

Restructuring the Lecture Method in Marine Corps Schools is
Overdue

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Introduction: Bury an Outdated Style

The lecture method has the same constraints as centralized leadership such as poor information dissemination and power being in the hands of a few. Despite these constraints, "the Marine Corps educational mindset remains one of centralization and control"¹ as exhibited by current curricula that includes a multitude of lengthy lectures in professional military education (PME) courses. Centralization is outdated and not in line with the Marine Corps' maneuver warfare doctrine, which calls for execution of mission type orders at the lowest levels of leadership.² Centralized leadership and the lecture method were products of illiterate societies with limited information dissemination capabilities.³ Today, the Marine Corps does not have the concern of having uneducated and illiterate members. Therefore, to improve instructional efficacy in Marine Corps Formal Schools, class lectures should be structured in thirty-minute blocks followed up by small group discussion.

Learning is FUNdamental

Restructuring class format in PME courses would create a more effective and appealing learning environment. Studies have not only shown that shorter lectures produce better results on exams,⁴ but conducting shorter lectures coupled with small group discussions is also more appealing to students.⁵ Centuries ago,

the lecture method was implemented due to the time consuming and extremely expensive processes of literature reproduction.⁶ Though the access to information has exponentially increased, the lecture method generally remains the preferred style of instructing throughout the Marine Corps. Lecturing does have a place in education, but it should not be the primary form of instruction it has become in Marine Corps schools. The lecture method is the easiest means to convey sizeable amounts of information to large audiences. Consequently, the lecture method remains the cornerstone of instruction in PME because administrators believe⁷ that the most effective results are derived from providing the maximum amount of information. In fact, implementing shorter lectures would facilitate tracking the standard of education because of the more focused material that would be covered.

Perfection: A Tragic Flaw

The Marine Corps strives for perfection in everything it does. However, striving for perfection is sometimes an inhibiting factor when it guides academic instruction. Though indoctrinating the maximum number of personnel with as much information as possible is a well-intended idea, it constrains our PME institutions to the painfully lengthy lecture method.

For example, Young quotes a professor explaining the reason for his increasing negative feedback:

"It was the most extremely boring thing my students had ever seen," Mr. Kehoe acknowledges. His course evaluations, usually glowing, grew dismal. "I had to sit to down and look at these lectures and realize that when you're looking at someone online as a talking head and shoulders in video, you just want to kill yourself after about 20 minutes," he says with a laugh.⁸

Moreover, the expectation in Marine Corps schools is that the instructors should be experts in what they teach. This, however, is an impossible expectation given the immense amount of knowledge that would have to be understood. The time to dedicate to making instructors experts in all facets of study does not exist. By scaling down lecture length, Marine Corps schools would then reduce the material placed in classes which would also facilitate producing expert instructors.

Time Critical

Time is never sufficient for what needs to be accomplished; therefore, the Marine Corps must constantly evaluate its efficiency and productivity rates. Additionally, the lack of time equates to the inability to "train the trainer," a term the Marine Corps uses when referring to the Marine Corps ensuring its Formal School instructors are properly qualified to train his or her students.⁹ Shorter lecture periods with lengthier small group discussions are highly effective in creating more

free time for both the instructor and the students. As a result, instructors would be able to apply their efforts on more focused information and facilitating small group discussions. Moreover, facilitating small group discussions allows students to bring their own expertise into the forum and alleviates the pressure on the Marine Corps of an unattainable goal: the expert instructor in all subject matter. Thus, implementing shorter lectures would result in producing expert instructors because the subject matter required to be placed in PME courses would be more focused.

To be Voluntold or to Volunteer? That is the Question

Appealing learning environments will improve voluntary participation in PME. Throughout the Marine Corps, PME is highly regarded as vital for the service member to remain mentally sharp. Conversely, some Marines also say that attending PME is not appealing because they do not like being "power pointed to death," a metaphor for a student being continually subjected to lengthy lectures via power point presentations. These types of lectures typically contain a whole host of useful information. However, these particular classes typically last well beyond thirty minutes; therefore, the average student is unable to absorb the majority of the material presented.¹⁰ A strictly power point environment also

equates to boredom, which is not appealing. As a result, some Marines who attend these courses inform their peers, who have not yet gone, that these courses are highly informative but mind-numbingly boring; a ripple affect adversely affecting some Marines' willingness to volunteer for future courses. The advantage the military has when it loses volunteers is to simply order its members to go. However, the Marine Corps practices the leadership trait of "know yourself and seek self-improvement" and should recognize that PME is an area where it needs to improve making PME appealing to attend.

Who Doesn't Like a Happy Marine?

A venue consisting of shorter lecture periods with an increased number of small group discussions would equal more volunteers from the operating forces. A greater number of volunteers would improve efficiency across several key personnel categories in the Marine Corps: manpower, individual units, and individual Marines. As a result of more appealing venues, military occupational specialty (MOS) monitors and career counselors would gain valuable time if they did not have to go through individual Marines' records in order determine if they should be strongly suggested to attend PME. Therefore, individual units would gain more enthusiastic Marines upon return from school, and individual Marines' morale would improve

with regard to attending PME. Managing personnel effectively by getting Marines to PME is vital to the success of a unit as stated in MCDP 1 *Warfighting*:

Since war is at base a human enterprise, effective personnel management is important to success. This is especially true for a doctrine of maneuver warfare, which places a premium individual judgment and action.¹¹

Thus, improving personnel management efficiencies and increasing morale by creating more appealing PME courses are both consistent with the mandate MCDP 1 places upon the Marine Corps.

