

Junior Enlisted PME

Creating an intellectual edge in Marine Corps education

by Capt Michael S. Goff & GySgt James K. Walls

It is necessary to overhaul the junior enlisted professional military education (PME) curriculum to better prepare Marines for the complexities of their career regardless of their intent to reenlist or depart from military service. A plethora of skills are common to success in and outside of uniform; the Joint Chiefs of Staff identified a few traits they deem to be of the utmost importance, “judgment, analysis, and problem-solving skills,”¹ among others. While their publication focused on restructuring officer PME, it is foolish to think these attributes are not central to enlisted Marines. MajGen Mullen, the former commanding general of Training and Education Command, identified this need stating that the Marine Corps’ new operating concept “will force small-unit leaders to make important decisions, potentially without the time or the ability to check-in with higher headquarters first.”² The organization must develop the instruc-

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tional capabilities of the force through the creation of a Master Instructor primary MOS. In conjunction with this, the organization needs to reevaluate what is taught to the Marines. Lastly, the Marine Corps should place more of an emphasis on assessing the force in its efforts to develop an institution-wide intellectual edge.

A single institutional change could improve educational outcomes throughout the Service. As an instructor, a Marine serves a three-year tour with minimal training. The shortfall in training is because of manpower and time. The Service does not have the personnel to

allow staff noncommissioned officers (SNCOs) to spend a year in training before instructing classes to Marines. Second, there is not an existing framework to allow instructors time and space to attend in-depth coursework on educational theory and pedagogy. It is unrealistic to think every instructor can attend a yearlong course on education, but there is a workable compromise that when implemented will yield higher results—instituting a Master Instructor primary MOS. *MCDP 7, Learning*, addresses the issue of retaining quality instructors “[attracting], rewarding, and retaining a highly qualified cadre of effective instructors is a crucial factor in facilitating Marines’ learning and requires senior leaders to recognize the importance of learning. An appropriate focus on the selection processes is essential to select the right Marines as instructors, trainers, and educators.”³ The Master Instructor career path would mirror the Career Recruiter MOS with additional qualifications. To be eligible for the MOS, a Marine would need to be a senior staff sergeant in zone for promotion to gunnery sergeant or currently a gunnery sergeant. To man this program, there would be two gunnery sergeants as Master Instructors at each recruit depot and two at each School of Infantry, one at each of the academies and Officer Candidate School/The Basic School (master sergeant), and one Chief Master Instructor at Training and Education Command (master



Developing professional instructors is central to improving PME. (Photo by Cpl Santiago G. Colon, Jr.)

gunnery sergeant). To be selected for the program, one must have previous experience in an instructor, schoolhouse, or academy billet, and they must be actively pursuing a bachelors or higher in education. Exceptions can be made if the Marine already possesses a degree in education. Once accepted, the Marine incurs a service obligation of four years; this obligation is increased if the Marine has not yet completed their degree. Upon completion of their degree and subsequent MOS school, the Marine is non-competitively promoted to gunnery sergeant if need be. The Master Instructor MOS school will be facilitated by the Chief Master Instructor in Quantico; this course's primary function will be how to apply concepts learned at civilian institutions to military training. The Master Instructors' role would be initial training for all instructors in current pedagogy and providing annual professional development training. For promotion to master sergeant, a degree in education will be required; promotion to master gunnery sergeant will require a masters or higher degree in education. Because of the fiscal requirements of this proposed program, it would have to remain small, totaling no more than 30 members, although in practice there likely will not be more than 20 across the Marine Corps.

The most essential task for the institution is to continually reevaluate PME content at all levels and its presentation to Marines. In the 1970s, ADM Stansfield Turner worked to overhaul the Naval War College's curriculum, stating, "[every] academic institution must periodically review whether it is fulfilling its mission."⁴ The Marine Corps must be dedicated to the same principle; this must go beyond simply questioning curriculum managers because "any dean or professor worthy of their title can easily demonstrate how every class on their respective schedules is essential for the development of future strategic leaders."⁵ Independent reviews of each PME must be conducted to determine where fat can be trimmed and what needs to be added to achieve the intent of the Joint Chiefs.⁶ This review must be conducted by multiple ranks, Services, and civilians. The Joint Chiefs

made it clear that the future of warfare will be a joint environment; therefore, PMEs must prepare Marines to fight and win in joint environments, and this will not be realized unless the institution starts at the bottom. Additionally, by having civilian subject matter experts involved in the curriculum review process, it will reinforce the critical component of civilian oversight, providing a more comprehensive use of taxpayer money.

