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Psychology and Basic Combat Training

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As long as there have been armies, there has been a need to train the men and women that occupy their ranks. For thousands of years, a special class of warriors has endeavored to impart the tools and skills of combat to new members of their formations. Combat instructor is one of the few professions that has as its output the survival of its students and the societies they represent.

With such high stakes, the US Army does very little to equip its Drill Sergeants with the knowledge and tools they need to optimize the time they have with their trainees. The methods and psychological approaches to training today's recruits can be vastly improved if the Army would take a moment to consider the psychology behind its training and implement some simple changes.

Throughout history combat instructors have struggled with scarcity of resources, insufficient training time, and various degrees of competence and capabilities in their raw material: the trainee. Today is no different. Combat trainers still battle for resources and struggle with limited training time and difficult trainees. Institutions still struggle to identify and train the best instructors to carry out this mission. Armies still rely on this critical component of force generation to fill its ranks with men and women qualified to do their duty in combat. The fundamentals of basic combat training are not new, only the specifics have changed.

There are two important populations involved in this transaction: the instructors (in the case of US Army Basic Combat Training (BCT) this is the Drill Sergeant) and the trainee (members of the society who volunteered to join the Army). The Drill Sergeant is reportedly selected from among the best Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs) in the Army. The average age of the Drill Sergeants is 32 years old with 10.6 years of service; 68% are married. Ninety percent of Drill Sergeants have combat tours (45% have at least two combat tours).[1] They spend nine weeks learning their trade at Fort Jackson's Drill Sergeant Academy, a centralized school for preparing NCOs to become Drill Sergeants. None of the topics covered in these nine weeks addresses the psychology of Basic Combat Training or the psychological transformation of the trainee over the period of training.

The second half of the training equation is the trainee. Today's average trainee is 20 years old and is a high school graduate. Few have had careers or joined a profession prior to enlisting. Many lack life skills as they never left their parents' home prior to joining. Educational backgrounds vary from college graduates to High School Graduate Equivalency Diplomas. Almost all are "digitally literate" although some are marginally literate in the traditional sense. In Fiscal Year 2013, the Active Army accessed over sixty-nine thousand Soldiers, highlighting the requirement for efficiency in training, as well as effectiveness.[2]

There is, of course, much talk about how the latest generation of trainees differs from the recruits of the past. The so-called “Millennial generation” is supposedly immune to age-old techniques of training, and therefore “must be approached differently.” While there are certainly characteristics of the current generation of trainees that impact the way they approach learning, it is false to suggest that today’s trainees are wired differently than their ancestors. Learning and retaining new knowledge requires creating imprints on the human brain and matching that with muscle memory. The fact that Millennials have, on average, played more video games, texted, communicated online, exercised less and have always had the availability of wireless voice communications does not change how their brains assimilate new knowledge. As developmental molecular biologist Dr. John J. Medina states, “Evolution trumps culture.” [3]

Basic Combat Training requires the assimilation of two types of new knowledge: declarative knowledge (“book” knowledge) and procedural knowledge (how to do something). The human brain uses different tools to acquire the different kinds of knowledge. It makes sense, then, that our training institutions should apply different methods to instill these kinds of knowledge in trainees.

Doctrine and Philosophy

The Army Learning Model

TRADOC Pam 525-8-2 (*The Army Learning Concept for 2015*) and TRADOC Pam 525-8-3 (*The US Army Training Concept 2012-2020*) are the guides for Army Training in general, and offer specific guidance for Initial Military Training (IMT) in particular. The *US Army Training Concept 2012-2020* lays out the purpose of IMT:

IMT is the critical entry point that combines indoctrination into the Army culture with its values and Warrior Ethos, along with basic skills training, comprehensive fitness, and cultivating a lifelong learning mindset to take responsibility for individual career progress.[4]

The ATC goes on to say that IMT “provides the foundation” for subsequent training, and that it provides the “basic knowledge, skills and behaviors” that trainees need to become Soldiers.[5] Among the most important points in the doctrine is the fact that IMT is a foundational experience: it is designed to introduce knowledge, skills and behaviors so that Soldiers are ready for *subsequent* training at their unit. While a goal for IMT is that Soldiers can contribute to their units, there should be no expectation that Soldiers are combat-ready the minute they arrive from IMT, but that they are *basically trained Soldiers ready to learn* and contribute to the specific collective tasks their units require.

