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Army Learning Concept 2015:

These are not the droids you are looking for ¹

by Michael C. Sevcik

In the profession of arms, the scientific and technical approach is appropriate for learning basic and repetitive skills. Technical and mostly unimportant problems lend themselves to this scientific approach to learning found in the recently released Army Learning Concept 2015 (ALC 2015).² Unfortunately, our Soldiers rarely operate in the high ground where the scientific and technical approach is appropriate. Our Soldiers conduct full spectrum operations, face uncertainty, ethical dilemmas and ill structured problems both in garrison and during combat operations. A meaningful and relevant learning strategy should descend into the challenging and messy environment of ambiguity and face the complex leadership, team-building and moral/ethical issues. These problems simply do not lend themselves to the “technical approach” to learning found in ALC 2015.

Introduction and Problem

This paper illustrates two fundamental flaws in TRADOC’s ALC 2015 approach to learning. First, the ALC 2015 argues, “The US Army’s competitive advantage directly relates to its capacity to learn faster and adapt more quickly than its adversaries. In the highly competitive global learning environment where technology provides all players nearly ubiquitous access to information, the Army cannot risk failure through complacency, lack of imagination or resistance to change. Outpacing adversaries is essential to maintain the Army’s global status and to fulfill its responsibilities to the nation.”³ While the premise of faster learning and adapting quickly as a competitive advantage from ubiquitous access through technology may sound logical, it is a false and dangerous assumption. What makes any resource a strategic and importantly a “sustained” competitive advantage is not ubiquitous access but rather its “scarcity.” The US Army will gain and maintain an advantage over rivals by having something that others do not. Outpacing adversaries is certain to fail and will cost millions, perhaps billions of dollars, if we rely predominantly on a technological approach to learning as advocated in ALC 2015. Every Army on the planet has a ubiquitous access to information through technology and the internet. The Army’s scarce but brilliant and undeniable strategic resource lies not in technological solutions but in our leadership. The US Army is simply the very best leadership factory on the

¹ Obi-wan Kenobi to the Imperial Storm Troopers guarding access to Los Isley Space-port in *Star Wars: Episode IV - A New Hope*, 1977. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0076759/quotes>

² TRADOC Pam 525-8-2, *The US Army Learning Concept for 2015*, released 20 JAN 2011.

³ Ibid, page 5, Chapter 1-1. Purpose and scope

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planet.⁴ We have the best officers, NCOs and Soldiers in history. While technology holds promise, it is only a tool, *never* the purpose or reason for learning and education.

Second, the stated purpose of the ALC 2015 focuses on *individual* Soldier learning. This focus on individual learning does not mention the key to success in creating a learning environment – leadership found in the command team. The vast majority of what Soldiers need to learn comes from “experience” gained while assigned to operational units under the leadership of the command team. While the TRADOC school system is important, most of the meaningful “learning” takes place while Soldiers are assigned to operational units. As such, ALC 2015 should focus unit level leadership (commanders and leaders) where most of the important and practical learning actually occurs. A review of ALC 2015 shows only one reference to the “unit” commander with over fifty references to individual learning.⁵ The only reference states that “the goal is to provide the Operating Force with a standardized set of foundational competencies that can be further tailored to suit operational and position needs as determined by the learner and unit commander.” There is no other mention of the unit command team in the Army learning strategy and importantly little by way of explanation of “how to” achieve this goal.

The company commander/first sergeant team, battalion and brigade level commander/command sergeant major teams are responsible for the training, education and leader development of their Soldiers and importantly, creating a “learning organization.”⁶ TRADOC and the institutional school-house play a smaller but yet important role in what Soldiers need to learn about the profession. At the institutional school-house, the focus of ALC 2015 should be on instructors and facilitators rather than individuals. With the doctrinal shift towards decentralization through mission command our learning strategy must focus on improving our already formidable leaders and trainers