Counter-argument: Degrading the Quality of Education

On the other hand, some educational traditionalists fear that reducing the length of lectures to thirty minutes or less will degrade the quality education provided by learning institutions.¹² In particular, Young references a long time professor's statement:

Marian C. Diamond, a professor of anatomy and neuroscience at the University of California at Berkeley who has taught for more than 40 years, says her students often ask for her lectures to be longer, not shorter. "We're following systems, and you want to give as complete a lecture at a time as possible," she says. "That's what worries me about education today. Everybody's trying to simplify it."¹³ Therefore, critics say, instructors need to continue conducting lectures in excess of fifty minutes in order to maintain the high standard of education in Marine Corps learning institutions.¹⁴

Furthermore, traditionalists feel that reducing lecture length is a direct result of the information age and the general public's need for instant gratification, and the standard of education as set forth by the lecture method cannot be compromised because of the growing impatience of students.¹⁵

Additionally, many traditionalists feel the lecture method is the most effective way to relay the greatest amount of information. Sally Brown and Phil Race amplify the importance of the lecture in their book, *Lecturing: A Practical Guide*:

Any number of students learning with their teacher at the centre. The teacher sets out the journey, the steps and (largely) the pace, however interactive it becomes. Also, the teacher is seen as the main source of knowledge, wisdom and balance in the session (the teacher has the big picture). I suppose for me, the main point of the lecture (at Level 1) has always been to the students understand this big picture, to be a focus for contextualizing of the detail, a framework in which to build the understanding. I suspect that by Level 3, we should be challenging things a lot more, almost using the lecture to help students develop the confidence to deconstruct the framework and build their own... This is probably very variable with subject discipline.¹⁶

The current operating environment in Afghanistan and Iraq requires service members to have an enormous knowledge base in a wide variety of subjects. Therefore, the requirement to provide this vast information drives the need to continue instructing via the lecture method. Furthermore, studies have shown no statistical difference in knowledge retention between conducting

lengthy lectures versus conducting shorter lectures followed by discussion groups.¹⁷ Besides, attempting to transform the educational system that currently exists would merely detract from the already limited time the Marine Corps has to conduct its educational programs.

Rebuttal: Courage to Break Tradition

The Marine Corps must begin to break traditionalist mindsets and not allow a challenge be the reason it avoids revamping PME class formats. Avoiding a challenge is not commensurate with either the Marine Corps' ethos or maneuver doctrine. In fact, maneuver warfare doctrine "requires intelligent leaders with a penchant for boldness and initiative."¹⁸ The Marine Corps cannot be hindered by the shackles of the past by continuing to utilize the lecture as its primary means of instruction in formal schools. Lecturing should be a small portion of the instruction students receive, not the majority. Therefore, the format of instruction should be as follows:

- Lectures should not surpass thirty-minutes because the average adult attention duration is merely twenty minutes.

- Lectures should be followed by small group discussions lasting anywhere from 60 to 120 minutes because small group discussions are more appealing to students.

Additionally, the time needed to create the expertise to effectively conduct extensive lectures covering vast amounts of material is not available.

Conclusion: PME-Finally On Board with Maneuver Warfare

The time for military schools to evolve from the lecture as the cornerstone of instruction is long overdue. Furthermore, the Marine Corps adopted maneuver warfare as its warfighting doctrine nearly twenty years ago.¹⁹ Maneuver warfare calls on Marines to apply the fundamentals of maneuver doctrine in all aspects of their lives. To the contrary, the centralized format of the lecture method is counter-intuitive to the Corps' maneuver.²⁰ Restructuring Marine Corps Formal Schools by employing succinct thirty minute lectures trailed by small group discussions must be done in order to maintain the highest standards of education while increasing morale.

1821 words

¹ Jeffrey S. Dinsmore, "Basic Officer Education: Developing a Maneuver Orientation," February 2005, 8.

² Department of the Navy, United States Marine Corps, MCPD 1, Warfighting, June 20, 1997, 57.

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- ³ Barbara J. Duch, Susan E. Groh, & Deborah E. Allen, *The Power of Problem-Based Learning* (Virginia: Stylus Publishing Inc., 2001), 5.
- ⁴ Patricia L. Carrell, Patricia A. Dunkel, Pamela Mollaun, "The Effect of Notetaking, Lecture Length and Topic on the Listening Component of TOEFL 2000," TOEFL Monograph Series-23, August 2002, 51.
- ⁵ Vanina Dal Bello-Haas, "A Study Comparing the Feedback Lecture Method and the Traditional Lecture Method," The Journal of Physical Therapy Education, Fall 1999, 1.
- ⁶ Kenneth E. Eble, *The Craft of Teaching* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1977) 52.
- ⁷ Eble, 43.
- ⁸ Jeffrey R. Young, "Short and Sweet: Technology Shrinks the Lecture," The Chronicle of Higher Education, June 20, 2008, 1.
- ⁹ Department of the Navy, United States Marine Corps, Commandant of the Marine Corps, NAVMC 3500.37, "TRAIN THE TRAINER TRAINING AND READINESS MANUAL," February 7, 2008, 1.
- ¹⁰ Bello-Haas, 3.
- ¹¹ Warfighting, 64.
- ¹² Young, 3.
- ¹³ Young, 3.
- ¹⁴ Young, 2.
- ¹⁵ Phil Race, *The Lecturer's Toolkit: A Practical Guide to Learning, Teaching, & Assessment* (Virginia: Stylus Publishing Inc., 2001), 105.
- ¹⁶ Sally Brown & Phil Race, *Lecturing: A Practical Guide* (Virginia: Stylus Publishing Inc., 2002), 17.
- ¹⁷ Bello-Haas, 1.
- ¹⁸ Warfighting, 57.
- ¹⁹ Warfighting, 2 (Forward).
- ²⁰ Dinsmore, 8.