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Army Training Learning

The Army as a Training and Learning Organisation

Abstract

This essay deals with the challenges faced by the Educational and Training Services in dealing both with modern warfare whilst overcoming the lack of basic skills which is becoming a liability, by evaluating the effectiveness of the forces as a learning organisation.

In order to progress and improve as an Army, Army educators not only have to deal with basic skills shortfalls, but assisting other arms in overcoming cultural problems, in our own country and in the countries in which we are operating. Also, an analysis of how the ETS can deliver the educational needs for a difficult situation, in which not only basic skills but also languages, culture and an understanding of modern war and counter-insurgency techniques are needed. The difficulties faced by the ETS in teaching methodologies in order to overcome the wide range of topics and abilities faced by an Army educator both in barracks and on operations are also evaluated in detail.

“ What is the good of experience if you do not reflect?” Frederick the Great

Lt N Mazzei

Seminar Paper

The Army as a Learning Organisation

Introduction

1. In order for any organisation to be 'effective' it is important for the organisation to identify what its key aims are. Though this may sound obvious, large organisations such as the Army constantly need to identify exactly what its aims are in order to ensure that it is 'doing the right things' (Drucker: 1977). In order to do this, it is important to bring together 'individual motivations, norms and institutional expectations', as the effectiveness of the organisation is relative to the appropriateness of the situation (Mintzberg: 1979). The Army's situation right now is one of sustained operations in foreign cultures in support of other nations' internal security.

It is important to identify this in order to demonstrate how the Army is still focused on a strong strategic level of thought rather than a tactical one. Overall, it is important to evaluate the Army's capability to 'learn as an organisation', a far more difficult demand than many other organisations face.

For all the talk of training and learning amongst the writers of doctrine, makers of policy and practitioners, there is a lack of attention to dealing with the Army as an organisation. Theories of learning rarely appear in professional training programmes for training members of the Armed forces.

Often, the process of learning is overlooked and simply 'accepted' as something that just takes place within the training environment, with the correct knowledge being learned just as a matter of course (almost as if it was by some magical osmosis). This failure to deal with the learning process,

for individuals but especially as an organisation, will hold back the Army for many years. There is even a lack of resources produced by professional academics who deal on a daily basis with the understanding of 'learning' on the development of the human resource within the organisation and the organisation itself and the understanding that this learning may be in a anyway problematic is rarely discussed.

2. Approaches to learning

There are many different approaches to learning, two of which will be used to further our understanding the Army as a learning organisation.

i. Behaviourist Orientation. John B. Watson created the stimulus-response model. In this the environment is seen as providing stimuli to which individuals develop responses. This is very much the current learning process encouraged on the Command, Leadership and Management courses at Education Centres. According to James Hartley (1998) four key principles come to the fore:

- **Activist.** Learning is better when the learner is active rather than passive. ('Learning by doing' is to be applauded).
- **Repetition, imitation and practice.** Frequent practice - and practice in varied contexts - is necessary for learning to take place. Skills are not acquired without frequent practice.
- **Positive Transactional Approach.** Positive re-enforcers like rewards and successes are preferable to negative events like punishments and failures.

- The setting of clear aims and objectives. ' By the end of this session participants will be able to'. With this comes a concern with competencies and product approaches to curriculum.

ii. Humanist Orientation. This approach focuses on the potential for humans to develop as individuals, rather than as a scientific approach viewing individuals as objects that can be controlled within variables. Maslow's hierarchy of needs is perhaps the best known example, which also used to the CLM course to assist NCOs in understanding motivation, from physiological needs to self actualization.

The concept requires each level to be fulfilled until progress can be made to the next level. Understanding where learning comes in Maslow's hierarchy is not clear, though Tennant (Tennant 1997: 13) argues that achieving self actualisation may mean developing humans to what they are capable in which education would play a key role.

