



Cultural Training for Military Personnel

Revisiting the Vietnam Era

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IN THE YEARS since the 9/11 attacks and in the subsequent conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, the U.S. Department of Defense has initiated many programs and policies to prepare military personnel to operate in foreign cultures. Although these programs are new, the problem of preparing military personnel for operations abroad is not. In this article, we review Vietnam-era and more recent cultural training methods in the context of their underlying instructional principles. There is much to learn from the Vietnam-era programs in terms of successful instructional methods and ensuring the transfer of cultural learning.

Relations between U.S. military personnel and members of the communities in which they operate abroad are an ongoing consideration for defense leaders. These relations have sometimes turned hostile, such as when naval ships were barred from harbors in Spain in the 1960s due to a liberty incident at a bullfight in which U.S. sailors were cheering for the bull.¹ Another example occurred when violent crimes allegedly committed by U.S. service members soured relations with German host nationals after World War II.² In addition to relations with host communities, intercultural interactions have been an integral component of operations, such as in training and advising indigenous forces. The United States has engaged in military advising around the world, from Southeast Asia to Central America. Thus, it was somewhat surprising that the U.S. military did not have existing programs on which to build when the need arose after 9/11 to prepare ground troops for the realities of counterinsurgency operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In the years since 2001, the U.S. Department of Defense has initiated many changes in policy and organizational structure, such as the addition of cultural issues to Army doctrine.³ Moreover, it has established culture centers to develop and deliver training.⁴ Although these programs are new, the need to prepare military personnel for operations abroad is not. For example, Special

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PHOTO: A U.S. 1st Division soldier guards Route 7 as Vietnamese women and school children return home to the village of Xuan Dien from Ben Cat, South Vietnam, December 1965. (AP Photo/Horst Faas)

Forces personnel have always had a cultural and regional element to their roles and training.

The years of both Vietnam and post-9/11 were rapid growth periods for research on and implementation of cultural training programs for general purpose forces. This paper will review some of the methods developed in those two eras to highlight notable methods that can be incorporated into current and future training and education programs.

In subsequent sections, we review the Vietnam era and more recent cultural training programs in the context of their underlying instructional principles.

Applying Merrill's Principles of Instruction

In synthesizing instructional design theories, professor of instructional technology M. David Merrill identified five core principles of instruction.⁵ These principles provide a prescriptive framework for designing instruction in a way that best facilitates learning. Applying these principles to cultural training can help identify valuable lessons from past programs and guide the design of current and future programs.

Learning is promoted when learners are engaged in solving real-world problems.⁶

Training for intercultural effectiveness should focus on the interaction between members of cultures rather than on the cultures themselves.⁷

Effective instruction tends to provide a real-world context or frame concrete problems for the learner.⁸ Case studies, critical incidents, and narratives provide context. They also frame cultural learning in terms of problems or situations that military personnel are likely to encounter. Early cultural training methods often advocated this approach.

A product of U.S. defense research efforts, the critical incident technique was developed by John Flanagan while devising methods for aviation personnel selection.⁹ Other researchers subsequently used this method to identify intercultural situations and published a set of critical incidents for use in cultural training.¹⁰ Critical incidents were to “bridge the gap” between the concrete and abstract to help stimulate the interest of those going abroad.¹¹ Because those least effective in intercultural encounters are often the ones most confident in their abilities, concrete situations can



(U.S. Army photo by T.D. Jackson)

Air Force Capt Tanya Manning, shown at the head of the “table,” eats her meal in the customary way of the Middle Eastern culture. Women take their meals in a separate room from men during this traditional Afghan luncheon coordinated by the 189th Infantry Brigade as part of cultural awareness training at Camp Atterbury, Joint Maneuver Training Center, 14 November 2009.

be helpful in pointing out the need for cultural learning. Such situations form the foundation of the culture assimilator method discussed in a subsequent section.¹²