Background

On 20 JAN 2011 TRADOC Pam 525-8-2, *The US Army Learning Concept for 2015 (ALC 2015)* was approved and released to the Army. The stated purpose is to meet the Army’s need to develop adaptive, thinking Soldiers and leaders capable of meeting the challenges of operational adaptability in an era of persistent conflict.⁷ The Army Learning Concept 2015 is nested with the framework of concepts which include the *Army Capstone Concept*, the *Army Operating Concept*, the *U.S. Army Training Concept*, and the *Army Leader Development Strategy*. ALC 2015 recognizes and addresses the arrival of a new generation of Soldiers in our ranks who have grown up in a digital world. The stated goal of The Army Learning Concept 2015 is to ensure that the people of this great Army maintain our competitive advantage over our adversaries.⁸ The cornerstone of TRADOC’s approach to learning in ALC 2015 is the continuous adaptive learning model. The ALC 2015 model purportedly provides a comprehensive framework that transforms the current learning model into one that supports the

⁴ COL Wayne Grigsby, Director SAMS, Fort Leavenworth, KS, “leadership factory” was used to address battalion and brigade level designated commanders during the Pre Command Course, 11 MAY 2011, (by permission).

⁵ Author’s search of the ALC 2015 indicated several other references to the word commander however most were administrative uses or references to how the Army trains commanders at the School for Command Preparation. Importantly, ALC 2015 misses the true purpose and focus in looking to individuals rather than “commanders.”

⁶ AR 600-20, The Army Command Policy, US Army. Para 2-1 of this regulatory guidance indicates that commanders are responsible for everything that happens or fails to happen within their unit.

⁷ TRADOC Pam 525-3-0, p. 8.

⁸ TRADOC Pam 525-8-2, *The US Army Learning Concept for 2015*, forward, page i.

development of adaptable Soldiers and leaders, provides an adaptive development and delivery system that will meet Soldiers' learning requirements at the point of need and can sustain adaptation during an era of persistent conflict and exponential change.⁹

Before a discussion and recommendations for improving ALC 2015, it is important to note that the premise of ALC 2015, that of life time learning, is certainly a brilliant concept. The idea of the Army as a learning organization is old and the formalization of ALC 2015 is long overdue. Life time learning is a legitimate and vital concept and TRADOC leadership should be commended for their visionary start.

The opening chapter of ALC 2015 indicates that many of its goals are within reach and identifies "first steps" that the Army can take now. Among these steps, the mandate to "dramatically reduce or eliminate instructor-led slide presentation lectures and begin using a blended learning approach that incorporates virtual and constructive simulations, gaming technology, or other technology-delivered instruction."¹⁰ A first step which includes reducing PowerPoint slides is important as it points to guided discussion. However, the line of thought and directive to incorporate virtual and constructive simulations, gaming technology or other technology-delivered instruction is not a learning strategy. Technology, simulations and the like are tools, only the means to the important end, learning. In general, ALC 2015 takes a very strong supporting view when it comes to enhancing learning through digital technology. The environment characterized in the new learning concept focuses on the "millennial" generation and digital-aged learners. This approach is misguided as the learning concept however only scarcely mentions the concept of "adult" learners and provides little in way of "how to" of a learning strategy which is appropriate for adult learners. While every one of our Soldiers under 25 years old will remain part of the millennial generation forever, they are not juvenile or undergraduate level learners. All Soldiers are adult learners and as such, a focus on what motivates and how adults learn is much more relevant than digital learning. TRADOC's new learning concept is overly focused on millennial Soldiers with a digital strategy that focuses too narrowly on individual learning.

**"If you are planning for the year ahead... plant rice;
if you are planning for ten years...plant trees;
if you are planning for 100 years... educate people."**

Chinese Proverb¹¹

Operational commanders, leaders and institutional faculty must appreciate that all our Soldiers are adults and do not learn like children. Soldiers must see and understand why learning is personally relevant or they will tune out. All adult learners, i.e., our Soldiers, will see little value in the rote memorization of data or facts. What is relevant to adults is acquiring knowledge for practical use, creating meaning from what they do and increasing more tacit or intuitive forms of wisdom. Perhaps this was best said by John Dewey, "Education is a social process. Education is growth. Education is not a preparation for life; education is life itself."¹²

Adults are self-directed and expect to take responsibility for decisions. Adult learning

⁹ TRADOC Pam 525-8-2, *The US Army Learning Concept for 2015*, page 16.

