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EDUCATING U.S. SENIOR MILITARY LEADERS:
CASE METHOD TEACHING IN ACTION

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Abstract

The challenge for organizations is to provide a professional development program for senior executives that will prepare them for the strategic level of management and leadership. Executive education has been an evolving process. It has been moving away from the normal pedagogical styles of the traditional classroom to the andragogical styles appropriate for adult learners. Andragogical methodology is characterized by the use of the experiential baggage of the adult learner. It is in effect case method learning in action. The United States Army War College is an educational institution that uses this type of learning as it prepares its future senior leaders for the strategic arena. This paper discusses the rationale for using adult learning methodology as well as the system applied at the USAWC.

INTRODUCTION

The challenge for many organizations -- profit or non profit -- is to provide a professional development program that provides appropriate knowledge and skills to enable identified leaders and managers to cope not only with today's workplace challenges, but also to ultimately take advantage of opportunities and to survive possible threats in the future.

The military like any other large, complex organization seeks to educate its senior personnel in an orderly progressive way to insure that they are capable leaders and managers, especially at the strategic level of management. How, then does such a nonprofit organization educate, train and reinforce acceptable behavior for today's challenges while preparing individuals for what the military calls the VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity) of future events?

The focus of this paper is to present an andragogical teaching method for senior executives who are being groomed for the VUCA environment of the strategic level of management and leadership. The hypothesis is that the educational process of a command and control relationship of

the traditional classroom is no longer a viable pedagogical method of teaching this type of learner. Although the thrust of this paper is not the adult learning -- andragogy -- it is, nevertheless, important to distinguish between the pedagogical and andragogical approaches to learning.

According to Harback (1996), pedagogical learning is a system where there is little need to address individual learning experiences. After all, children come to the classroom with little or no background/experience and are there to be intellectually filled. On the other hand, andragogy emphasizes the value of the learner's background.

In this learning mode, experiential sharing is its hallmark. The teacher becomes the facilitator, who simply lays the conceptual framework for issues under discussion and then guides the adult learner through dialogues of the many experiences that they bring to the table. In essence, andragogy recognizes the baggage that people carry into the learning process and tries to leverage it. This adult learning approach uses the experiences, insights and evidence presented by the participants in order to discover a deeper understanding and, ultimately, new learning of the issues under investigation. In this scenario, the teacher lays the conceptual framework and then utilizes a myriad of techniques such as the Socratic Method of Questioning to intellectually and emotionally engage the selected adult learners at the USAWC.

The average profile of the senior executives at the USAWC is one of a very experienced, well-educated individual with a Type A personality. In order to complement the various experiences that these individuals bring to the classroom, case method teaching is the preferred instructional mode.

THE PRESSURE TO CHANGE

If we take the reasonable position that all large, complex organizations seek to educate its senior managers and leaders in an orderly progressive way, then the follow-on question is, "How is the best way to accomplish this?" To answer this question it should be recognized that the challenge for most organizations is to establish a professional development program (PDP) that provides a balance between the tools to survive the "here and now" as well as the strategic skills and knowledge to see the opportunities and threats of the future. In essence, how do you educate, train and reinforce acceptable behavior for today's battles while preparing individuals for what the military calls the VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity) of future events.

Before a conceptual framework can be set up for developing such a well balanced PDP, it should be recognized that the comfort level set by the parameters of the "here and now" operational world lose its stability in the visioning process and changing reference points set by future events and new combinations for organizing the work force. Wheatley (1993) challenges us to re-think the new organizational horizon when she tells us that we are using "Newtonian Organizations in a Quantum Age." Her point is that the well-organized, mechanistic world of the Industrial Revolution, Toffler's 2nd Wave (Toffler, 1990) is having a difficult time maintaining the command and control relationship in light of the chaos generated by the High-Tech, Information Age of the Third Wave. This is not a new theme to many who study the field of management, but what may be new is that the stability of the of past, may be a fixture of the past. The reference points that were familiar and comfortable, and relatively safe, in the Second Wave mentally now create stress and disorientation, VUCA, in visioning the future.

Many would call it chaos, others like the former CEO of VISA, Inc, Mr. Hock would call it the existence of today's organizations (Hock, 1995). In fact, he has coined a new term to capture this reality. He calls this new organizational order a *chaordic* actuality. What writers like Wheatley and Hock are showing us is that the structures of the past is in fact, a mechanism of the past. Some like the Pinchots (1994) would join this call for the demise of the mechanistic structure and its way of grooming future senior executives. Although their push for the *Intelligent Organization* is an echo heard from such management writers through the years as Follett (1949), McGregor (1960), Argyris (1962), Senge (1996), and Covey (1996), the message is the same, namely, the energies of an organization is a function of the people within the organization to focus on the changing landscape around them. The critical factors being the ability to have all the people in the organization to focus their energy and secondly, the understanding that the landscape continues to change.

