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Motivational/Cultural Issues in the Utilization of Army Learning Model (ALM) Techniques While Instructing Armenian Soldiers

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Keywords: motivation, culture, Army learning model, ALM, facilitation

Abstract: Using Army Learning Model techniques to conduct a modified first-stage Sergeant's course to Armenian soldiers, motivational and cultural issues were observed affecting learner experience/outcome. This action research observed that successful outcomes were achieved through specific use of facilitation, demo, and practical exercise instructional techniques, with firm control of class interactions.

Introduction

The Army Learning Model (ALM) is the Army's newest educational concept to create adaptable, 21st century soldiers capable of full spectrum operations (United States Army, 2011). It relies heavily on guided discussion (facilitation) with most classroom experiences being collaborative problem-solving events led by facilitators as opposed to instructors. The facilitators work to actively engage learners to use critical thinking skills and ensure that soldiers realize the relevance and context of what is being learned. Additionally, learning is to be customized as much as possible to soldiers' learning experiences and comprehension level derived from pre-test and various assessments. Another major component of ALM is to reduce or completely "...eliminate instructor-led slide presentation lectures" (United States Army, 2011, p. 9). The ALM also seeks to enhance the usage of blended learning (face-to-face mixed with online learning) with the use of simulations, virtual reality, and educational gaming technology whenever possible.

Various ALM techniques were used to conduct an abbreviated Military-to-Military (Mil to Mil) Warrior Leaders Course-like instructional event. The Warrior Leaders Course (WLC) is the first level Sergeant's school that U.S. Army soldiers attend to be fully qualified junior level Sergeants. Typically this course is one month long, focusing on leadership skills development. The abbreviated WLC course was conducted in five days and focused mainly on providing Soldiers information on knowledge that Sergeants should know. This focus was a higher leadership decision based on the Armenian government's desire to start to increase the use and prominence of Sergeants within their military as opposed to their current Soviet-era utilization of Sergeants/Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs).

Adult Learner Profile

The WLC-like course was conducted to a total of 40 Armenian soldiers at the Armenian NCO Academy in Yerevan, Armenian. Of these 40 soldiers, 20 were conscripts with the rank of advanced private. Conscripted soldiers (drafted from all physically fit males in Armenia), are mandated by law to serve in the Armenian military for three years. The other 20 soldiers in the WLC-like course were professional soldiers (voluntarily contracted with the military) with the rank of Sergeant. This is a vital distinction in that many of the conscripted soldiers did not really want to be in the classes; they were forced to be there. This affected their motivation in that these

soldiers were sometimes observed attempting to sleep or do something else in class. The Armenian student-soldiers consisted of the following additional adult learner variables: age (Privates average age: 22, Sergeants: 24), marital status (5% of Privates versus 30% of Sergeants were married), military deployments (0% of Privates had deployed versus 10% of Sergeants), education level (most only had High School education, 20% of Privates had some college versus 30% of Sergeants), and years of service (Privates averaged almost 2 years versus Sergeants 5 years). Although only a couple of years separated the Privates and the Sergeants in chronological age and years of service in the military, noticeable differences were observed regarding general discipline, demeanor, comprehension, and communications capabilities (Sergeants being more advanced and capable than Privates).

Cultural/Environmental Issues

An initial cultural issue observed dealt with how the U.S. Army instructional team was introduced to the Armenian soldiers. Introductions were very short and formal and did not create a positive, inclusive atmosphere. From there, the next interaction was to give the Armenian soldiers a U.S. Army Physical Fitness Test (APFT). Soldiers felt somewhat embarrassed in that this was their first exposure to these types of exercises. They wanted to perform well, but were still trying to understand how to correctly do the exercises (U.S. Army push-up and sit-up). Additionally, the WLC course itself was not fully explained to them ahead of time and no evaluation/assessment criteria was presented. Many Armenian soldiers thought that the U.S. Army instructors were simply judging them on how well they could perform as a soldier. The fact that American instructors first interactions were to evaluate how well they could perform a fitness test seemed to confirm their suspicions.

