

BEST PRACTICE PRINCIPLES FOR PROFESSIONAL MILITARY EDUCATION: A LITERATURE REVIEW

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Abstract: *This paper reviews the best practice principles that support tertiary-level military education programmes, as highlighted in the existing literature. It draws attention to some of the tensions existing around military education, and issues with a traditional approach to this. Recognising that military curricula need to change, the author focuses on the challenges of ensuring critical thinking, openness, and diversity are addressed by stakeholders and military educators alike, and summarises key principles which should be implemented during three phases (planning, delivery, and post-delivery) of a professional military education programme.*

Keywords: *best practice, military education, planning, military curricula.*

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to investigate the best practice principles that support tertiary-level military education programmes, as highlighted in the existing literature. Military staff and stakeholders, and those working in military education more broadly, could all benefit from further insights into multiple factors contributing to effective delivery, including curriculum design, the student experience, and elements affecting student performance. Such insights could articulate for stakeholders different interventions that could be implemented to raise standards and student achievement, and to develop best practice from staff. They could also help educators and curriculum designers gain a deeper understanding of, for

example, student expectations, as well as cultural sensitivities and challenges experienced by students working in a bilingual and/or multicultural environment. This review will help identify aspects of learning, teaching, and delivery which may be applicable in many contexts, such as face-to-face, fully online, and/or a blended delivery of Professional Military Education, and the delivery of other cross-cultural educational programmes, including courses for other professionals who are undertaking mid-career postgraduate-level studies.

2. WHAT IS “BEST PRACTICE“?

The phrase “best practice“ is used in education for a variety of systems, procedures, and behaviours

which “may or may not have been rigorously evaluated” (Arendale: 2018). Arendale, while questioning the frequent use of the term, defines best practice as the “wide range of individual activities, policies, and programmatic approaches to achieve positive changes in student attitudes or academic behaviors” (ibid.).

Such “positive changes” are certainly one aspect of best practice, but Hargreaves and Fullan (2012, p.51) go one step further, defining best practice as “existing practices that already have a good degree of widely agreed effectiveness”. Investigating military education programmes, in relation to recognised effective practices, will contribute to further understanding of best practice in education, in similar contexts.

3. FOCUS ON PROFESSIONAL MILITARY EDUCATION

When reflecting on military education, it is important to distinguish between different levels of training. Higher-level Professional Military Education aims to develop strategic leaders and commanders; professionals who may be diplomats and/or scholars, as well as soldiers (Kümmel: 2006). Command and Staff Courses, for instance, provide advanced education and training for mid-career personnel who have already achieved a certain status

and military rank. This contrasts with initial military training and Officer Cadet Schools, intended for civilians who are new to the military profession. This paper is not claiming to address all aspects of military education at different levels, nor is it aiming to analyse academic-military tensions in depth. Similarly, its principal focus is not on how military education helps personnel in their professional roles. It does, however, aim to review findings from research in key areas relevant to Professional Military Education.

Just as ongoing professional education is important for those working in fields such as law, medicine, science, or education, so too is it essential for military personnel. The available literature around Professional Military Education (PME), however, highlights several issues, including tensions that may exist in relation to military, academic, and ethnic cultures, issues around compliance and conformity, versus leadership and individualism, and the difference between education and training (Abbe & Halpin: 2009; Cucolo & Betros: 2014; Foot: 2001; Kelley & Johnson-Freese: 2014; Lamb & Porro: 2015; Murray: 2014; Syme-Taylor & Jalili: 2018). It is not clear to what extent such tensions continue once personnel return to their professional roles (Jenks et al.:

2007; Pigeau & McCann: 2002), as, to date, the effectiveness of mid-career PME has not been extensively investigated, and research into curriculum design and course content in PME, while it does exist (see, for example, Jolly: 2004; Reisman: 1994), is also scarce (Allen: 2015). Having said this, “A substantial body of recent work argues that the traditional approach to joint professional military education needs reform” (Lamb & Porro: 2015: p. 41), and one thing that all of the existing literature on Military Education agrees upon is that there is a need to review Military Education (Caforio: 2018; Martin & Yaeger: 2014; Murray: 2014; Silverstone: 2016; Watkins: 2016). As Murray (2014: p. 13) succinctly asserts, Professional Military Education “needs to change both what it is doing and how it is doing it”. Military academies and institutions, then, must actively reflect on how they are tackling the education of their personnel (Allen: 2015; Ayers: 2016; Emilio: 2000; Gerras: 2008; Miller & Tucker: 2015; Simons: 2011; Straus et al.: 2014).

