Fixing Distance Learning

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Fixing Distance Learning

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to
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Since 1920, when General John A. Lejeune first brought distance learning (DL) to the Marine Corps, Marines have enrolled in over 13,800,000 courses.[1] His intent behind this "experiment" was to: help educate Marines, to improve them professionally, and to assist in relieving the boredom of post-World War I activities. Distance learning has come a long way since then. Now video teleconferencing and interactive multimedia instruction (IMI) supplements paper-based course through electronic instruction. Under the Training and Education Command (TECOM), there are two main organizations that manage DL for the Marine Corps: the Marine Corps Institute (MCI) and the College of Continuing Education (CCE), which was formed in 1997 and subsequently merged with another unit from TECOM. As budget and training time constraints increase, the importance of Marines using DL to train has increased as well. This has caused some growing pains between the two organizations, subsequently changing the focus from the Marine to "Which media is best?" and "Who's in charge?" The Marine Corps can remedy the disjointed command structure, poor unity of effort and a lack of coordination that adversely affects students by unifying MCI and CCE under one command.

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[1] GS-15 Terry M. Franus, Executive Director Marine Corps Institute, Washington, DC, e-mail interview by author, 21 November 2005.

Two Units, One Mission

The mission statement of the two units is practically the same, which contributes to the disjointed command structure problem. MCI's current mission statement is to "facilitate the training and education of individual Marines anywhere, anytime."[2] MCI focuses mainly on researching, writing, and distributing traditional paper-based "red-book" courses that develop military occupational specialty (MOS) skills, non-Marine specific courses such as *Personal Financial Management* and *Spelling*, and job-aids including the *Fire Support Handbook* and *Pastry Baking*.[3] CCE's mission statement is to "Design, Develop, Deliver, Evaluate and Manage Distance Learning Products and Programs… ."[4] CCE maintains the Marine Corps' MarineNet, which delivers web-based courseware, and supervises the Professional Military Education (PME) Seminar Program. Some web-based CCE specific courses include: *Fire Support Coordination* and *Cultural Awareness and Terrorism*.
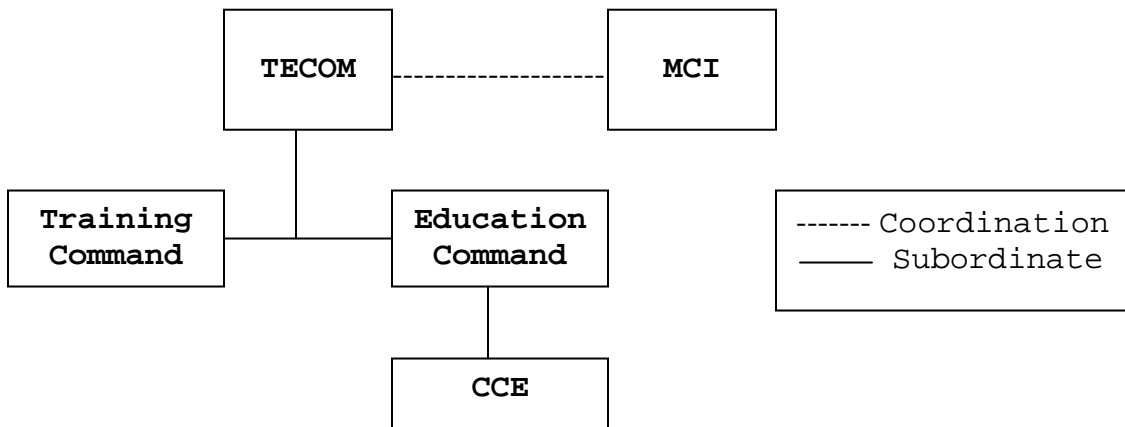
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[2] Gearhard, Glenn LtCol. "Mission Statement." URL: https://www.mci.usmc.mil/aboutmci/, accessed 17 November 2005.

[3] U.S. Marine Corps, Marine Corps Institute, *Annual Course Listing 2005* (Marine Barracks Washington, DC: Department of the Navy, April 2005), 156 Cited hereafter as MCI Annual Course Listing 2005.

[4] U.S. Marine Corps, College of Continuing Education, General Information and Programs, http://www.tecom.usmc.mil/cce/mc_general_info.asp, accessed 20 November 2005.