The way that the Armenian soldiers answered questions was also done differently than how most U.S. Army instructors were used to. An Armenian soldier would typically stand up and start to answer a question, if a fellow soldier didn't like the answer he would interject and talk over the first soldier. Other soldiers would then comment at the same time as to who had a better answer, and a debate sometimes ensued. This had a tendency of making classroom interactions chaotic and hard to understand. In a similar manner, many of the older students (who were usually Sergeants) had a tendency of talking down to younger students during class discussions. Expressing that a younger soldier should not try to give an answer if he doesn't fully know the response was made several times by different Armenian Sergeants.

The use of translators was also a culture shift for both American instructors and Armenian soldiers. The Armenian soldiers wanted to look at and talk to the translators as opposed to the American instructors. In a similar manner, some American instructors had problems focusing on the students and would instead start to talk to and look at the translator. This created greater psychological distance and hampered some interaction and engagement.

Additionally, two subjects were part of the WLC course that were very sensitive issues for the Armenian soldiers: Suicide Prevention and Sexual Assault Prevention. The Armenian soldiers needed a lot of facilitation to even begin to address these issues and would not even start to talk about sexual assaults while a female translator was present in the room. They viewed it as highly disrespectful to her (for men to talk openly about such a subject). The fact that this wasn't addressed before the class started displayed a lack of cultural sensitivity on the part of the U.S.

instructors. Putting the class on break and bringing in a male translator quickly addressed this issue.

Instructional Techniques

Four different instructional techniques were used during the WLC course: *lecture*, *demo*, *practical exercise*, and *conference*, as defined in the Army Basic Instructors Course courseware (United States Army, 2010). The six different U.S. Army instructors used a mixture of the teaching methods in order to conduct their block of instruction. The *lecture* method of instruction was mostly one-way communication with mainly text/slide presentations used to reiterate key points. The *demo* method involved physically showing the Armenian soldiers how something was done (first at full combat speed and then slowly, step-by-step, example: how American soldiers salute). The *practical exercise* method involved demonstrating how to do something, and then having the Armenian soldiers actually go through and accomplish the task (example: finding an eight digit grid on an Army map). The *conference* method involved facilitating discussion through soldiers' opinions and experiences while working on comprehending a new topic (example: a discussion of responsibilities of a Sergeant).

Instructional Results

The overall worst results observed occurred when pure *lecture* was used as the instructional technique. Most of the Armenian students quickly became bored, lost interest and sought to occupy themselves with other things such as side conversations or sleeping. This method was also the most distant in that it often seemed as though the instructor was simply talking to the room, not with the individual soldier. Additionally, since the lecture had to go through the interpreter, even more distance was felt. When Armenian class leaders were openly surveyed after the class on how they thought the class went, they initially said everything was great. But, upon greater reassurances that we (U.S. Army instructors) would not be offended by their truthfulness, they confirmed the previously stated observations.

Better results were obtained when the *demo*, *practical exercises*, or *conference* method of instruction were used. Each of these methods were much more dynamic and hands-on (experiential learning). Students paid much more attention and enjoyed the instruction more as reported by the Armenian class leaders and verified by individually filled out, anonymous, end of course surveys.

Best results were attained when the *conference* (facilitation) technique was combined with the *demo/practical exercise* method of instruction and firm-control of class interactions were maintained. In this case, the meaning of firm-control is that students were not allowed to interrupt or degrade each other. This method of instruction correlates with what the ALM (Army Learning Model) recommends (enhanced, experiential learning through more facilitated instruction with greater student interaction), (United States Army, 2011). Armenian soldiers did not seem fully accustomed to being asked for their opinions or past experiences, and had a tendency to slip into debate mode if the instructor did not intervene. Discussion was therefore facilitated with greater discipline in order to ensure a positive and safe educational environment. This was important in that "When we don't feel safe, complex information is often blocked from passage to higher cortical functioning and memory storage, which slows learning and increases

our frustration, aggression, or withdrawal,” (Wlodkowski, 2008, p. 126). This combined method of instruction increased Armenian Soldier motivation and educational mission success in that:

...norms we set as instructors and the strategies we use to teach will largely determine the quality of social exchange among learners... In this atmosphere, intrinsic motivation is more likely to emerge because learners can voice the things that matter to them... These strategies also enable learners to feel connected to one another. This feeling of connection draws forth learners’ motivation because their social needs are met (Wlodkowski, 2008, p. 127).