¹⁰ Ibid, page 9.

¹¹ "Chinese Wisdom" – quoted by Richard G. Lillard, in *Amazon West*, January 1974

¹² John J. Dewey, *John Dewey on Education: Selected Writings*. (R.D. Archambault, ed.) Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974.

programs, which value andragogy, rather than pedagogy and technology, must accommodate several fundamental aspects in order to be effective. According to Malcolm Knowles, andragogy identifies adult learning principles as: (1) adults need to know why they need to learn something, (2) adults need to learn experientially, (3) adults approach learning as problem-solving and (4) adults learn best when the topic is of immediate value.¹³ In educating, training and leading Soldiers, it's vital to demonstrate the relevance of the topic and this is done by showing Soldiers how they can apply learning. ALC 2015 provides a reference to Malcolm Knowles concept of andragogy in support of moving from "individually tailored" instruction to team-building. Unfortunately, Knowles concept of andragogy found in ALC 2015 contains nothing about principles of adult learning. The principles of adult learning are much more relevant to the Army learning strategy than the dozens of references to millennial generation learning through digital and technological means.

ALC 2015 argues, "A common theme is the growing influence of information technologies. This influence is having a *profound effect* on learning approaches in higher education centers, primary and secondary schools, and private corporations."¹⁴ There is no evidence presented, nor any reference for this claim found in ALC 2015. Importantly, the Army in general and commanders in particular, are not in the business of training and educating students at the high school or the college level. Frequently higher educational institutions are in the business of education for social status or "raison d'être." "Academic degrees and qualifications are often seen as both an end in themselves (you have a Masters degree, so now you are clever) and a means to an end (you have a PhD so now you are „really clever“ and we should consider you more favorably for promotion.)"¹⁵ In contrast, Army commanders must *always* apply training, education and experience to achieve the higher commander's intent and accomplish their mission. For legitimate and *profound influence* on education and learning in corporate and business, the Army should look to Professor Henry H. Mintzberg.

Henry Mintzberg defines these three elements of practice in leading business organizations. In *Managers Not MBAs*, Mintzberg offers a new definition of management as a blend of craft (experience and judgment), art (insight and intuition) and science (analysis and technical reports).¹⁶ Mintzberg sounds a warning for learning in any profession that the Army would do well to heed. The trouble with "management" education, Mintzberg notes, is that business education leaves a distorted impression of management. Mintzberg notes,

Business education overemphasizes science and encourages a style of managing called "calculating," or if the graduates believe themselves to be artists, the related

¹³ Knowles, M. *Andragogy in Action*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1984. For a clear and compelling summary of andragogy, see: <http://tip.psychology.org/knowles.html>

¹⁴ ALC 2015, para 2-3.

¹⁵ King, Richard, *How the Army Learned to Plan but forgot how to Think*, Australian Army Journal, Volume V, Number 3, 6 NOV 2008

¹⁶ Henry Mintzberg, Henry, *Managers Not MBA's A Hard Look at the Soft Practice of Managing and Management Development*, published by Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2004. . Authors note: Henry Mintzberg offers a sweeping critique of how managers are educated and how corporate management, as a result, is practiced with important application to the practice of command and leadership. Mintzberg makes meaningful, albeit controversial, recommendations for reforming both education and corporate management. Mintzberg posits, the case that because conventional MBA programs are designed almost exclusively for young people with little, if any, managerial experience, and the programs overemphasize the science & technological approach, in the form of analysis and technique, and downplay experience and insight.

style is called heroic. Accordingly neither heroes nor calculating technocrats in positions of influence are useful - what's really needed are balanced and dedicated people who practice a style that can be called "engaging" leadership. Such engaging leaders believe their purpose is to leave behind stronger organizations and better individuals, not just making more money. ¹⁷

Mintzberg also suggests a new education system, targeted at practicing managers, as opposed to younger students with little real world experience, which emphasizes practical issues. *Managers Not MBAs* explains in detail how to cultivate such managers and leaders in business and importantly, how they can transform the business world and, ultimately, society.