Using the conceptual framework of Hock's "Chaordic Organization: Out of Control and into Order" senior executives need to walk the line between the seemingly stable and orderly mechanistic world of the Industrial Revolution Society where they were bred and the chaotic world of the future. As a sidebar, it is interesting to note that chaos is only in the eye of the beholder and results from the lack of knowledge of the pattern being exhibited by the phenomenon under investigation.

If one buys the premise of Wheatley and Hock that we must see the world as it really is, namely a world that Hock

defines as, "self-organizing, adaptive, nonlinear, complex system, whether physical, or social, the behavior which exhibits characteristics of both order and chaos, loosely translated to business terminology, cooperation and competition" (p. 6), then the question must be asked as to how do we educate individuals to manage and lead in this arena, an arena that many including, the United States Army War College (USAWC), calls the *strategic arena* (Murphy, 1996).

The strategic arena to most large, complex organizations is no longer the national arena, but rather, the global arena with all its turmoil and richness in diversity, challenges and opportunities. The term strategic arena used by USAWC highlights three key areas that must be addressed by complex organizations. They are: (a) the environment in which an organization exists; (b) the leadership and management needed to understand and shape the future of an organization; and lastly (c) the process by which these myriad of variables are understood and acted upon (Murphy, 1996).

NEW WAYS OF EDUCATING SENIOR EXECUTIVES

The standard way to build a curriculum is to provide foundation courses and then progress the students through a series of more advanced courses usually culminating in a capstone course. The premise is that the progress of the student is controlled through the curriculum. A basic assumption of the model appears to be built on the pedagogical model discussed earlier in this paper, and that is that students lack the depth and breathe of knowledge and experience to engage in a full discourse on complex issues. In this case, the teacher becomes the fountain from which the students must drink.

In the adult learning model, it becomes critical that the knowledge and experience of the student becomes a critical factor. The teacher becomes the mechanism used to leverage the myriad of cases histories stored within the students. The act of leveraging these cases is the challenge of this teaching method. In the fixed environment of traditional teaching, the knowledge and the experiences of the teacher become the touchstone for the class. In this mode, the teacher walks a familiar path with new faces. Not so with the adult learning model. All participants, teacher included, are travelers on a journey to the deeper meanings behind complex issues.

The baseline, of course, is the issue(s) under investigation as well as the conceptual underpinnings provided by the teacher. The journey, however, can take many

turns, and wind up in dark alleys, dead ends, or in new territory, where all involved become enlightened. Is there a school solution like typical ones in the many case studies used in the traditional classroom? The answer is usually not. Typical when dealing in the strategic arena. Are there a myriad of plausible solutions which change dependent on the reference points set in place, ala Hock and Wheatley.

What this type of teaching forces is a dependence on one's critical thinking ability. The ability to understand the underlying assumptions of an issue as well as a reconfirmation as to the validity and reliability of the facts of the case. This is not to say that the traditional method does not also do this, but what this approach offers is a richness that comes from the participant. A richness that is difficult to orchestrate and can only be found through the diversity of the adult learner's baggage.

Is it a frustrating journey? Yes, when it is compared to the controlled Industrial-Aged model commonly used in all levels of schooling. Is it chaotic? Yes, but as Hock would say, "Out of control and into order." The order that Wheatley says is the natural way in our universe. Will it be a typical learning situation that will prepare senior executives for the strategic arena, The USAWC is betting on it.

THE UNITED STATES ARMY WAR COLLEGE

The United States Army War College (USAWC) is an institution designed to provide the last step in the formal education process for the officer corps. The College runs a 10-month educational program for the students selected to come to this level of education. The mission of the USAWC is:

To prepare selected military, civilian, and international leaders to assume strategic responsibilities in military and national security organizations; to educate students about the employment of the U.S. Army as a unified, joint, or multinational force in support of the national military strategy; to research operational and strategic issues; and to conduct outreach programs that benefit USAWC, the U.S. Army and the Nation. (Program for Joint Education, Academic Year 1997,p. 8)

The profile of the student that goes to the USAWC is akin to the top middle managers in a profit organization that have been selected for increased responsibilities at

the top management level. They average student profile for U.S. students is:

Table 1. USAWC Average Student Profile

Age	44 years
Years of Service	22 years
Education	Masters (80%)
Responsibilities	
People	600-1000
Budgets	\$1 - 500m (Est.)

The student body each year is comprised of approximately 300 students from: active duty U. S. military officers; civilians from governmental agencies; military officers from the National Guard and Reserves, and lastly, officers from forty international countries.

