Innovating the Commandant's Professional Reading List

Creating incentives and a formal program

by Capt Cameron Lahren

Cpl Brown finishes cleaning the bolt of her weapon after a long firing week on the rifle range. She is proud that her attention to detail and discipline has paid off for her first expert rating. She spent long days sitting in a classroom reviewing shooting fundamentals, which was followed by hours of practicing uncomfortable firing positions. She knows that when her expert score is recorded by her battalion S-3 her composite score will be high enough for promotion. She trained hard and knows that she deserves the results. Cpl Brown's rifle range example illustrates the ability of the Marine Corps to tie annual training requirements to a Marine's career. Replace Cpl Brown's situation with any Marine running the physical fitness test or the combat fitness test, and the result is the same. The Marine's performance results in reward or remediation. The same holds true for a Marine battalion. If all Marines have not completed their annual and fiscal training requirements, then a battalion must remediate. If a battalion finishes its annual requirements early, then it garners favorable attention.

But this same level of importance is not given to the Commandant's Professional Reading List even though it is an annual training requirement for all Marines. The Marine Corps has unintentionally created a perverse incentive system in which it fails to invest in a

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program that tracks reading completion for the force. The Marine Corps should innovate the Commandant's Professional Reading List by using available off-the-shelf technology to incentivize participation across the Corps. By doing this, the Marine Corps can create a system of record to track reading completion and standardize reading completion criteria.

The Marine Corps requires reporting seniors to record reading completion via directed comment in a Marine's fitness report or reflected in a Marine's proficiency and conduct marks. *ALMAR 015/17* establishes the annual reading requirement and record process for all Marines. It states, "Each Marine shall read a minimum of five books from the 'Commandants Choice' or 'Grade Level' sections each year." However, unlike every other annual or fiscal training requirement, the Commandant's Professional Reading List is not established in a system of record. There is no standard, centralized way to track individual completion. Without a system of record, a battalion training section cannot verify completion. A Marine has no way to display reading

completion over multiple years without referencing multiple fitness reports. A new reporting senior cannot verify that a Marine is reading new books from the reading list instead of recycling those he or she already read. These issues can be answered with the introduction of a program called Accelerated Reader (AR). AR is reading software developed for K-12 students that "assesses whether students have read books or selections of text." AR also creates individual user profiles much like a learning profile in MarineNet to record and track books read per student. The profiles enable a system to record the completion of every book read in a Marine's career. With a program like AR, a reporting senior can ensure that a Marine has met the professional military education requirement for the year, and a battalion commander can track the annual training status for the battalion.

AR evaluates reading completion through the use of online quizzes. Instead of being subjected to non-standard evaluation criteria such as book reports, AR quizzes hold Marines to the same evaluation standard. If a company commander of 180 Marines used 1-page book reports to verify the reading requirement, he would read 900 pages of reports per year. If the company commander delegated the responsibility to his platoon commanders, they would read 220 pages per year. The task of reading and grading of papers turns the

Marine Corps into an English lab for lieutenants. Because of the length of the reading list, the fair grading of the essays is a challenge if not impossible. I think most professionals in academics would agree that a reputable English teacher would not grade a book report if he has never read the book. However, if a platoon commander is to fairly grade every Marine in the platoon, then the platoon commander would have to read 34 books from the reading list. A company commander would have to read 47

proctors. To mitigate cheating, testing should be conducted in the same manner as Regional, Cultural, and Language Familiarization tests. This also the reduces, if not eliminates, the ability of quiz takers to memorize the answers to quizzes by changing the order of answer choices for each quiz. In addition to quiz monitoring and quiz choice variations, AR quiz writers watch the movies of books to ensure quizzes are free of questions easily answered from a movie. Therefore, the details that stand out in

comprehension in the operating forces. A Marine officer is at best checking for completion and basic understanding when evaluating papers. AR also checks for completion and basic understanding with automation and greater fidelity.

The Marine Corps would need to field the program across the entire force for it to be a viable system for record for the Commandant's Professional Reading List. A localized solution at one of the MEFs would not allow for a Marine's reading record to follow him after a permanent chance of station to a different MEF. The acquisition process for AR would need to cover every Marine in the force.

In summation, the AR program innovates by incentivizing individual Marines to participate in the Commandant's Professional Reading List. The program does this by eliminating subjective grading and completion criteria with standardized testing. The AR program incentivizes by potentially reducing tens, if not hundreds, of hours of reading and grading of book essays by commanders. For ten dollars a year per Marine, AR adds incentive for all Marines by creating a system of record that follows a Marine for his or her career. This system of record prevents the resubmission of previously read books, and it adds credibility to a Marines' professional military education biography. Most importantly, AR is an incentive for the Commandant because it forces commanders to ensure that the annual training requirement of the Commandant's Professional Reading List is met. Just as Cpl Brown is held to a high standard on the rifle range, the Commandant's Professional Reading List would be held to the same standard as all other annual training requirements with AR.

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books from the list to be able to fairly grade everyone in his company. Instead of putting the reading and grading onus on the platoon or company commander, an AR quiz serves as a standardized automated test. This standardization reduces the untenable workload for the officer ensuring compliance with the reading list, and it eliminates subjective evaluation by commanders.

According to a sales representative at Renaissance Learning, the software developer for AR, the program would cost a Marine an estimated ten dollars a year to implement for all active duty Marines. The 10 dollars would pay for a quiz for every book and a customizable platform with 100 quizzes for testing. A program that costs less than 2 million dollars is a drop in the bucket for a Marine Corps with a budget over 25 billion dollars.

A notable concern for using the AR program is the risk of cheating while using an online database for testing. A Marine could obtain the answers in advance, have another Marine take the test, or watch a movie, such as *Ender's Game*, instead of reading the book. Tests that are deemed important for a Marine's advancement, such as the Regional, Cultural, and Language Familiarization, are conducted with either a proctor supervising at work or at a Learning Resource Center with paid test

the film version of *Ender's Game* are not tested in the AR quiz version.

The efficacy of a program like AR for reading comprehension is another concern for implementation across the force. If research shows that AR does not work as advertised, then the Marine Corps would be wasting an investment. In 2013, Jan Shelton conducted research on the effect of AR for 5th graders' reading comprehension. Page five of Shelton's research found that reading comprehension and reading ability did not show "statistically significant effect for gender by group." Mirroring Jan Shelton Nichols research, a team from the University of St. Thomas researching student responses to using AR also found that "limited number of studies conducted to investigate achievement shows that AR does not usually result in gains." In other words, a student's ability to comprehend what he reads does not improve with the use of AR. These research findings do not negate the positive potential use for the Marine Corps. The Marine Corps is not concerned with improving reading comprehension for its Marines. The Marine Corps is looking for a system of record that objectively tests reading completion and records completion across the force. It is unfair and maybe foolhardy to believe non-education trained Marine officers could evaluate increased reading

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