Before a discussion of commander/leader centered learning aimed at adults in military professional practice, a word on the Army as a profession and in particular, the art, science and "craft" of command. Our profession is a calling and Soldiering in general, is a "practice." The practice of any profession has three essential elements: art, science and craft.¹⁸ Change 1 to FM 3.0, *Operations*, provides the details of the "art of command and science of control" as a part of mission command but is *not* particularly helpful in outlining the "craft" of command. Doctrinal references to the "science of control" are not accurate and confusing. There is no a science of control just because an army manual says there is. Everyone has heard of the science of mathematics or medicine or geology – but there is no science of control. The "science of control" brings to mind Maxwell Smart and the humorous escapades as a control agent fighting the evil organization "Chaos." As Mintzberg points out, commander's rather use science in reports, studies, statistical analysis, etc., in order to make decisions, to build understanding and visualize and to lift the fog of war. While Army doctrine lumps all aspects of experience in with "art" of command, the three elements of "practice" found in Professor Mintzberg's art, craft and the use of science model, is particularly helpful in accurately framing military professional practice. Learning the craft aspect of our professional "practice" is the right place to focus our learning strategy. The craft aspect of our professions is not unique to the Army; it is pervasive in business, government, clergy, law and medicine -- any organization involving organizational behavior, teamwork and human relationships. The craft of practice in the military profession is the sum total of all leadership, technical and tactical, team building, problem solving and all other experiences are applied. It is critical as practical experience from assignments in combat and garrison, is where truly relevant learning happens.

ALC 2015 falls into the same trap Henry Mintzberg warns about with its strong focus on technical solutions, digitization and processes at the expense of practical application. Similarly, our Army does not need calculating, digital technocrats who focus on technology as a part of ALC 2015. The Army learning strategy should focus on the practicing leadership in both the operational Army and institutional schoolhouse.

The Army's *Capstone Concept for Joint Operation (CCJO)* and *The Army Capstone Concept (ACC)* and *Army Learning Strategy* all describe a future characterized by uncertainty, complexity, rapid change, and persistent conflict. The emerging global trends that will define the future security environment include: globalization, increased access to new technology, population growth, resource demand, climate change and natural disasters, proliferation of

¹⁷ Henry Mintzberg, *ibid*, page 1.

¹⁸ See Of course, not all agree with just three aspects of the practice of command. Per conversation with COL (Ret.) Chris Paparone, the practice of command has not only art, science and craft but and forth element -- ethical & moral thinking and other forms of deeper philosophical reasoning. From a personal email dated: 18 MAR 10.

weapons of mass destruction and finally, failed and failing states.¹⁹ Every one of these, “fog of war” issues that our Soldiers will face in the years ahead. A meaningful and relevant Army’s learning strategy should focus on problem solving and decision making in this VUCA environment. The point is not that technology should be discarded. A technical approach is legitimate for some training such as rudimentary basic training skills that are honed by repetition. But technology is only a tool which does not lend itself to the complex life skills and problems solving in the VUCA swamp our Soldiers face in the conduct of full spectrum operations.

The best lessons in life are often learned through failure.

-FM 7-0²⁰

ALC 2015 contains numerous references to blended learning. This blending concept is “technology-delivered instruction is the generic term used in this concept to describe a range of instructional delivery means that may include computer-based instruction, web-based instruction, gaming, video, interactive multimedia instruction, virtual worlds, massively multiplayer online games, simulations, and others.” A wide range of instructional delivery techniques through various technological means is not a learning strategy. This ubiquitous access to technology and the internet is neither a strategy nor a strategic advantage.