The purpose of IMT, then, is to provide the foundation and basic knowledge necessary for civilians to become Soldiers, and to instill discipline and the Army Values. This second part is essential: discipline and Army Values are what distinguish a Soldier from a well-trained civilian. Instilling Army Values, the Soldiers Creed and the Warrior Ethos are integral parts of the soldierization process. Some further expectation management is necessary here: 9 weeks of Basic Combat Training and a few weeks of Advanced Individual Training will not reverse 18 years of values instilled throughout the trainee’s childhood. Soldierization is a powerful process, but it is not brainwashing.

ALC 2015 also seeks as a goal that all Soldiers develop “21st Century Soldier Competencies.” These competencies “are essential to ensure Soldiers and leaders are fully prepared to prevail in complex, uncertain environments.[6] Current Program of Instruction (POI) does not adequately address these competencies.

Effectively training military recruits *a priori* requires taking advantage of characteristics of the trainee. This learner-centric approach considers the applicable dynamics of adult learning while also countering the obstacles to learning. Since the operating environment places increased demands on distributed decision making, personnel at the lowest levels must do more than just remember procedures and follow orders: now they must be capable of making decisions independently. This implies that military personnel receive substantial training in higher-order cognitive skills.[\[7\]](#)

Adult Learning Model

ALC 2015 also briefly addresses the “Adult Learning Model.” Adult Learning Model is a learning approach based on assumptions of how adults learn as compared to children. Based largely on the work of educator Malcom Knowles in the 1980s, the approach to learning distinguished the adult learner from the child learner based on four primary assumptions, all of which have to do with the learner’s ability and motivation to learn:

- Their self-concept moves from dependency to independency or self-directedness
- They accumulate a reservoir of experiences that can be used as a basis on which to build learning
- Their readiness to learn becomes increasingly associated with the developmental tasks of social roles
- Their time and curricular perspectives change from postponed to immediacy of application and from subject-centeredness to performance-centeredness[\[8\]](#)

Many educational endeavors seek to employ the Adult Learning Model including many graduate programs, corporate training methodologies, ALC 2015, SMART training, and others. While there has been some significant progress in many arenas in applying the Adult approach, there are some issues regarding its applicability in the IMT environment.

To apply the Adult Learning Model to the IMT environment (particularly BCT), one must first determine if the model’s assumptions about the learner are valid. Many BCT trainees do not necessarily meet the requirements to be considered an adult learner. Many lack the requisite maturity and confidence to transfer from dependency to independency in their learning. Few have accumulated sufficient life experience to use as a basis to build learning. Their interest in social roles rarely affects their readiness to learn whilst in the BCT environment. There are certainly BCT trainees that have the requisite maturity and life experience for which the Adult Learning Model is appropriate, but it is doubtful that this represents more than a small minority of trainees. Methods used by US Army training programs are designed to address the majority of the training audience, and the mature, experienced adults who attend BCT are likely too few in number to base a change in the training model.

Although many trainees may not match up with the underlying assumptions behind Adult Learning Model, they could benefit from certain aspects of the approach that may be appropriate in the BCT environment. Bearing in mind the differences between Knowles’ learner and the BCT learner, there is merit in identifying strategies and principles that may be appropriate for both purposes. Corporate trainer Jean Barbazette describes Adult Learning Principles in terms of motivation and retention, methods of training, and the adult learning environment.[\[9\]](#) The Army could certainly benefit from applying at least some of these concepts:

- Adults are motivated to learn when THEY identify they have a need to learn
- Adults retain learning that they discover and forget much of what they are told
- Adults learn best from their own experiences
- Adults hate to have their time wasted
- Adults will become bored and will multi-task when participation isn’t interesting or required

The mass-production design of large training posts is intended for efficient use of ranges and training facilities, not for efficient use of trainees' time. There is far too much wasted time during and between training execution, time that could be spent on self-teaching (discovery) or peer teaching. Trainees given a creative, productive outlet will make good use of it.

Obstacles to Learning

BCT trainees are bombarded with new information from the time they arrive in the training unit until they graduate. While the POI indicates that trainees are expected to remember all the information and be capable of performing all the tasks taught to them over the course of training, it is unrealistic to believe that all trainees retain all the information presented to them or adequately demonstrate all of the skills they learned. In order to determine the obstacles to reaching this goal, it is important to understand the process by which new skills or knowledge are obtained.