Command Structure and Lack of Unity of Effort

The command structure supporting distance-learning units is unusual. The primary command tasked with the overall cognizance is TECOM. From there, a disjointed "split" occurs. CCE falls under the Marine Corps University command. MCI is a different beast altogether. MCI falls under the command of Marine Barracks, Washington, DC. The Barracks CO is also the Director of MCI. The Director answers to the TECOM CO, but only for matters pertaining to DL. MCI therefore is officially listed as having a "coordinating"[5] role in the overall DL mission. See the figure below.

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        ┌──────────┐                    ┌──────────┐
        │  TECOM   │--------------------│   MCI    │
        └──────────┘                    └──────────┘
              │
  ┌───────────┴──┐    ┌──────────┐      ┌──────────────────────────┐
  │  Training    │────│Education │      │ ------- Coordination     │
  │  Command     │    │ Command  │      │ ─────── Subordinate      │
  └──────────────┘    └──────────┘      └──────────────────────────┘
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                      ┌──────────┐
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                      └──────────┘
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This lack of a proper command structure can have only a detrimental effect on the ability of two units to accomplish the mission of providing DL courses to the Marine. With the

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[5] U.S. Marine Corps, Training and Education Command, Organizational Chart, http://www.tecom.usmc.mil/TECOMorg.pdg, accessed 15 December 2005

exception of the additional task that CCE has to manage, the PME seminar program, these two units do exactly the same thing: produce distance-learning courses. The only difference is the media through which it is distributed. MCI develops and writes paper-based products, and CCE produces web- and CD-based products.

A crucial distinction must be made at this point. The two commands are doing exactly the same thing, with almost the exact same methodology. MCI has over thirty staff non-commissioned officers from a variety of MOS's, who research and develop the various courses with the assistance of the MOS Centers of Excellence (COE). Instructional specialists assist the writers by ensuring that the final product is educationally sound. CCE has a similar model, based on a single project officer, also assisted by an instructional specialist. This team oversees a contractor who develops a course, again with the assistance of the appropriate COE. What does the production process above have to do with a lack of command structure? Again, the two commands are doing exactly the same thing, in almost the exact same manner. Besides the disjointed command structure and the methodology under which they produce a course, the primary difference in the two organizations is the thirty miles that separates them (Quantico to Washington, DC).

For years, the fact that two commands that were doing for all intents and purposes the same thing, has led to a lack of coordination and a poor unity of effort. Courses would be developed simultaneously but without using similar methods, structure, information, or grading methods. The left hand was not aware of what the right hand was doing. One example of this is the way in which each unit numbers its courses. MCI uses a 4-digit numbering system indicating the MOS and the course within that MOS group. For example, 0813B is the *Field Artillery Survey* course. MCI uses a letter to indicate the most current version. In the above case, this is the third version (courses start out without letters indicated the first version, so an "A" version would be the second version, and so on). If a course is available from MCI in different formats, each course is given its own unique designator. CCE, in contrast, numbers each course with four-digits and two-letters. The four digits indicate the specific course, and the two letters indicate format and version. This difference becomes a problem when attempting to give credit for a course in the Marine Corps Total Force System (MCTFS).   Part of this system handles school codes for resident schools as well as for DL courses. Currently, MCI is the only DL unit that has direct access to MCTFS, although CCE is slated to have access by April 2006. Another example is in the grading and passing score of courses. For MCI, the

passing score for non-PME courses is sixty-five percent. This

is based on standards for the Distance Education and Training

Center (DETC), which accredits MCI and its courses, allowing

many to be eligible for college credit. CCE on the other hand

maintains a passing score of seventy-five.

Lack of Coordination

Coordination has improved over the past couple of years

with the annual convening of the TECOM DL Training and Education

Courseware/Product Selection Board.[6] This board was ordered by

the TECOM CG to determine what products and courses were to be

developed for the next fiscal year. It is comprised of the

Directors or representatives from MCI, CCE, the various COE's,

MARCORSYSCOM, and the Reserve. Throughout the year, ideas for

new courses or proposed revisions may be submitted to the Board,

and then when convened, the ideas are scrutinized. If accepted,

the board determines what type of media best suits a particular

project. This list is then submitted to the TECOM CG for final

approval. However, if the two units were combined, a product

determination board would not be necessary, as a single source

could field ideas throughout the year.

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[6] U.S. Marine Corps, *Training and Education Command (TECOM) Policy Letter 1-04*, (Quantico, 2004), 3.