- Theory of Learning Organisations. Two theories which are of particular use in the case of Learning in the Armed Forces will be looked at.

i. The phases of learning (Double and Single Loop Learning). For Argyris and Schön, learning is all about making mistakes, realising those mistakes and then rectifying the problem. They identify two processes to finding solutions to the problem. The first is identified as single loop learning, where a resolution is found without a fundamental change to the structure or underlying theory. This comes from unexpected outcomes that arises from outside the expected ' norm' from actions made and are strategies put in

place to maintain results within the expected norms Argyris and Schön (Argyris and Schön, 1978: 2).

The norms and expectations themselves remain fundamentally unchanged Argyris and Schön (1978: 2). An alternative response is to question the norms themselves. This is described as double-loop learning. With a change in the values of our set parameters we change the field in which the system seeks to maintain its stability (Ashby, 1960). Strategies and assumptions may change along with theories which affect the individual and the organisation. Chris Argyris' research has focused greatly on exploring how can increase their capacity for double-loop learning.

Argyris argues that double-loop learning is necessary for institutions and organisations, operating in dynamic, rapidly changing and uncertain contexts, in order to make informed decisions in (Argyris; 1990). This method of learning is highly suitable to a dynamic institution such as the Armed Forces. Single-loop learning, then, presents when goals, values, frameworks and strategies are taken for granted.

The emphasis is on ' techniques and making techniques more efficient' (Usher and Bryant: 1989) Reflection is aimed towards making the strategy more effective within the framework and the restraints of the theory. Double-loop learning ' involves questioning the role of the framing and learning systems which underlie actual goals and strategies' (Argyris and Schön, 1996).

Argyris added to the single and double loop learning theory (advocated in its rawest form by Ashby) with the inclusion of conventional beliefs about

correct behaviour in institutions and social groups. These governing beliefs can be clustered together in certain world views, and as a result into aspect of organisational learning, within Models, of which Argyris has identified two.

Model 1

- " Achieve the purposes as the actor perceives them
- Maximise winning and minimise losing
- Minimise eliciting negative feelings
- Be rational and minimise emotionality"

This produces adversarial and defensive action strategies, poor relationships and poor learning (1982, p. 86)

Model 2

- " Valid information
- Free and informed choice
- Internal commitment to the choice and constant monitoring of the implementation"

The action strategies are less defensive and more collaborative and are conducive to effective relationships and learning. (1982, p. 102). These models, Argyris suggests, demonstrate how organisations enter the learning process and how successful they are at achieving organisational learning. Argyris found that most individuals and organisations will advocate the use of Model 2 values which will benefit the organisation and others.

In other words, it is their ideal aim. However, it is far more likely for individuals to actually occupy Model 1 cultures, due to the competitiveness and culture of independent work ethic that western society exists around. In addition, the Army shows a number of other features which adds to this.

(Argyris, 1982)

- *Power* is one. When there are power differences between people, it is often tempting to "solve" problems (or at least dispose of them) by fiat rather than understanding.
- *Specialisation* is another. People pursue the goals of their own position or section or branch, and may thus lose sight of the overall goals. This makes for competition rather than collaboration between person and person and between section and section. Competition in itself is based only around promotion as there is no room for 'money making incentives'.
- *Designing organisations around jobs* rather than around people is a third. People are expected to leave at home the more individual aspects of them, including their thoughts and feelings. A false rationality results. (Argyris, 1982)

Overall, Argyris and Schön's theories on organisation learning are able to take aspects of both approaches discussed in the opening paragraphs. It is important to recognise that 'each member of an organization constructs his or her own representation or image of the theory-in-use of the whole' (Schön, 1978).

This statement shares many hallmarks of both the humanist approach, with Maslow's perspective included demonstrating how the individual perspective and needs affect the organisation. The behaviourist, with the affect of the organisation guiding the individual is also shown. With encouragement towards the Model 2 culture then organisational effectiveness will push for greater organisational learning.

ii. Communities of practice. This theory explains that all communities and ones of practice, in which all individuals are members of. Wegner and Lave created a model of situated learning which suggested learning involved engagement within a 'community of practice'. The Army is too a community and within it are methods of practice, varying from culture, humour, training and education. As Wenger explains, " These practices are thus the property of a kind of community created over time by the sustained pursuit of a shared enterprise. It makes sense, therefore to call these kinds of communities, ' communities of practice' (Wenger, 1998). According to Wenger (1998), a community of practice defines itself along three dimensions:

- What it is about - its united aim as understood and continually renegotiated by its members. Though direction for The Army comes from outside, it is certainly united in its goals and methods by its membership.
- How it functions - mutual engagement that bind members together into a social entity. The Army is a social entity in a far more extreme way than the majority of organisations.