The State-based Information-loss Processing Model is based on a memory model focused on higher-order learning (application of knowledge in real-world settings).^[10] At the risk of over-simplification, the learning process essentially runs from the learner being exposed to new knowledge (which is discerned from competing information) which enters the sensory memory. Through a selective process, the new knowledge is either lost or enters into the Short Term Memory (STM). The knowledge, if retained, goes through a series of filters as it progresses towards the Long Term Memory (LTM). Once in LTM it is available for retrieval and output, either in the form of rote memory or useful, applicable knowledge.

Along this path of new knowledge accrual lie the obstacles that inhibit learning. Competing information disrupts the sensory memory from absorbing the intended knowledge through distraction and sensory overload. Picture the new trainees during their first few days at BCT. Disoriented, stressed, and sensing much more than they can assimilate, new trainees have little hope of sensing all the information that is thrown at them, let alone retaining more than a fraction of it. Of the information that does enter their sensory memory, only that information that they attend to even enters into short term memory. Given the short amount of time that information remains in the sensory memory (approximately 1-2 seconds), it is critical that trainees attend to the new information or it will never enter STM and the learning process will end there.

To assist trainees in attending to the information, trainers must capture the trainees' full attention. Contrary to some Drill Sergeants' belief, fear is not necessarily the best tool here. Reducing distractions (yelling at other trainees, people entering or exiting the classroom, natural disorientation) is challenging. But to maximize the chances that information is attended to, trainers must increase (or decrease) the pace and complexity of information (depending on the audience and material). The instruction must capture the attention. TRADOC's Sex Signals class which uses an interactive format, comedy, and talented improvisation actors to teach appropriate social behavior is routinely the only class during the first several weeks of training that trainees can recall with any detail by the end of the training cycle.^[11]

Once in STM, new knowledge runs the gauntlet of obstacles keeping it from entering long-term memory. Forgetting, task-shedding, and disinterest inhibit the learner from properly filtering and filing information into LTM. These can be mitigated through a variety of means, including advance organizer (preparing trainees for receiving the new information by pre-teaching aspects of the training), use of narrative (story-telling) or multimedia (use of visual and auditory cues simultaneously) and stressing the relevancy of the tasks to be learned.

Motivation and Retention

Numerous studies have confirmed that trainees' motivation to learn and attend to training has a major

effect on their skill acquisition, retention, and willingness to apply the newly acquired knowledge, skills and attributes on the job.^[12]

This has been widely known to military trainers since time immemorial, therefore much attention is given to making sure trainees are “motivated”. But what does that really mean? How is the trainee motivated? Is it sufficient that the trainee should be intimidated into learning through fear of punishment or fear of failure? It is interesting that neither the *Army Learning Concept for 2015* nor the *US Army Training Concept 2012-2020* address means of motivation for the IMT environment.

There are numerous schools of thought about what constitutes a “motivated” trainee in the BCT environment. Anecdotal evidence in terms of sensing sessions and exit interviews reveals that most trainees in BCT are motivated by a desire to perform well for the Drill Sergeant more than any other factor. However, studies have shown that trainees retain information best when they learn a skill or knowledge when they believe they will need the skill in the near future, that they are able to learn the skill, and that there is value in the skill.^[13] If this is accurate, it brings into question the efficacy of motivation based on Drill Sergeant affinity (or fear) to instill the skills and knowledge into trainees for long term retention. Yet it is intuitive that there is a connection between trainee and trainer that makes a significant difference in the attitude and motivation of the trainee. This attitude, in turn, affects the transfer of knowledge from trainer to trainee. It does not, however, appear to significantly impact the *long-term* retention and recall of the skill or knowledge.^[14]

So what form of motivation is most appropriate for the BCT environment? FM 6-22, *Army Leadership* describes motivation as emerging from “people’s confidence in themselves, their unit and their leaders.”^[15] *Army Leadership* lists the following motivational factors:

- Self-efficacy (the confidence in one’s ability to succeed at a task or reach a goal)
- Emotional inspiration
- Goal setting
- Positive reinforcement (incentives, recognition)
- Values and shared goals
- Task enjoyment
- Self-responsibility (the opportunity to be responsible for their own work and to be creative)

While the Field Manual is written for leaders in field units, Drill Sergeants should be applying these motivational factors from the start. Modeling good leadership throughout the training period would enhance motivation, which, in turn, would enhance learning. Too often, it is difficult to draw the linkage between the way some Drill Sergeants treat trainees and the self-confidence and motivation that *Army Leadership* espouses.