4. TRADITIONAL MILITARY EDUCATION

If we consider the current state of military education today, what principles of best practice already exist? There is relatively

little published research around best practice and/or key performance indicators in military education generally, or within Command and Staff courses more specifically. Much of the literature that does exist is less than complimentary about traditional PME, delivered by military institutions. Martin and Yaeger (2014: p. 40) emphasise that a “common critique is that [the] curriculum is focused on the past, at the expense of the emerging future, [...] and not enough on critical thinking skills relevant to current issues”.

Lamb and Porro (2015: p. 41) summarise critics’ views that military academies and colleges “fail to attract top-flight faculty, teach outdated curricula, no longer pioneer or use innovative teaching methods, and pamper rather than challenge students”.

Emilio takes a slightly more positive stance, arguing that “For today’s military leader, Professional Military Education[...] offers one last chance to remedy past educational inadequacies” (2000: p. vi), while highlighting the shortcomings in a traditional approach to education; one which prioritises what to think, rather than how to think. Tollefson (2017: p. 90) agrees: “We train our young leaders to think monologically - in a simple, linear fashion”. Similarly, both Brodie (1973) and

Owen (2016) question education that teaches military personnel to follow orders, rather than to reflect on why they are doing so. Traditional military education, then, does not seem to be the answer for the development of modern military leaders, even if the need for ongoing military education is undeniable.

5. THE CHANGING FACE OF MILITARY EDUCATION

An increasing number of PME Courses are now conducted in cooperation with academic institutions, enabling students to work towards postgraduate qualifications in addition to the military qualification. The aim is for learners both to develop their communication skills, so that they may prepare themselves for higher command appointments, and to broaden their academic and professional knowledge, including, for example, theories and practices of leadership, management, and command, as well as major trends and dynamics (including historical, political, economic, cultural, and military). As Allen highlights, “Education is a necessary and valued component of leader development” (2010: p. 100). The global security environment is complex, and calls on the military to interact and engage with multiple and diverse cultures in different political contexts, in order to

reduce the risk of escalating conflict and to ease relationship building between different states. In military education: “The potential range of issues that must be addressed is... widening due to the varied types of activity the military can become involved with. Peacekeeping or peace enforcement and humanitarian relief operations pose very different types of challenges to those found in ‘traditional’ high-intensity, state-on-state warfare” (Whetham, 2018: p. 143). With significant potential for ethical challenges in the field, then, military personnel need to adopt critical thinking strategies to understand such dilemmas from multiple viewpoints.

6. THE CRITICAL THINKING CHALLENGE

A National Security Report from the U.S. Army emphasises that “the Army’s most critical asset will not be technology; it will be critical thinking” (Association of the United States Army, 2005: p. 21). This echoes the U.S. Air Force Doctrine, which states, “Success in war depends at least as much on intellectual superiority as it does on numerical and technological superiority” (Drew, 1992: p. 2).

Different services, then, (the U.S. Army and U.S. Air Force, in these examples) support the

importance of critical thinking for military personnel. This is significant given that many PME programmes incorporate multiple military forces with an emphasis both on joint operations and on preparation for promotion. As McCauley (2013: para 10) highlights: “To better prepare our forces[...], 21st Century Joint Force leaders must transform their approach to strategy and plan development from the linear intelligence-based thinking resident in the industrial age to one that embraces strategic foresight, to identify the complexities and uncertainties that mark today’s information environment”.