- What capability it has produced – the shared repertoire of communal resources (routines, sensibilities, artefacts, vocabulary, styles, etc.) that members have developed over time. (Wenger, 1999). The Army would identify itself as a sub-culture within the UK.

Understanding the organisation is key to it developing and learning and so the communities approach has been looked upon with interest in the last 10-20 years which has arisen along with the growth of interest in the learning organisation. This growth pushed the interest of academics towards informal organisational cultures and structures as well as analysing formal structures, both of which exist within communities of practice.

Similarities can be seen with Schön's and Argyris' "Models". The focus of communities of practice however, amplifies the informal rather than the formal aspect pushed by the formal structure within the organisation. The model also focuses on those within the organization and how benefits could accrue to the organization itself, and did not lie primarily with the individual members of a community of practice. This then fits similarly with Argyris' Model 2.

Within these theories and approaches to learning, we will look at the Army's success as a learning organisation, focusing on the era of change brought in with the attacks of 9/11, the huge increase in operational activity and the challenges faced by the modern Army. We will identify where these theories fit within the Army's methods of learning and further more how they can be used to improve the Army's learning effectiveness as an organisation.

4. The Army as a Learning Organisation

The Terms such as ' the strategic corporal' and ' three block war' remind us constantly about the need for well educated, well trained and well disciplined soldiers who are able to deal with difficulties that such complex operations present ([http://www. publications. parliament. uk: 30/08/07](http://www.publications.parliament.uk)).

Key to dealing with these issues is enhancing the soldier's decision making capability, so the soldier is better able to over come problems faced, think on their feet and apply their knowledge to deal with situations that they have not been explicitly told how to solve.

Further to this is the need for further and higher education in our soldiers and officers, without which development of our strategic, operational and tactical capability will be severely limited. The American armed forces, after spending thirty years forgetting lessons learnt in Vietnam, has taken the step to educate their soldiers in counter insurgency warfare, with officers reading British counter insurgency manuals.

They have also used books written by academics and former members of the British armed forces, talking of experiences in Aden, Malaya and Northern Ireland. Dealing with asymmetric warfare requires different things from our soldiers from conventional warfare, with culture, language and morality more important than simply applying firepower. Dealing with media and digital communication as well as applying the laws of armed conflict to unfamiliar ground.

Creating change in such an organisation is not simple, The Army, with a stereotype for blindly following commands, a rigid structure and an inability

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to move outside of its constraints, must change like any other organisation. In order to change, the Army must move forward to face whatever threats it is opposing and further to do this, must learn how it must operate.

This change is not a new process and has been taking place in Britain's Armed Forces ever since the first military revolution at Agincourt. How we learn as an organisation however, has not changed. Ashby's concept of single and double loop learning fits neatly into the military structure.

Firstly, most would declare the Army as a double loop system, changing its methods from the bottom up and as such would be regarded by Argyris as a Model 2 organisation. This is certainly not how the majority of military learning operates. The Army would very much be described as a Model 1 organisation, aiming instead to apply resources to resolve problems rather than affect a change in the structure and theory behind their current operations.

For example, much like the Americans experienced in 2003-2006 in Iraq, the British Army increased its force protection and removed itself from the environment it was attempting to control. Further to this, the control the forces were trying to export did not take into account free radicals within the system that were fundamentally uncontrollable, particularly from outside this system. With respect to learning communities, which recognises the importance of informal organisations and structures, the Army was not establishing a suitable environment to allow eventual control of the system.

It's defensiveness of its methods, stemming from an over-confidence from experiences in Northern Ireland and Bosnia, maintained the Army's place as

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a Model 1 organisation, maintained the single loop learning process and so never allowed room for adaptation and innovation.

