



NCOES Course Redesign at the Soldier Support Institute

The Soldier Support Institute used the Army Learning Model to redesign its Noncommissioned Officer (NCO) Academy courses and improve the quality of education provided to adjutant general, financial management, recruiting and retention, and chaplain assistant NCOs.

■ By L.Z. Harrison Jr.

Soon after taking command of the Soldier Support Institute (SSI) in March 2012, Brig. Gen. David MacEwen set his top priority as redesigning the SSI Noncommissioned Officer Academy (NCOA) curriculum. During his initial assessment, he concluded that a large part of the NCOA's curriculum was neither operationally relevant nor sequential and progressive in teaching new concepts, doctrine, organizations, and material.

His priority was to redesign the courses to provide a curriculum that integrates and enhances operational knowledge in the adjutant general (AG), financial management, recruiting and retention, and chaplain assistant career fields. He charged SSI leaders and course developers to integrate skills, techniques, and procedures into courses that are instructed by a well-disciplined, adaptive, highly

skilled, confident, and operationally relevant team.

The objective was to have an NCOA instructional team that provides the Army with adaptive leaders who are confident and prepared to perform their training and wartime missions whenever needed in any strategic, operational, or tactical environment. MacEwen's focus was on redesigning curriculum, but his intent was so much more than that.

In his words, "If we don't train the young Soldier coming out of advanced individual training right, the NCOs will fix it. If we don't train the young officer coming out of [the] Basic Officer Leader Course or the Captains Career Course, the NCOs will fix it. However, if we don't train the NCO right, there is no one in the field to fix it; we must get it right."

Army Learning Model 2015

MacEwen's assessment of the state of the curriculum and the subsequent findings by a curriculum redesign team were directly in tune with what Training and Doctrine Command Pamphlet (TRADOC Pam) 525-8-2, The U.S. Army Learning Concept for 2015, describes as the outdated baseline model of instruction prevalent in Army institutional schools. The challenge of meeting operational adaptability gained through a decade of conflict compelled the Army and SSI to re-examine the learning model used to develop and deliver training at the NCOA.

The curriculum redesign team found several issues with the curriculum, including the following:

- Courses were not progressive and sequential.
- A cycle of learning, testing, and forgetting material was prevalent within the courses, which resulted in an unhealthy focus on tests.
- A knowledge-based versus performance-based curriculum, including a lack of real-world assessments.
- Outdated instructional methods, such as lecture-based instruction.



Students conduct a small group collaboration during the Senior Leaders Course pilot at the Soldier Support Institute Noncommissioned Officer Academy.

Conversely, the Army Learning Model (ALM) 2015 calls for continuous learning that promotes adaptive qualities in Soldiers by improving the relevance and effectiveness of face-to-face learning experiences through outcome-oriented instructional strategies that foster thinking and initiative and provide an operationally relevant context. ALM 2015 calls for the following:

- Educational learning outcomes that are linked to 21st century Soldier competencies (figure 1) that will begin to be instilled during initial military training and then reinforced at levels of increasing depth and complexity throughout the Soldier's career.
- A learner-centric learning environment (figure 2) with instructional strategies, expert facilitators, and technologies that support the learner.
- A career-span framework that provides the operating force with a standardized set of foundational competencies tailored to suit operational and position needs.
- An adaptive development and delivery infrastructure that provides a supportive learning infrastructure.

- Adaptability and responsiveness to operational changes and evolving trends in learning technologies and methods.

The Challenge

According to TRADOC Pam 525-8-2, the Army's competitive advantage directly relates to its capacity to learn faster and adapt more quickly than its adversaries. The current pace of technological change increases the Army's challenge to maintain an edge over potential adversaries. MacEwen challenged the curriculum redesign team to quickly conduct analysis, design, and development to adapt the new courses with ALM 2015 characteristics.

The challenge was to completely rebuild the courses using the latest principles, techniques, and procedures to ensure that NCO education system (NCOES) training at the SSI NCOA was keeping it "REAL" (relevant, engaging, adaptive, and learner-centric). REAL training is relevant through a continuous, adaptive learning model that provides engaging adult-learning, experiential learning opportunities that create adaptive leaders who possess 21st century Soldier competencies in a

learner-centric, context-based, facilitated problem-solving environment.

Redesign of Course Outcomes and Objectives

The redesign effort was initially focused on the Advanced Leaders Course (ALC) and Senior Leaders Course (SLC) for military occupational specialty (MOS) 42A (human resources [HR] specialist). Based on the Army's personnel services delivery redesign, the educational outcomes of the MOS 42A courses needed to be refocused to align with the 21st century Soldier competencies.

One course redesign goal was to ensure that the courses were progressive, sequential, and no longer repetitive in nature. The ALC now focuses on producing graduates who effectively deliver HR support at the battalion and brigade S-1 levels. SLC now focuses on producing graduates who effectively plan for and execute HR support for brigade and higher level organizations, including theater-level HR organizations.

The expected outcome of both courses is to have HR leaders who are doctrinally sound and technically capable critical and creative thinkers. The level of expectations varies between ALC and SLC because of the increased experience and responsibility levels expected of our senior NCOs.

As part of the redesign process, SSI conducted a job analysis in accordance with TRADOC Regulation 350-70, Army Learning Policy and Systems. The Adjutant General School commandant held a critical task site selection board to select critical tasks that linked directly to 21st century Soldier competencies and supported the desired educational outcomes of the courses.