The student body is equally divided into individual groups called seminars. Each seminar group will have 16 students. To insure maximum diversity of the group, the composition of each seminar factors in different specialties in the Army (Infantry, Armor, Finance, etc.) plus representations from each of the other services (Air Force, Navy, Marines, Coast Guard, Civilian) and usually two international officers. In addition, race and gender is also considered.

The curriculum of the USAWC involves four core courses, advanced courses and a variety of nationally known guest speakers who address either the entire student body or partial segments as the topic dictates. The topics of the core curriculum and the advanced courses range from critical thinking to creativity to multinational military operations.

As they traverse the core courses, the seminar group will stay in tact. This means that the students will meet a minimum of three hours every weekday and cover the lessons as guided by a faculty instructor (FI). The uniqueness of this activity is that each of the seminars is meeting at exactly the same time covering the exact material. Since the core course last from August through until mid January, three FIs are assigned to facilitate the various lessons. A detailed discussion of the material covered is beyond the scope of this paper, but suffice to say that there are three academic departments and each provides an FI to facilitate the lessons generated from the respective departments.

The andragogical methodology of the seminar is divided into three phases. The core phase is an introduction to various topics that are deemed by the academic administration to be appropriate to achieve the mission of the College. These topics are generated by the faculty and approved by the Academic Board. The dynamics of the seminar revolves around a dialogue andragogy where the FI introduces the topic, conceptual underpinnings, and then sets up either briefings by the students, experiential exercises, or throws out "snowball questions" all in an effort to tap into the experience, case histories, of the students.

The strength of this methodology is the use of the FI to focus the topic under investigation and the variety of experiences of the seminar group to push the envelope for understanding complex strategic issues. The weakness of the system is the amount of time spent on dialoguing on each issue. Recognizing that the intent is an introduction and not an in-depth analysis of each topic, frustration can set in among the students. Another possible problem is the challenge to have each FI adept enough to cover the essential points of each lesson. Although each FI is an expert and lesson author for at least one of the topics in the core courses, they are not the experts on the other lesson topics. What actually happens is a series of pre-briefs by each lesson author to get the other FIs sufficiently comfortable to facilitate a seminar dialogue during each lesson.

To counter this lack of depth in the core lessons, the advanced courses are designed to be taught exclusively by the expert and at a much deeper depth than the core lessons. Essentially what happens is that a topic in the core course becomes a subject for a graduate level advanced course. Examples of such advanced courses are: strategic management; organizational cultures; critical thinking, or strategic logistical operations. The shortcoming here is that students can only take four of the over one hundred course offered. It should be remembered that this is a 10-month course, and thus, the normally progressing that you would have through a graduate program is limited.

To culminate these knowledge and skills learned during the core and advanced course, the College has two major exercises which are used as capstone events. To challenge their new gained insights on strategic military operations, the College conducts a Strategic Crisis Exercise (SCE) where students role play various military and civilian leaders in the U. S. government. The international students play representatives from countries throughout the world. As the scenario develops through computer simulations and the choices of the students, a "real-time" case study is

unfolding. It is more than just the normal experiential exercise that is used in graduate courses, it is a series of events designed to capture the VUCA of world events with the struggle to balance U.S. resources with the desires of the laws and desires of the US citizenry as well as those of the international community. I might add, that the students go through very intense questioning by a mock Congressional hearing by outside experts who have experience in such matters.

The last culminating exercise is a one-week event where the College invites professional individuals from all walks of life to sit in the seminar with the students in order to discuss the complex issues presented by guest speakers addressing the entire student body as well as the invited professionals. These professionals are not connected to the College but are invited based on recommendations from a myriad of sources. They are educators, medical doctors, business persons, lawyers and clergy. The intent is to have the students dialogue some of the ideas that have been discussed throughout the year with individuals from the U. S. society. Although efforts are made to have a diverse mix in the seminar room, because it is a military institution contact with non governmental individuals is limited to guest speakers for the core and advanced courses. It is during this capstone week that a greater diversity is achieved in the seminar room.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The educating of senior executives is at best a difficult journey. It is difficult because their journey is into a world that no one has yet traveled. How does one prepare for a journey that one has made? The answer appears not to be imbedded in the Industrial-Age mentality where command and control are the prime characteristics, but rather in the critical thinking abilities of a diverse group investigating the journey.

It is not comfortable to lose control, since many of us have been trained, educated and worked to gain control of our environment. Having said that it is interesting to postulate that maybe the control that we thought we had in the Industrial Wave was a mere illusion and now as organizations get more complex, the Industrial-Age model is starting to show its faults and limitations. Subsequently, if the control model is in fact an illusion, maybe the way we prepare our future strategic managers and leaders is also an illusion. If so, freeing the executive in the classroom through the use of their own personal experiences may in fact be the best way to prepare them for the chaotic

existence that Hock tells us is the norm of the future.

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