It would seem, however, that military graduates, even mid-career, often lack vitally important critical thinking skills (Cojocar: 2011; Hatfield et al.: 2011; Lamb & Porro: 2015), and this can result in poor communications, ill-judged decisions, and, ultimately, casualties in the field (Facione: 2015; Vogel-Walcutt et al.: 2010). The call to embed critical thinking in military curricula has existed in literature since at least 1973, right through to 2018 (see Table 1). Indeed, it is this aspect of military education for which there appears to be the most published content, and yet it remains unresolved.

It could be argued that, even in the phrase ‘Professional Military

Education’ itself, a tension exists between the idea of professionalism and the objectives of education. For Metz (2013: para 9), “education suggests a broadening beyond the confines of [professional] knowledge, and the development of critical thinking and creativity”.

A 2014 article by Nicholas Murray, an Associate Professor at the U.S. Army Staff College, stresses that, in PME, “the amount of time devoted to critical thinking has hardly changed despite the emphasis on a command system that is absolutely dependent upon it” (2014: p. 11).

Murray also questions how the U.S. Command and Staff Course can justify its decision to reduce the amount of time spent learning about critical thinking, when the Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff recommended the exact opposite; “What message is sent to the PME community and to the Armed Forces writ large?” (ibid.). Similarly, Gerras (2008), a retired Colonel and a Professor at the U.S. Army War College, draws attention to the gap between what military educators and policymakers would like to see, and what happens in reality. He goes on to highlight that: “Assessing an issue from alternative points of view is sometimes difficult for [military] students. By the time an accomplished lieutenant colonel [...] has reached this

level, they are sometimes inclined to believe that they have figured out how the world works, and, moreover, that their view is correct” (ibid., p. 8).

This view may be valid, to a certain extent. Command and Staff Course students, for instance, have attained at least the rank of Major (or its equivalent), and have usually progressed through the ranks thanks to their success and decision-making abilities in different roles. Individual advancement may have also resulted from respect for military culture and norms, including traditional hierarchical structures, yet these same structures often cause a barrier to thinking critically; “To foster critical thinking, Army teams must at times leave rank at the door” (Fastabend & Simpson: 2004, pp. 20-21). For Facione (2015, p. 22), critical thinking “leads us away from naïve acceptance of authority [...] and culminates in principled reflective judgement”.

Taking all of this into consideration, one principle of best practice in PME could be to ensure that critical thinking is incorporated at all stages of a military curriculum, in order to generate better leaders, and more successful military academics, in the long run.

7. ENCOURAGING OPENNESS

Although military students are usually well-travelled and are open to different ideas and self-expression,

given their established careers in the armed forces, expressing personal thoughts and commenting on the work of published academic authors, for example, in front of colleagues, superior officers, or one’s elders (in terms of age) may be perceived as professionally and/or culturally inappropriate. This is a significant issue, particularly for those studying at postgraduate level. To encourage openness, and to address any concerns that course participants and military staff may have about the degree to which they may speak freely, institutions may choose to adopt the Chatham House rule of confidentiality, established in June 1927 by the Council of the Royal Institute of International Affairs (Chatham House: 2018). The rule states: “When a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed” (ibid.).

In other words, whatever is said during the course may be shared but will not be attributed to any person in particular. Allowing individuals to speak freely and to express views which may, on occasion, clash with organisational beliefs, through the use of the Chatham House rule

(or similar), may be another example of best practice within military education.

8. THE NEED FOR DIVERSITY

The call for diversity among both learners and educators is important, and appears regularly throughout the existing literature (see Table 1). For Martin and Yaeger (2014, p. 41), PME should allow mid-career students, such as those enrolled in Command and Staff courses, to be paired with “fellow students from other departments, agencies, and other countries to expand their understanding of alternative views and cultures”.

Critics argue that “while diverse perspectives seem recognised as essential for complex decision-making and improving the performance of organisations, ... it is sorely lacking in professional military education institutions” (Johnson-Freese et al.: 2014, p. 59), with male faculty, mostly retired from military positions, dominating (Johnson-Freese et al.: 2014; Lamb & Porro: 2015; Murray: 2014). Several authors (Allen: 2010; Cucolo & Betros: 2014; Foot: 2001; Kelley & Johnson-Freese: 2014; Lamb & Porro: 2015; Murray: 2014; Waggener: 2015) appeal to PME institutions to review both the calibre and balance (including military

versus civilian) of their teaching staff.