More recently, the Air Force Cultural Studies Project gathered first-person narratives from airmen about their intercultural experiences on deployment. Dramatizations of such experiences are often cultural training tools, such as in the Army 360 training¹³ or the Army Excellence in Leadership tool.¹⁴ This approach contrasts with the area studies approach, which seeks to convey factual and conceptual information about a specific group, country, or region.¹⁵ Area studies include multimedia, films, novels, and reading materials reviewed and approved by experts.¹⁶ In Vietnam, a “package concept” included multimedia materials that did not require an instructor.¹⁷ Potential problems included oversimplifications or intentionally projecting a particular image of a culture.¹⁸

The military services’ culture centers used the area studies approach in their initial efforts in 2005 and 2006.¹⁹ Subject matter experts designed courses and materials on specific countries and topics, and also provided supplementary material in the form of guide books or “smart cards” as references on deployment.²⁰ Marine and soldier reactions to these materials were mixed and often unfavorable.²¹ The culture centers’ offerings have since expanded to include more operationally and functionally oriented instruction.

Learning is promoted when relevant previous experience is activated.²²

*An increased awareness of and insight into American values and assumptions results in greater alertness and ability to diagnose failures in intercultural communication, and more flexibility in modifying one’s own behavior.*²³

Because everyone is socialized into at least one culture, a service member’s experiences of his culture can teach knowledge and skills for engaging with other cultures. Although the impact of one’s own culture is often unrecognized and automatic, instruction can make cultural self-awareness explicit and use it to structure new learning. Activating or forming a mental structure for existing knowledge can help in acquiring new knowledge.

Various training methods can be used to build cultural self-awareness. For example, A.J. Kraemer

developed a cultural self-awareness workshop.²⁴ Its goal is to enable participants to recognize cultural influences on their thinking to decrease their “culturally conditioned assumptions.”²⁵ The workshop includes lectures, role play, and debriefing exercises in small groups.

Another method that develops cultural self-awareness is the contrast-American exercise.²⁶ Although originally developed for military personnel, it has also been used by World Bank staff, State Department staff, and business executives, and the International Management Institute of American University uses it now.²⁷ This face-to-face training tool was initially developed from research into American cultural patterns, mirror images of those patterns, and advisory overseas scenarios.²⁸ Trainees participated in exercises with live actors playing the role of someone from another culture. Additional training focused on intercultural communication.

Learning is promoted when the instruction demonstrates what is to be learned rather than merely telling information about what is to be learned.²⁹

*Comparing an optimal or criterion performance with an ineffective performance can give the trainee a basis for evaluating his own behavior in similar circumstances.*³⁰

Merrill argued that presenting examples is more effective than presenting information. Thus, the critical incident approach, depicting real-world situations involving conflicting cultural norms, can address this principle. Common assumptions people make in intercultural encounters involve *projected cognitive similarity* (assuming another person’s cognition is similar to their own in similar situations).³¹ Critical incidents can demonstrate concrete examples of this phenomenon.

Training can also depict cultural norms or practices that military personnel are likely to encounter. “Overseamanship” was an entertaining program intended to develop culture specific awareness and positive relationships with local populations for naval personnel on liberty in ports around the world.³² Developed by David Rosenberg, a culture expert and folk entertainer, in cooperation with the Navy People-to-People department, the program featured instruction by Rosenberg himself, who demonstrated cultural awareness through singing, dancing, and audience involvement.³³



(Lance CPL Stephen C. Benson)

Muhammad Naeem Ayoubzaada, a Dari language instructor for the 2nd Marine Special Operations Battalion, U.S. Marine Corps Forces, Special Operations Command, teaches marines and sailors Dari language skills and the cultural nuances of the Afghan people. The unit participated in language and culture training for deployment to Afghanistan at Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune, NC, 27 May 2009.

In another approach, group- or team-based training with multi-cultural members provided intercultural conflicts via direct experience.³⁴ Having trainees interact and perform tasks with foreign nationals in the training environment provides opportunities to experience the kinds of interpersonal conflicts that will likely occur on deployment, but in a structured environment. Such opportunities are readily available in military educational institutions, as these schools typically have foreign military students in attendance along with U.S. personnel.