After classes were over, several soldiers directly expressed extreme gratitude in that they very much liked being able to express their opinions and experiences. They also noted that they really liked having the conversations be more controlled in that they did not like it when the most experienced or overbearing soldiers controlled the discussions or belittled others’ thoughts.

Suggestions for Future Implementation

Future iterations of instructional missions to Armenia should incorporate the results of the methods of instruction used in this instance with a focus on experiential learning, as well as additional cultural considerations. Initial introductions with Armenian soldiers should be done to enhance motivation and to establish culturally responsive teaching (Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner, 2007). Introductions should include: where one is from, experiences, certifications/diplomas, why one is happy to be at the location, and a welcome to students. In the same way, students should also be encouraged to introduce themselves, “This emphasizes their [students’] importance and your [instructor] interest in them as people,” (Wlodkowski, 2008, p. 136). A full introduction by the instructor and an opportunity for students to introduce themselves will also work to create positive attitudes toward the instructor by the students (Curzon-Hobson, 2002; Raider-Roth, 2005). It is additionally important to include a full explanation as to the purpose and desired outcomes of the instructional event to ensure student-soldier situational awareness. A key item that is needed in any educational program is to fully state the evaluation/assessment criteria. Although there can be some hesitation from higher U.S. military leadership in presenting specific soldier evaluation criteria in Military to foreign Military (Mil-to-Mil) operations (due to certification/legal concerns), evaluation is extremely important and is needed in creating the proper motivational atmosphere. Properly facilitated assessments are vital in ensuring effective instruction (Vella, 1994).

Continuing with the concept of assessments, soldiers were not given any feedback, they were not individually counseled either initially, during the course, or as a component of an overall evaluation. Individualized feedback is an important learning and motivational component in that “From a neuroscientific perspective, feedback enhances learning and motivational processes within the brain... Feedback is probably the most powerful communication that instructors and peers can regularly use to affect learners’ competence,” (Wlodkowski, p. 315). Similarly stated, “Feedback is one of the most powerful influences on learning and achievement.” (Hattie, & Timperly, 2007, p. 81). For additional credence on the subject, *feedback* is prominently referred to within the “Satisfaction” portion of Dr. Keller’s famous and highly regarded ARCS Model of Motivation (1987).

Another consideration deals with increasing cultural exchange opportunities to improve motivation by enhancing student's feelings of self-worth (Covington, 1984). Although this WLC-like course was specifically designed to teach Armenian soldiers U.S. techniques and theories with regard to Sergeants in the military, Armenians have a lot to offer U.S. soldiers as well. The U.S. military instructors on this mission were already embedded (staying at the Armenian Academy as opposed to a separate location) so it would be easy to create after work-hours events such as Armenian/English classes, tours of nearby historical sites, Armenian informational presentations, or other such events that would allow for greater social interactions to help enhance international relations.

A final consideration deals with the focus of this WLC course. As described earlier, the focus is generally on developing leadership skills, but in this case the focus was on knowledge acquisition. To develop into a fully functional Sergeant both are vital elements. A Sergeant must have procedural knowledge *and* leadership experiences to be able to succeed in accomplishing his/her mission. Typically a WLC course provides both of these crucial elements. It is recommended that future Armenian mission iterations work to incorporate both knowledge and more leadership experiential events (more hands-on leadership experiences).

Summary

Use of Army Learning Model (ALM) techniques and strategies in the instruction of Armenian soldiers by U.S. military instructors were successful, but can be further enhanced through greater cultural awareness with regard to motivation. A lot of insights have been learned through this first instructional iteration that can greatly improve follow-on military educational missions. Through observance of class interactions, student behavior, and educational outcomes, use of a combined *conference/demo/practical exercise* method of instruction is strongly encouraged in that it was the most motivational, preferred by Armenian student soldiers, and best aligns with ALM. Maximizing hands-on learning and providing more experiential leadership situations will provide the best learning outcomes. Yet, special cultural considerations need to be understood in order to properly facilitate classroom discussion to ensure the most optimal learning environment. Use of culturally sensitive online learning tools such as short courses, games, and simulations should also be developed to improve Armenian soldiers' basic skills mastery of Sergeant role fundamentals, and to continue to align with ALM directives.

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