In order to establish itself as a double loop system, it needs to break away from the Model 1 process and establish itself as a system that welcome innovation. This is not a simple procedure, as the military relies heavily on the system it is used to using. For example, the survival of horse cavalry in military systems around the world demonstrates how difficult innovation is for the military in moving into new systems.

Even though single loop learning would have demonstrated that in the era of industrial warfare the horse was no longer effective, many countries still tried to implement them as useful for mobility in a nuclear conflict (Katzenbach, 1958), another aspect of informal structures and communities of practice affecting innovation and learning. John Nagl, a US Colonel, discussed organisational learning and focused on the differences of the UK and US army's ability to adapt, learn and innovate. In order to identify any military as a learning institution (In this case, we will call a learning organisation as a Model 2, double loop learner), Nagl lists five questions (Nagl, 2005)

- 1. Does the army promote suggestions from the field?
- 2. Are subordinates encouraged to question superiors and policies?
- 3. Does the organisation regularly question its basic assumptions?
- 4. Are high-ranking officers routinely in close contact with those on the ground and open to their suggestions?

- 5. Are standard operating procedures generated locally and informally or imposed from the centre?

All of John Nagl's theories of organisational learning fit within the double loop learning process and along with Argyris and Schön's theories of learning organisations. It is certainly clear that the double loop learning process can be applied to the British Army.

5. The Educators Role.

Within the process of forcing the Army to become a Model 2 organisation (the term forced is used as the culture of the Army is not one of comfortable change) the Educational and Training Services must play a key role. As the ETS restructures itself to fit the Army's future needs it, it must also recognise itself as a learning institution and become a Model 2 organisation itself. Its roles within CLM, languages and training and development will obviously move with this; however it is in the change of CLM which is key as this is where we will have the most contact with the rest of the Army.

CLM V3 is a severe change from the previous system where we will be required to 'educate forward' (a horrendous term) and deliver to the learner at their position rather than expect them to come to us. It also requires a large amount of distance learning on behalf of the learner, putting the pressure of learning on the learner rather than utilising the character of the teacher to promote learning (something Schön was famous for).

6. Conclusion This process of moving the education onto the unit and the learner rather than at the heart and soul of the educator is an excellent example of single loop learning. Rather than changing the theory behind

what we are trying to achieve, the Army intends to change the course to being delivered by others who are not in the learning process. The pressure of communities of practice will greatly affect the learning process, most likely by hugely increasing the amount of plagiarism by soldiers who do not understand the benefit of the learning to their careers and personal development.

This failure to recognise the double loop learning process as a fundamental shift in methodology rather than the method itself will also be reflected on the Army's practises away from the ETS, especially in the infantry and the combat arms on operations.

The Americans, with their Iraq surge, did more than flood 30, 000 more soldiers into Baghdad; they reflected on their previous errors, searched for alternative solutions and implemented the process. They focused less on brute force and more on the mind, with information being the key area they process. Because of the British Army as a community of practice stuck in a process of tradition stemming from hundreds of years of success on operations, we have not been through this same reflection process.

The British Army is without doubt a typical Model 1 organisation with aspirations to be a Model 2 organisation. John Nagl identifies this with his questions on an Army's ability to 'innovate', questions we are not able to successfully answer. Because we are a Model 1 organisation we become defensive when others criticise our actions and often laugh at the Americans attempts at bringing control to a system that has too many variables.

But in this process, the Americans discovered they must create environments for local innovation rather than too force the system to be controlled in the process they wish. Outside of operations, the British Army still relies on the old system of “ the organisation learners because we train it”, an ironic position to be in as the Army prides itself on being the most experienced Army in the world. Argyris and Schön identify a process of phases (Argyris and Schön, 1978) through which the Model 2 organisation can be achieved, which Nagl’s process was based upon.

Through this system, it would no longer be necessary for individuals to go full circle on a learning process (such as the OODA loop or Kolb’s cycle) and can amend the process through double loop learning. This will only be achieved once a Model 2 organisation is achieved.

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