Other proposed forms of demonstration include Air Force research examining the potential for modeling and imitation to help develop intercultural skills.³⁵ Prominent researcher in intercultural communication Richard Brislin also recommended using modeling and social support training.³⁶ This argument has recent echoes.³⁷ Although the training has a strong theoretical basis, it is unclear whether any subsequent design of cultural training explicitly included the modeling of exemplary intercultural behavior.

Learning is promoted when learners are required to use their new knowledge or skill to solve problems.³⁸

*Each individual needs to experiment with various ways in which new patterns of thought and new ways of observation and behavior can become a part of himself.*³⁹

Several methods give trainees the opportunity to apply their new cultural knowledge or skills by presenting situations in which the trainees can make errors or experience uncertainty that increase the likelihood of behavior change.⁴⁰

The culture assimilator tool was originally developed for military application and later refined for other intercultural situations.⁴¹ Early culture assimilators were culture or country specific (e.g., Greece, Thailand, and Korea). Culture assimilators were also developed to improve race relations in the Army, linking internal diversity challenges with external, intercultural training, as has been suggested more recently.⁴² Later, culture-general assimilators were developed for situations involving multiple foreign

cultures abroad or multiple cultures within one's home country.⁴³

Culture assimilators consist of critical incidents and different responses to or interpretations of those incidents. Trainees choose a response, and subsequent discussions address the appropriateness of each option for the target culture. Evaluations using different methods have shown that culture assimilators are effective, resulting in positive changes in both attitude and behavior.⁴⁴

In another method, the self-confrontation technique sought to increase the degree of rapport and efficiency of communications with host nationals.⁴⁵ Participants received a detailed description of interaction expectations, followed by a videotaped role-play exercise. Afterward, participants were given feedback of their performance while viewing the tape and then participated in another role-play exercise, again receiving feedback with video. Evaluation of this method showed that behavioral skills for interacting in Middle Eastern and North African countries improved in ROTC students and in officers, and the skills were retained over time.⁴⁶

Simulations and tactical games have been widely used in military training for some time. The Navy supported research to develop cross-cultural simulations.⁴⁷ In fact, Navy funding was used to develop Bafa Bafa, a widely known cultural simulations game in current use. The game involves multiple groups instructed on the rules of a fictitious culture. Fictitious cultures were constructed because military personnel were likely to work in several different countries, so needed to learn not just specific cultural norms and facts, but also principles underlying intercultural dynamics.⁴⁸

Once informed of the rules in Bafa Bafa, the groups must work together to achieve a common task while not revealing the norms of their particular culture to outsiders. As the groups interact, they get an idea of how ambiguous rules impede task completion. Business executives, students, Peace Corps workers, and other professionals who work across cultures have used this simulation. Ironically, it is less commonly used in the military, despite its origins with the Navy.

More recent simulations for cultural training include Enhanced Learning Environments with Creative Technologies for Bi-lateral Negotiations (ELECT-BiLAT).⁴⁹ After completing a negotiation

exercise set in Iraq, trainees in ELECT-BiLAT can view selected moments from their simulated meeting and receive feedback. This kind of training is a cost-effective means of providing simulations for large numbers of personnel preparing for deployment.⁵⁰

Learning is promoted when learners are encouraged to integrate (transfer) the new knowledge or skill into their everyday life.⁵¹

*Techniques must be devised to transfer the favorable behaviors learned during training to the real world.*⁵²

Integration, Merrill's fifth principle, suggests that learners benefit from reflecting on, discussing, or defending their new skill set. Teaching one's new knowledge or skill to others also accomplishes integration and transfer, as does demonstrating use of the knowledge or skill on the job.⁵³ In this way, the learner individualizes the new knowledge for his or her purposes. Providing training after personnel had been in country for some time was one recommendation to ensure cultural training transfer.⁵⁴ In addition, training programs in the 1960s and 1970s provided plenty of opportunities for integration and transfer by providing cultural instruction at the unit level.