In terms of relationships, it is important to reflect too on the teacher-learner connection, investigating, for instance, whether students respond differently to different lecturers, such as those from a Western background compared with those from a non-Western background, staff with or without military experience, or male versus female academics. These relationships may vary, depending on the cultural background of the individuals and on their professional experience. Understanding these intricacies will be of help to educators in military programmes and to anyone involved in multicultural education.

9. CURRICULUM DESIGN

With regard to best practice principles concerning the curriculum, Murray, for instance, recommends incorporating research time for students, as well as regular writing tasks, under the guidance of “the best serving officers and civilians – not only in terms of qualifications, but also in terms of their teaching skills” (2014, p. 13).

Teaching, though, “should not dominate the schedule. There has to be time for officers to think about what they have learned. Only that will allow us to excel at the critical thinking required by the Armed Forces of the future” (ibid.).

Thinking skills should take precedence over technical skills (Ulmer: 2010). Martin and Yaeger (2014, p. 41) concur, calling for PME to be “grounded in a core curriculum and enriched by electives and research”. Others believe that students should be able to choose elective papers (Cucolo & Betros: 2014; Martin & Yaeger: 2014), participate in seminars or scenarios which encourage reflective practice and synthesise learning across different papers (McCauley: 2013; Thain et al.: 2008; Vogel-Walcutt et al.: 2010), and complete a research project which, for instance, “challenges students to demonstrate what they have learned... by solving a practical problem in an area of their choosing relevant to their career goals” (Martin & Yaeger: 2014, pp. 41-42).

Stephens (2011, p. 75) stresses that “mechanisms should be available for individual learners to personalise their interaction with the content as well as with fellow students”.

In summary, the application of learning (and not just the learning itself) should be embedded throughout military curricula.

10. ASSESSMENT DESIGN AND ADMINISTRATION

Just as in any other educational context, practices around assessment

design and administration within military education should be regularly reviewed; as Wiggins underlines, “good teaching is inseparable from good assessing” (1992, p. 33). Although student and tutor understanding of what exactly is required to produce a ‘successful’ piece of work might differ (Lea & Street: 1998; Starfield: 2004), principles of best practice should be considered here. Is it enough for teaching staff to provide instructions and marking guides, for instance, for each assessment? It may well be that students and stakeholders, possibly from different countries and cultures, have different expectations around how much information and support should be available to learners, so that they might succeed in an assessment. Understanding the complexities faced by international students attending military education programmes in a country other than their own is also essential for stakeholders.

Added to this are considerations around cultural sensitivities. Alongside the potential challenges posed by the hierarchical culture within the military, students may also be impacted by their national values when it comes to critical thinking

and reflective practice. In some cultures, for example, “authority is seldom criticised” (Prescott: 2002, p. 247). This respect for authority may affect students’ ability, or possibly willingness, to critique published articles, for example, or to challenge something which is presented in class. This brings us back to the call for military educators to embed critical thinking and reflective practice throughout their programmes, whilst enabling freedom of speech (through adoption of the Chatham House rule, for instance), ensuring diversity, and reviewing the cultural and contextual appropriacy of their curricula, materials, and pedagogical approaches.

11. ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Other recommendations in the existing literature include conducting institutional self-assessments (Cucolo & Betros: 2014), establishing an alumni network (Thacker & Lambert: 2014), building online communities of practice (Stephens: 2011), seeking regular feedback from students on their experiences in PME (Lamb & Porro: 2015; Martin & Yaeger: 2014), incorporating more variety in assessment tasks (Thain et al.: 2008), using a portfolio approach

to demonstrate students’ progression through the programme (Allen: 2015), including distance-learning modules prior to the face-to-face course (Ulmer: 2010), and reflecting on the academic rigor of programmes which everyone passes (Cucolo & Betros: 2014; Kelley & Johnson-Freese: 2014; Lamb & Porro: 2015; Syme-Taylor & Jalili: 2018; Ulmer: 2010; Waggener: 2015). These strategies could all be included in principles of best practice when designing and developing quality education programmes.