Attitude (Trainee) and Temperament (Instructor)

Motivation in a learning environment is contingent on both the trainee and the instructor dispositions. The transfer of knowledge is easily inhibited by poor attitudes on both sides of the training team. The behavior and demeanor of Drill Sergeants and instructors is a significant determinant in the efficacy of training. “Effective behaviors included 'reduction of vagueness', 'discipline methods', use of less conventional methods', 'relating to personal experience' whereas ineffective behaviors were 'poor preparation', 'inefficient use of time' and 'belittling the class’.”^[16] These behaviors are common across military services and are displayed in the instructors of multiple western militaries.

Many popular methods of training employed by Army Drill Sergeants do not optimize learning. Even a

cursory review of the literature would produce significant, beneficial changes in the Drill Sergeants' approach. Psychologist and author of *On Combat* and *On Killing* Dave Grossman offers the following principles for instructors:

Principle 1: Never "Kill" a Warrior in Training. Learners are expected to complete a scenario even if hit, stabbed or shot. As a trainer, tell them, "You're not dead until I tell you you're dead!" Don't give up, always win.

Principle 2: Try to Never Send a Loser off Your Training Site. Have your participants go through a scenario as many times as necessary in order to have them succeed. Scenarios designed to make the trainee look foolish or fail just prove that the training designers are incompetent.

Principle 3: As a Trainer, Never Talk Trash about Your Students. Don't ridicule or try to tell funny stories about the last trainee who tried to complete your scenario. Your role as a trainer/leader is not only to pass along knowledge but also to inspire. You cannot do this when you are not respected. If criticism is to be given, give it in private. If praise is warranted, do so publicly.

Encourage your learners not to worry over a 'bad' day of training. Fix the problem, correct the deficiency, strive to improve and move on.(Grossman and Christensen, *On Combat*)

While Drill Sergeants graduate from Drill Sergeant School well-versed in the POI, discussions about the psychological approach to training (as discussed in Grossman and elsewhere) are completely absent. Violations of these principles can be observed at any of TRADOC's training posts during any day of training.

While TRADOC's POI spells out the tasks and methods that every trainee must endure, the specifics of how (in terms of posture, motivation and attitude) training is conducted is left to the executors. The pre-training that sets the stage (and overcomes many learning obstacles) is not defined by POI. The introductions to each task that explains relevancy, identifies potential errors, or assists in cognitive labeling are not defined, but are left up to each trainer and training team to determine and employ. Each unit must invest the time in developing schemas that reinforce the POI learning objectives before, during and after each training event if there is any hope of Soldiers retaining the information and transforming it into a useful output.

A common response this discussion is that the Army has time-honored traditions. The image of the burly Drill Sergeant screaming at a trainee is in our heritage, and has produced some of the finest Soldiers the world has ever known. "We must be doing something right," the saying goes. It is true that the US Army has produced some of the world's best Soldiers, but it is just as true that fear and intimidation has stood in the way of even better training throughout our history. Tasked with developing military training for World War I, then LTC Lincoln C. Andrews observed and studied different styles of training techniques in order to optimize training for the nation's mobilization. The maxims in his 1916 *Fundamentals of Military Service* are completely consistent with those of Grossman and Siddle today:

We only ask that our military instructor use the same common sense methods, put the same human interest into instructing the recruit how to do each of these things that he would use if, as a baseball coach, he simply had to train a beginner to play on his team that season, because this new man was

the only available material. He would not march this man stiffly up to the home plate, have him execute right face and stand with eyes to the front, chin in and shoulders back, while he explained to him at length how to hit a pitched ball; then pitch a swift one and yell, “Wake up, what the h---- are you doing!” because he didn’t hit it. Yet we constantly see instructors teaching military recruits by just such stupid methods, ---and sagely talking about how it takes two years to train a Soldier. They could not do it in ten. – LC Andrews, 1917[17]

