collective effort, they keep grading consistent.

CONCLUSION: THIS APPROACH WORKS!

One of the essential principles of OBT&E is to treat the trainee like a mature, thinking adult responsible for his or her own actions. This encourages them to take ownership of their development and training. Not surprisingly, cadets (and soldiers, too) tend to respond according to how they are treated. If the expectation is that they cannot be trusted to do anything without micro-management, then they will act like children. If, however, the expectation is that they must think on their own and take ownership of their training, they generally will conduct themselves responsibly.

DMI has applied this principle in the Military Science curriculum over the past academic year and inspired a surge in enthusiasm from the cadets. What they seem to enjoy most is that, rather than being asked to memorize lists of information, they are required to think creatively under pressure. Their comments were almost uniformly positive:

"The previous MS classes seemed to be merely checking the box . . . I didn't like that approach very much. I enjoy the way we did it this semester because it was really my plan or decision that failed or succeeded."

"MS classes in the past have been monotonous and boring. This semester's class required us to take an interest, make a call, and put ourselves in the shoes of a real PL."

"I think the class discussions were the best part of the course. We went over alternate solutions for TDEs, and we had to defend ourselves against criticism. This made me more confident in myself, but it also showed me other perspectives and made me work on dealing with criticism."⁶

Putting ALM into practice in our Military Science courses took a lot of time and work on the part of many officers and NCOs. It was (and continues to be) a collective effort executed within the framework of an outcomes-based developmental environment. Even though improvements always can be made, it is clear that this past academic year has been a success. The cadets and instructors have enjoyed the experience, and the level of performance in the classroom has improved. The results speak for themselves: ALM is an effective tool for teaching in OBT&E, and it is here to stay at West Point.

(ENDNOTES)

¹Blumenson, Martin, *The Patton Papers* Vol. 1: 1885-1940 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1972), 792.

²Ibid., 793.

³The Adaptive Leader Methodology (ALM) is the product of MAJ (Ret.) Don Vandergriff, an influential thinker in the area of leader development. He is currently a contractor in support of Army Capabilities Integration Center Forward (ARCIC Forward).

⁴Vandergriff, Donald E. *Raising the Bar: Creating and Nurturing Adaptability to Deal with the Changing Face of War* (Washington, DC: CDI Press, 2006) pg 77-111.

⁵ALM is being implemented in our MS100 and MS200 courses as well.

⁶These comments were taken from the anonymous end-of-course survey in December 2008.