More recently, integration and transfer have become central concerns for cultural training and education. Methods for integration that include a social component—teaching, discussion, and application on the job—not only increase transfer for the learner, but also can facilitate learning in others. Formally establishing communities of learning and practice help to achieve this goal, as the Army has done in recent years with its Battle Command Knowledge System, which provides opportunities for peer-to-peer exchanges and dissemination of knowledge.⁵⁵

Predecessor Cultural Training Programs

The methods described above were largely developed in defense research and partly implemented into training programs. Some training combined multiple methods and provided instruction at the unit level, such as the Personal Response Program and the Troop-Community Relations Program. Developed for and funded by the Army and the Navy, the Personal Response Program was

implemented for personnel deploying to Vietnam,⁵⁶ specifically in the combined-action platoons of the Marine Corps.⁵⁷ The Troop Community Relations Program was designed for troops stationed in Korea.

Cultural understanding and sensitivity were a tactical necessity for marines conducting counterinsurgency operations in Vietnam.⁵⁸ Surveys of marines' attitudes toward and experiences with the host nation population in both Vietnam and Japan helped identify important cultural information.⁵⁹ The critical incidents developed for the Personal Response Program were among the most effective aspects of the program.⁶⁰ In the Marine Corps, unit leaders led critical incident briefings to change attitudes and build concern and respect for the Vietnamese.⁶¹ The program eventually employed lectures, discussions, illustrated message posters, human-interest news releases, and role playing in simulated village settings at the NCO Leadership School in Okinawa and in the Orientation School for combined action units and supporting units. The program included cultural analysis, active problem solving, attitude modification, and learning reinforcement (e.g., feedback to the trainee).⁶² Combined-action platoon instruction, personal response, and other socio-cultural material totaled about 26.5 hours of training, or 38 percent of the combined-action platoon's predeployment training time.⁶³

The Personal Response Program was successful and well-received.⁶⁴ Indeed, feedback from those who received the training indicated that the personal-response component should have been lengthened.⁶⁵ Leaders reported the benefits of the program for learning about their troops' attitudes.⁶⁶ Overall, both the Combined Action Platoon Program and the Personal Response Program were viewed as quite successful. Unfortunately the ground forces did not widely adopt them.⁶⁷

The Troop Community Relations program in Korea had similar goals: positive regard for host nationals, social objectivity, the ability to deal with

culture shock, and the maintenance of effective relationships.⁶⁸ The program included culture-specific lectures on Korean customs, family patterns, and religion, followed by a series of discussion sessions. An action program was implemented including soldiers teaching English, social gatherings, and small-scale, cooperative community development projects between Americans and Koreans. The small-scale pilot program subsequently went Army-Korea wide between 1965 and 1967. An evaluation showed that attitudes toward Korean soldiers improved as a result of the training.⁶⁹ Even when poorly implemented, the program produced more positive views.⁷⁰

Conclusions

Many of the themes of and methods for cultural training in the 1960s and 1970s have parallels today. First, the goal has not changed. Brislin noted, "Cross cultural training has as its purpose the development of attitudes and behaviors of U.S. military personnel such as to enable them to function most effectively in a foreign environment."⁷¹ This goal has been echoed more recently by discussions of cross-cultural competence as enabling "external adaptability" and mission success.⁷² The Marine Corps uses the concept of "operational culture."⁷³ The consensus is that cultural understanding and related skills are a necessity for most military personnel, for at least some types of operations.

Second, both eras shared the common challenge of providing effective training to large numbers of personnel within a short period of time. Similar debates emerged about how to approach cultural training and education. In earlier times, some authors distinguished between area studies approaches and human relations training.⁷⁴ This distinction included not only the content of what was taught (specific norms and beliefs), but also the method, with human relations training being more experiential and case-based.