Likewise, issuing millennial Soldiers hand held computers with the focus on “individual” learning will be expensive and in many cases result in a dumb down of their already weak social, writing and “thinking” skills.²¹ Nicholas Carr’s recent book, *The Shallows*, exposes digital technology and the internet’s influence on the brain. He concludes:

Greater access to knowledge is not the same as greater knowledge.
An ever-increasing plethora of facts and data is not the same as wisdom.
The breadth of knowledge is not the same as depth of knowledge.
Multitasking is not the same as complexity.²²

For over a decade there have been warnings that our millennial generation is addicted to technology at the expense of interpersonal skills, team building, common respect, the ability to communicate to one another. In many cases our millennial Soldiers have exchanged critical thinking for a passionate embrace of trivia. Some have lost contact with the human elements of our culture and shifted their focus to automation, systems management, scientific methods at the expense of the “touch and feel” of their humanity.²³ When TRADOC issues 100,000 new digital handheld devices to Soldiers how long will it be before “Joe” is wasting time playing computer games, buying stuff on E-Bay and surfing the net for porn? “These are not the “*an*” droids we are looking for...”²⁴ ALC 2015 should enhance learning by encouraging our millennial Soldiers to think hard and reflect about their profession rather than intuitively turning to another “app” whenever they face new and challenging problems.

¹⁹ US Army, *A Leader Development Strategy for the 21st Century*, dated 29 NOV 2009, page 2.

²⁰ Paragraph 2-73, FM 7-0 *Training for Full Spectrum Operations*, Headquarters Department of the Army, December 2008

²¹ William Strauss and Neil Howe authored *Generations* in 1991 and *Millennials Rising* in 2000. U.S. Army Recruiting Command Information Brief dated 04 FEB of 2005.

As of OCT 15 2005 the Army had an annual recruiting goal of 154,000 Soldiers per year. This is approximately the same number that all other branches of service recruit annually, combined.

²² Carr, Nicholas G., *Shallows, What the internet is doing to our brains?*, W.W. Norton Company, New York, NY, 2010. Note: see review at: <http://www.middleeastdirectory.com/ebus/ebus96.htm> accessed on 12 APR 2011.

²³ Postman, Neil, *Technopoly: the Surrender of Culture to Technology*, First Vintage Book, Random House, 1993.

²⁴ Star Wars: *ibid*.

The “dark side” of ALC 2015 ²⁵

Our new ALC 2015 indicates the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) and other research agencies are demonstrating significant learning gains using intelligent tutors that will provide a tailored learning experience. Really??? Pardon the skepticism but this technical approach to reflective tutoring or the art of a thinking facilitator is bound to be problematic. Perhaps this promise of technology has limited application at the basic training level or with rote memorization of mundane tasks (technical rationality) but certainly has narrow application for the tough leadership, organizational behavior, command climate, team/relationship building problems facing Soldiers in the VUCA environment of full spectrum operations.

ALC 2015 includes numerous references to the concept of a “mentor.” A mentor *always* implies a two-way volitional aspect of a relationship that *must* be honored. While a mentor would be the perfect coach or tutor to get at life time learning, the special mentor relationship is not needed for the purpose of learning, training and education of the Army. And while mentorship happens in rare and special cases, as a strategy for learning, this term is over used in the ALC 2015.

The concept of regional learning centers distributed throughout the Army will be expensive in both personnel and funding. Leaders at learning centers which are not part of the chain of command will have little trust, little influence and viewed as a bureaucratic threat to the command team and local formations. Why not take funding intended for regional learning centers and give each battalion or brigade commander a significant annual budget for creative approaches to lifelong learning? Commanders could fund leader development reading programs, creative team building and concepts found in reflective practice to nurture lifelong learning. The personnel assigned to the proposed regional learning centers could be distributed into the Army formations where they would play an important role in helping the commander/CSM create and nurture an effective learning environment. Regional learning centers is a bureaucratic approach to learning, violates the concept of “mission command” and will hinder the only true, meaningful and legitimate approach to creating life time learners – the command team.