MOS 42A AG leaders used the results of an Armywide survey to select critical tasks and then provided the AG School commandant with recommendations on how the tasks should be trained (institution, organization, or self-development). The board members also reviewed each task to provide the conditions,

Character and accountability
Comprehensive fitness
Adaptability and initiative
Lifelong learner (includes digital literacy)
Teamwork and collaboration
Communication and engagement (oral, written, negotiation)
Critical-thinking and problem-solving skills
Cultural and joint, interagency, intergovernmental, and multinational competence
Tactical and technical competence (full-spectrum capable)

Figure 1. 21st century Soldier competencies.

standards, and expected performance steps. This process was nested in the redesign effort to help ensure current and relevant training.

Current, Relevant, and Doctrinally Based

Following the guidelines in TRA-DOC Pam 525-8-2, the new courses are outcome-based, experiential learning courses that apply the characteristics of a learner-centric learning environment. The small-group experiential learning format capitalizes on the students' experiences and reinforces professional development through context-based, facilitated problem-solving exercises. These exercises are designed to be rigorous, relevant, and authentic assessments to ensure learning is applicable to the students' jobs.

Training developers and subject matter experts updated both courses to make them current and relevant, using technology and the latest in adult learning methods, techniques, and procedures. The courses blend classroom- and technology-based learning opportunities. This blended learning takes advantage of technology by using digital media to provide videos, scenarios, and interactive multimedia.

Students prepare for classes by using mobile technology. Mobile applications, or apps, can be downloaded to a smart device, or students can use their home computers to have immediate access to the course material, in-

cluding advance sheets, learning material, references, pre-assessments, and course attendance requirements.

The new doctrine-based courses are taught in modules based on the four HR core competencies and 13 key functions of HR support defined in Field Manual 1-0, Human Resources. Each module has pre- and post-assessments and integrates HR enabling systems using hands-on HR training simulators.

The modules are made up of critical task instruction using experiential learning and include both preclass assignments (reading, researching, studying), in-class assignments (small group, individual, and peer-based learning), and homework requirements (writing and web-based training assignments). Assignments reinforce the lessons and are critical to discussion and problem-solving within the classroom.

In both courses, training leads to a live and virtual culminating training event (CTE), that includes both an HR staff exercise and a field training exercise in which students apply and demonstrate what they have learned. The ALC CTE focuses on the HR considerations in the seven phases of the Deployment Cycle Support Program. The SLC CTE focuses on using the military decisionmaking process to conduct HR planning and operations.

Change for Students, Instructors, and Classrooms

Throughout the courses, students demonstrate the 21st century Soldier competencies by using reflective, critical, and creative thinking skills to complete course requirements, including written and oral communication assignments, practical exercises, small group work, facilitated discussions, and homework. No longer will a student be able to just show up and pass. The courses require the full engagement of the student from start to finish.

The course changes affect not only the students. Instructors are no longer simply on the platform delivering information; they are now facilitators

Context-based, facilitated, problem-solving exercises
Blended learning
Regional learning centers
Adaptive learning, intelligent tutors
Mobile learning, distance learning modules
Rigorous and relevant assessments and evaluations
Self-structured learning
Peer-based learning (digital social networks)
Performance support applications (apps)
Soldier-created content
Virtual learning environments
Single portal to digital learning resources

Figure 2. Some characteristics of a learner-centric 2015 learning environment.

who guide the small groups through the experiential learning process. They must challenge the students to share their experiences and focus on the context of learning while covering the objectives of the course, to include applying those objectives during the CTE.

The classroom configuration is redesigned as well. Instead of the traditional lecture hall or old horseshoe format, the classrooms are configured into several four-person pods. This format requires the instructor to act as a facilitator and encourages a learner-centric environment. The classroom becomes a learning laboratory where students are not afraid to provide their points of view or to discuss topics related to their profession.

Gone are the days of using rote memorization skills to learn the material, test on the material, and then dump the material. The focus is no longer on meeting a grade point average in order to simply graduate. Instead, students must embrace the new learning model and instructors must encourage students to think and understand the relevance and context of the material being taught and discussed. Under this approach, students actively learn and then take that knowledge back to home stations

to improve HR support within operational units.

In the pilot courses, students recognized the importance of this new training concept. These students firmly embraced the new courses and provided great feedback to the leaders to ensure that the courses met the expected learner-centric environment described in ALM 2015.

SSI's leaders, Soldiers, and civilian staff pulled together and redesigned AG NCOES courses before SSI's change of command in early March 2013. The team's success was the result of excellent teamwork, dedication, and a desire to do what is right in training the backbone of the AG Corps. The AG Corps will benefit from developing adaptable leaders who keep pace with the Army's operational adaptability requirements and are able to lead HR support organizations across unified land operations.

For its redesign of the MOS 42A ALC and SLC, SSI was selected as the government (military) recipient of the 2013 Pike's Peak Performance Award, which recognizes organizations that have transformed their training by implementing participant-centered, results-based techniques that have resulted in increased understanding, retention, application, and transfer of training content.

SSI continues to integrate ALM into the financial management, recruiting and retention, and chaplain assistant NCO courses so that all SSI NCOA courses will include adult, learner-centric learning as the primary method of instruction.

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What students are saying:

“The participation within the class was outstanding. Even though we worked long hours, at the end of the day we still wanted more.”

“The practical exercises have been challenging. These are the type of situational exercises we need in order to become critical thinkers and good NCOICs [noncommissioned officers-in-charge] in the field environment.”

“This is the best course ever. Leaders across the Army are given the opportunity to voice their opinions and strategies that can assist other leaders.”

“Classes are not death by PowerPoint slides.”