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LtCol Michael Kinsdorf, the 1st Battalion, 23rd Marine Regiment's commanding officer, shakes hands with an Afghan tribal leader during a cultural training scenario at the Marine Corps Mountain Warfare Training Center in Bridgeport, CA, 10 June 2009.

A similar distinction has emerged recently in the form of culture- or region-specific vs. culture-general approaches.⁷⁵ The military services have partly resolved the debate over the merits of each by adopting both. Predeployment cultural training tends to be highly tailored to the country and cultures that personnel will encounter on their upcoming deployment, whereas professional military education employs regional or culture-specific elements in addition to more general principles and skills. The Introduction to Culture course offered by the Community College of the Air Force is an example of the culture-general approach in military education.⁷⁶ It emphasizes developing cultural relativism.

Third, the use of similar instructional methods across eras is evident. Critical incidents and case-based instruction have been used both in earlier conflicts in Southeast Asia as well as for Afghanistan and Iraq more recently. Providing relevant, problem-oriented instruction and opportunities to apply cultural knowledge and skills are common events, although the media tend to differ. In the Vietnam era, application often occurred in live role play or in classroom discussion. More recently,

although live role play is still used at training centers, use of computer-based simulations is increasing.⁷⁷ New trainee intercultural skills emerge in interactions with instructional technologies, and then presumably transfer to human-to-human interactions.

The absence of earlier cultural training programs from recent discussions suggests that there is still much to learn from examining research and training from the 1960s and 1970s. For example, culture-assimilator and contrast-American methods do not appear in current approaches to military cultural training, although their impact on learning has been demonstrated in the literature. These methods could be of use in a variety of training and education settings and media today.

Instructional technologies present another issue for further examination. Clark has argued that different instructional media do not influence learning because they are merely delivery mechanisms, not the instructional method.⁷⁸ Thus, to the extent that instructional technologies use the same methods as in earlier cultural training, we would not expect any differences in learning.⁷⁹ However, different delivery media may not be instructionally equivalent. There

may be tradeoffs between using technologies that can reach larger numbers of personnel and using methods that better simulate the live interactions that occur on deployment to an unfamiliar culture (for example, intercultural anxiety).⁸⁰

A related issue here is the continuing need for valid and reliable methods to assess cultural learning outcomes. Assessment methods are needed to identify effective instructional methods and further performance gaps. In both eras, substantial resources and effort developed cultural instruction, but assessing its impact on learning or performance has been neglected. Although developed, no instruments to assess performance and relevant personal skills and characteristics were implemented for institutional use.⁸¹ Evaluation of training did occur in certain instances, showing that training had a positive effect on cultural learning in the short-term.⁸² However, its impact on performance was less often assessed.⁸³

A recent Government Accountability Office report pointed out the need for metrics to assess progress toward strategic cultural training goals in the Army and Marine Corps, indicating that the need for assessment methods is as salient as ever.⁸⁴ Although some research demonstrates that training tools have an impact on specific cultural learning objectives, explicitly linking those learning outcomes to the goals identified in strategic guidance or to mission performance has not yet occurred.⁸⁵

Implications for the Future

Vietnam-era cultural training for military personnel all but faded from consciousness during the 1980s. However, due to increasing demand, research on cultural training continued for corporate managers working abroad, providing advances in our understanding and assessment of intercultural knowledge, skills, and characteristics of benefit to military personnel.⁸⁶ Findings from this research have been helpful in the development of programs and policies for the current operating environment.

The policies adopted in recent years to institutionalize cultural training and education represent one important advance over the previous era. By incorporating culture into doctrine and into strategic guidance, the Department of Defense has greatly improved the odds that the cultural training programs implemented in recent years will survive beyond the conflicts that prompted them. The military services have each implemented a strategy for cultural and foreign language training, and the Office of the Secretary of Defense continues to highlight the importance of culture in workforce development.⁸⁷ Time will tell whether these efforts are sufficient to ensure that culture does not recede, once again, into specialist communities and out of the awareness of general purpose forces. **MR**

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