Chief learning innovation officer (CLIO) concept is inconsistent with both “mission command” and the concept of life-long learning. ALC 2015 emphasizes decentralization as an important operational factor yet proposes the concept of a CLIO, an ironic and very centralized approach to learning! A CLIO overseeing digital competence for millennial’s is a red herring. Our millennial Soldiers are digital natives, not sojourners as found in earlier generations. Millennial Soldiers do not need a mandate for digital competence, they need learn how to think and apply the lessons of practice in the profession of arms. Commanders, leaders and Soldiers don’t need a CLIO looking over their shoulder either. Soldiers will catch life-long learning by example from their unit leadership, not from digital devices, DARPA automation tutors or bureaucratic chief learning innovation officers at regional learning centers.

²⁵ Star Wars: *ibid*, the “dark side of the force” in this context is simply the wrong approach in a learning strategy. No “evil” intended in fact, the current author believes the concept of life time learning found in ALC 2015 is a brilliant, relevant and much needed concept.

Conclusion

The tone and nature of ALC 2015 is one of technology, digitization and millennial generation focused, as such will be celebrated among the many automation contractors, technical rationality proponents and information technology promoting bureaucrats. TRADOC guidance that encourages the incorporation of virtual/constructive simulations, gaming technology and other technology-delivered instruction is like saying “game on” for many in the contracting community who have for a long time, worshipped at the altar of technology producing costly techno-gadgets looking for a problem to solve. With good reason, the technological approach means lots of dollars on the horizon. Unfortunately, the material development (PEO/PM) community with a long history of developing automation technology with marginal utility now has a new partner in legitimacy. It’s disappointing that TRADOC with its long tradition as the “Soldier’s voice” would publish ALC 2015 which overly encourages technology and materiel acquisition rather than a meaningful learning strategy. Hey ARIC, let’s not forget that it’s DOTMLPF, not dotMlpf! ²⁶

Our Army does not need more technology, gaming, simulations and technology-delivered approaches to “individual” learning for digital aged millennial Soldiers. What our Army needs is a learning strategy targeted on adults and focused on the command team, NCOs and leaders at all levels. ALC 2015 should be a source of help for our commanders who are responsible for leader development and lifetime learning of their Soldiers. As written, it clearly is not. ALC 2015 must help commanders and leaders get after life time learning in the tough VUCA environment of full spectrum operations. A great place to start is the numerous papers and articles on the concept of “reflective practice” found in the recommended readings below. Our Army needs a learning strategy which gets after critical reflection, the art of thinking and learning the “practice” of the profession of arms.

Recommended Readings on Education for Professional Practice

Kolb, David A., *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1984).

Mintzberg, Henry, *Managers Not MBA’s A Hard Look at the Soft Practice of Managing and Management Development*, published by Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2004.

Paparone, Christopher R. and Reed, George E., *The Reflective Military Practitioner, How Military Practitioner’s think in action*, Military review, March/April 2008.

Paparone, Christopher R. and George L. Topic, *From the Swamp to the High Ground and Back*, Army Sustainment, JAN/FEB 2001, PB 700-11-01 Volume 43, Issue 1 at: http://www.almc.army.mil/alog/issues/JanFeb11/spectrum_swamp_highground.html

Raelin, Joseph A. “*I Don’t Have Time to Think!*” versus the Art of Reflective Practice, 2002, by the Society for Organization Learning, MIT, Volume 4, Number 1, REFLECTIONS.

²⁶ ARCIC: Army Capabilities Integration Center and TRACOC proponent for ALC 2015. The Army Capabilities Integration Center mission: to lead the development and integration of force capabilities across “all” DOTMLPF “domains” for the Army within a Joint and Multinational environment to support Joint Force Commanders. The mnemonic DOTMLPF means doctrine, organization, training, materiel, leadership, personnel, training and facilities. <http://www.arcic.army.mil/>

Schön, D.A. *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

Schön, D. A., *Educating the Reflective Practitioner, Towards a New Design for Teaching and Learning in the Professions*, San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1987.

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