Self Instruction

Trainers are often hesitant to employ peer training or self instruction during the course of training. This is often based on the assumption that trainees who do not know or understand the material will teach or acquire bad habits or erroneous information. While this is certainly a risk, there is ample evidence that trainees who spend time attempting to learn on their own not only retain new information more efficiently, but are able to internalize the new knowledge in such a way as to lead to expertise much more quickly than those who passively await information. This, too, was a staple of Andrews’ methods of instruction, finding that Soldiers often learned best by figuring things out themselves and from each other. Andrews chided instructors who wasted trainees’ time, giving explanations to men who can read. “There is no training to be had from standing in ranks listening to explanations, it is ridiculous. I sometimes wonder if the officers who deny their men this privilege of study, fear their learning the book too well.”[18]

Warrior Ethos and Discipline

Most of this article has focused on the cognitive challenges of imparting new knowledge and skills to the trainee. However, a major component of the BCT transformational experience is the indoctrination process centered on the Warrior Ethos, the Soldier Creed and the Army Values. Together, these provide the basis for discipline in units, and maximize the value of the Soldier as an adaptive, creative thinker capable of operating across the full spectrum of conflict.

There are challenges to inculcating trainees with the Warrior Ethos. Past warrior cultures (Spartans, Romans, Mongols, etc.) were warrior cultures embedded within warrior societies. This is not the case for the US Army. As author Steven Pressfield points out, “The American military is a warrior culture embedded within a civilian society.”[19] In our case, the values of the warrior culture are not necessarily shared by the society at large. In fact, many of their values are opposites:

- Civilian society rewards wealth and celebrity; military culture prizes honor
- Aggression is valued in a warrior culture; in civilian life you can go to jail for it
- A warrior culture trains for adversity; luxury and ease are the foals advertised to the civilian world
- Selflessness is a virtue in a warrior culture; civilian society gives lip service to this, while frequently acting as selfishly as it possibly can [20]

Drill Sergeants must overcome the bias inherent in the civilian culture that lies counter to the Army Values and the Warrior Ethos. They can best do this through constant reinforcement and by consistently modeling the appropriate behaviors. As trainees learn to respect and admire their Drill Sergeants, they will adopt their mannerisms and values as their own, voluntarily leaving behind the cultural artifacts they no longer need as they embrace their new profession.

Recommendations

The Army can significantly improve the effectiveness of its Initial Military Training by helping its trainers

to incorporate a basic psychological understanding of how trainees learn and by incorporating best practices from Adult Learning. Specifically, the Army should:

- Adapt Drill Sergeant School to develop experts at training (instead of experts at just following Programs of Instruction)
- Educate Drill Sergeants in the psychological components of learning
- Identify the relevant aspects of Adult Learning approaches and incorporate them into IMT
- Remove obstacles to learning inherent in the IMT environment, especially trainer temperament
- Change the criteria for Drill Sergeant selection to identify those NCOs with the right skills and attributes for training
- Select leaders for the training environment specifically for their ability to assess the efficacy of training methods

Conclusion

There is ample evidence that tried and true methods of teaching, coaching and mentoring recruits still works, but that the Army fails to deal with many of the obstacles to learning. The largest contributing factors to retention in learning are attitude and temperament: the motivation for trainees to recognize the need for a skill and a desire to learn it, and the Drill Sergeants' ability to impart this knowledge in a manner that optimizes learning and retention.

To maximize the impact of training at BCT, the Army must focus its attention on developing Drill Sergeants who understand the psychological components of learning and that incorporate best practices for training and developing Soldiers. The US Army Drill Sergeant School should not only incorporate best practices in training, but should provide the background in psychology that would help Drill Sergeants develop techniques consistent with optimized learning. Too often, Drill Sergeants cannot express the reasoning or expected outcome of the methods they are using. This should change.

Finally, the Army must identify NCOs with the right skills to become Drill Sergeants and the right leaders to lead them. Good performance in units is a necessary but not sufficient qualification for selection as a Drill Sergeant. The ability to do a task does not necessarily align with the ability to teach it, nor is the ability to teach mechanical skills to trainees sufficient to develop motivated, dedicated values-based Soldiers ready to contribute to their first unit of assignment. Developing the best Soldiers the Army can produce requires much more than just instruction on physical skills. It requires Drill Sergeants who understand and implement the best methods for developing Soldiers based on an understanding of how they learn.

End Notes

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