12. CONCLUSIONS

Table 1 synthesises findings from a critical review of the existing literature, showing principles which should be implemented during three key phases (planning, delivery, and post-delivery) of a professional military education programme. Many of these recommended practices are iterative, and one would hope that military educators and stakeholders might consider them part of ‘business as usual’, as professional military education is brought into the twenty-first century. Institutions, both military and academic, would do well to reflect on and review their capabilities in light of these recommendations.

PHASE	BEST PRACTICE PRINCIPLE	AUTHORS
PLANNING	Ensuring diversity (across professional roles, genders, cultures, teaching staff (military vs. civilian),...)	Allen, 2010; Cucolo and Betros, 2014; Esterhuysen and Mokoena, 2018; Foot, 2001; Johnson-Freese, Haring, and Ulrich, 2014; Kelley and Johnson-Freese, 2014; Lamb and Porro, 2015; Martin and Yaeger, 2014; Mukherjee, 2018; Murray, 2014; Perry, 2016; Syme-Taylor and Jalili, 2018; Waggener, 2015
	Reviewing currency of curricula and learning materials	Goldrick, 2017; Lamb and Porro, 2015; Sookermany, 2017; Syme-Taylor and Jalili, 2018; Warkins, 2016; Whetham, 2018
	Reviewing academic rigour	Cucolo and Betros, 2014; Kelley and Johnson-Freese, 2014; Lamb and Porro, 2015; Syme-Taylor and Jalili, 2018; Terziew, 2018; Ulmer, 2010; Waggener, 2015
	Facilitating distance-learning modules (e.g. before course begins)	Esterhuysen and Mokoena, 2018; Syme-Taylor and Jalili, 2018; Terziew, 2018; Ulmer, 2010
	Enabling freedom of speech / adoption of Chatham House rule	Fastabend and Simpson, 2004
	Implementing a core curriculum and choice of electives	Cucolo and Betros, 2014; Goldrick, 2017; Martin and Yaeger, 2014
	Embedding critical thinking throughout the curriculum	Association of the United States Army, 2005; Brodie, 1973; Cojocar, 2011; Drew, 1992; Emilio, 2000; Faccone, 2015; Fastabend and Simpson, 2004; Gerras, 2008; Hatfield et al., 2011; Lamb and Porro, 2015; Martin and Yaeger, 2014; McCauley, 2013; Metz, 2013; Murray, 2014; Owen, 2016; Syme-Taylor and Jalili, 2018; Tollefson, 2017; Ulmer, 2010; Vogel-Walcutt et al., 2010
	Including research time / research project	Martin and Yaeger, 2014; Murray, 2014; Ulmer, 2010
	Including time for regular writing	Murray, 2014
	Encouraging / embedding reflective practice	McCauley, 2013; Thain, McDonough, and Priestly, 2008; Vogel-Walcutt et al., 2010
DELIVERY	Facilitating personalised, applied projects	Martin and Yaeger, 2014; Stephens, 2011; Terziew, 2018
	Adopting a variety of assessment tasks	Thain, McDonough, and Priestly, 2008
	Using a portfolio of learning	Allen, 2015
	Implementing institutional self-assessment	Cucolo and Betros, 2014
	Enabling regular feedback (both to and from course participants)	Lamb and Porro, 2015; Martin and Yaeger, 2014
	Maintaining academic rigour	Cucolo and Betros, 2014; Esterhuysen and Mokoena, 2018; Kelley and Johnson-Freese, 2014; Lamb and Porro, 2015; Syme-Taylor and Jalili, 2018; Terziew, 2018; Ulmer, 2010; Waggener, 2015
	Establishing alumni network	Thacker and Lambert, 2014
	Building communities of practice	Stephens, 2011
	Reviewing academic rigour	Cucolo and Betros, 2014; Kelley and Johnson-Freese, 2014; Lamb and Porro, 2015; Syme-Taylor and Jalili, 2018; Ulmer, 2010; Waggener, 2015
	POST-DELIVERY / ONGOING	

Table 1: Summary of best practice principles for military education, identified in literature

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