Adverse Effects

One question that begs to be answered is, "Does having two different units perform the same mission lead to greater degree of effectiveness overall and return on investment?" Consider the following:

      1. <u>Cost and Time</u> – For a paper-based course, the costs in developing a course are easily defined. A course team consists of a staff NCO, a project officer, the instructional specialist, and the editor(s). The last three work on multiple courses at one time. It takes approximately nine to twelve months to design a course. Travel costs to visit the COE's associated with the course and to conduct course validations are minimal, on average $3,000-$4,500 per course. CCE on the other hand has many similar costs, and some specialized ones. Two-person teams, as previously described, typically manage multiple course progression and have similar course development costs. Where the costs differ are in the outsourcing of production. MCI typically produces their material in-house, at a lower cost, while CCE awards their courseware development to the lowest bidder.   Contractors are necessary due to the technical computer skills required to develop an IMI. Development time can take years depending on the subject matter and level of difficulty or interactivity. However, the enrollment figures

may not reflect a proper return on investment for the costs and time associated with putting together a specific course.

   2.   Enrollments - A true level of the return on investment is seen in the number of students enrolling in a course. The *Terrorism Awareness* course will be used as an example to highlight the differences between MCI and CCE. This course is offered in every media currently available (paper, web, and CD).   The enrollment data for fiscal year 2005 on this course was as follows: 503 CD-based, 1000 web-based, and 24309 paper-based.[7] Given the cost and time difference in developing the different versions, the paper-based is a more cost-effective product.

   3.   Availability - According to CCE, one of the biggest draws of taking a course electronically is that it is available, "Anytime, Anyplace." In practice this is not true, based on the fact that the student must have access to a computer to utilize the course, as opposed to a paper-based course that, once in the student's hands, can be read easily. Consider Private George W. Hislop, serving with the Marine Detachment at the U.S. Naval Radio Station, Russian Islands, Siberia. He completed the Salesmanship Course of the Publicity

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[7] Capt. Matthew Hawkins, e-mail message to author, November 15, 2005.

Schools.[8] While the fact that a Marine completed a course in a remote, isolated post should not come as a surprise, the fact that this was done in 1922 might. MCI has mastered the "anytime, anyplace" for over eighty years using paper-based correspondence courses.

Fixing the Problem

Distance learning cannot just be solely paper-based. Students learn differently using different formats. While paper-based courses may be the most cost-effective delivery system for the Marine Corps, and the easiest to use for the student, one cannot discount the value of a properly developed interactive multimedia instruction course. However, while an electronic course may be the wave of the future, the paper-based course will never go away either. The two formats, and the units that develop them, must come to terms with this. The following are recommendations for CG, TECOM. First, the College of Continuing Education and the Marine Corps Institute should be organized under one structure, preferably MCI, for the following reasons:

1. MCI has over eighty-five years of experience in the distance-learning field, with policies and

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[8] Anonymous, "Student in Russian Islands Finishes Salesmanship Course," Leatherneck (Quantico), 17 June 1922, URL: http://proquest.umi.com, accessed 14 November 2005.

procedures for researching, writing, distributing, and evaluating already in place to accomplish the mission of getting DL products to the student.

2. There would be greater unity of effort and coordination for the development of courses. If a course were being updated, it would be updated in every media. This would ensure that the student would the same quality, up to date product no matter what media used.

3. Grading and pass/fail standards would be uniform, and subscribe to DETC standards.

4. Numbering system would be consistent, reducing confusion for the end user, and reducing system error. Marines need to be assured that they will receive the proper credit for taking a course offered via multiple formats.

5. Man-hour resources would be reduced and the return on investment would be greater.

This command should coordinate all efforts with TECOM and specifically with the Marine Corps University.

Second, collocate MCI and CCE at Marine Barracks, Washington. While it might be of greater benefit overall for MCI to relocate to Quantico and fall under TECOM directly, MCI cannot due to the ceremonial mission of Marine Barracks, Washington and the dual primary missions with which MCI is tasked (ceremonial hosting and distance learning). CCE is not under similar restraints. Their products could be developed anywhere as they are outsourced.

Conclusion

By unifying MCI and CCE under one command, the Marine Corps can remedy the current disjointed command structure, fix its poor unity of effort and lack of coordination that adversely affects Marines taking DL courses. Adopting the above recommendations will greatly increase the effectiveness of the Marine Corps' DL program that has been doing great things for Marines for over eighty-five years. In the end, the Marines will experience less confusion, and increased customer service, and will receive a better overall product. Failure to adopt these recommendations will result in a continually fractured, less effective program.

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