Educational pedagogy recently underwent a massive restructuring of best practices, and the Marine Corps needs to adapt its procedures to be on par

throughout the Service. Adaptive curriculum is the practice of tailoring the learning environment and content to best suit the students; active instruction is one of the processes through which adaptive curriculum can be enacted. The institution recognizes the value in adaptive curriculum, placing it in its new doctrine, but it does not specifically address active instruction in the publication.⁹ Active instruction's foundational principle is to "[push] students to work through problems and reason things out as an inherent part of the learning process."¹⁰ The instructor becomes an information facilitator rather than

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with the civilian sector. MajGen Mullen recognizes the importance of engaging instruction coupled with the necessity of ensuring all Marines have opportunities for education,

a large number of students can be moved through the system when teachers stand at a podium and talk at students ... But ... students are more permanently changed by teaching that engages them better, and so schools are now being empowered to experiment with different ways of educating students.⁷

Learning recognizes that throughout the years education regularly develops new trends, and not all pan out as intended, so:

[When] considering whether to replace or enhance existing instructional methods, instructors and unit leaders must first seek clear evidence that a new method is, in fact, better than the existing methods ... Marines assess its value to support learning relative to their existing methods. Marines are open to ... adopting new methods when they are demonstrably better, not just because they are new.⁸

Based off this principle, the practices of adaptive curriculum and active instruction (or learning) need to be adopted

someone who talks at students from a podium. In a study conducted throughout a collegiate academic school year the results were irrefutable, active instruction consistently yielded higher results.¹¹ However, in terms of student feedback, the active instructor scored less on all other metrics. One explanation could be because of the conditioning of college students; throughout their academic careers, lecture has been the primary method for teaching. Therefore, many students adapt their thinking to assume that passive instruction (lecture) is the best method to get the most information. One assumption could be that since many Marines join the Service because "school just isn't for me,"¹² active instruction will be well received.

Education should not be limited to a rank; the reality is that some Marines are more intelligent than others regardless of where on the pay scale they fall. Currently, there are waivers available to senior SNCOs to attend higher-level PME; providing the same opportunity to younger Marines will generate positive outcomes for the Marine Corps, the unit, and the individual. Once a Marine is resident PME complete for their grade, they can submit a waiver to their chain of command to enroll



Improvements must be made to optimize the Lance Corporal Seminar and unit-led Corporals Course. (Photo by SSgt Benjamin Sutton.)

in the next higher Distance Education Program (DEP). The waiver process is not challenging but would require effort and initiative from the Marine. The requirements would entail a formal request in naval letter format, a biography, and short answer essay. Once submitted, it must be endorsed by the battalion's (or non-infantry unit equivalent) senior enlisted advisor. Once endorsed, the unit's administration section will submit it to MarineNet for implementation, allowing the Marine to enroll in the next higher DEP. This endorsement will ensure that the Marine is deserving of the waiver, and the process does not become just another requirement. The process for receiving the endorsement will be similar to that of a meritorious promotion. Each quarter a battalion is allotted one Marine per grade to take the next highest-level DEP PME. They will need to be vetted through their chain of command and go through a boarding process prior to their senior enlisted advisor's endorsement. Following completion of this program, a Marine need only to attend their resident PME after promotion. This simple implementation now brings the institution closer to its goal of having Marines complete Resident PME within twelve months of promotion. By having a Marine complete the waiver process first

on their own, with the guidance and correction of their platoon and company leadership, the institution can groom an entire generation of Marines to communicate more effectively. This will also better prepare the Marine for the arduous task of completing numerous essays once they attain a seat at the resident Sergeants School.

Writing has been identified by many leaders within the Marine Corps as a critical vulnerability. Within the enlisted ranks, many leaders fail to communicate in writing effectively. The SNCO academies have worked diligently to correct this deficiency, but not enough is being done at the unit level. To counter this vulnerability, the institution must intervene to teach our junior Marines writing at the lowest levels. Just as the Marine Corps embraces a systems-approach to training, it must embrace a systems-approach to education by increasing the academic rigor of junior enlisted PMEs. Implementing naval correspondence classes at the Lance Corporal Seminar and unit-led Corporals Course must be done immediately. The next enhancement would be moving EMPE5120AA, Communication from Sergeants Course to Corporals Course.¹³ To make this course more appropriate for corporals, the institution should remove the sec-

tions on interacting with the media and public affairs to ensure this course is not disproportionately long. Additionally, it is recommended to include two writing assignments to increase Marines' written communication skills. The first assignment would be writing a basic order in the five-paragraph order format with an answer key and explanations available to the Marine's leadership. Exposure to the format is more important than ensuring everything is correct; their immediate supervisor should be the one to assist the Marine in correct content for the order. Next, the Marine should read an approved book, from the *Commandant's Professional Reading List* or otherwise, and write a book report on it. MarineNet should then have a prompt for their officer-in-charge to certify the Marine has done so. It is recommended for the officer-in-charge to "grade" the paper, providing constructive feedback to ensure the Marine is developed through this process. The report's grade will not reflect in their MarineNet transcript.

Assessments are a useful tool to evaluate an individual's performance at critical junctures in their career. It is clear multiple-choice tests are never the perfect solution in evaluating someone's performance, but they have attained somewhat of a permanent status given their cost effectiveness, simplicity, and speed in grading, and unbiased approach to "right" and "wrong" answers. *Learning* briefly covers assessments, discussing the different types: diagnostic, formative, and summative, and then a short paragraph on their utility.¹⁴ Assessments should have a greater presence in the Marine Corps than they do today. Currently, there are a litany of assessments in initial training, but within the PME construct, assessments are sporadic and substantively lacking. Diagnostic assessments should be a requirement prior to acceptance into any resident PME; the diagnostic exam is one that would be suited to a multiple-choice test for the same reasons described above. If a Marine is seeking a waiver to attend the next rank's DEP, the diagnostic assessment will let the Marine Corps know if that Marine currently possesses the potential to suc-

ceed. Instituting the diagnostic should assist in retention within the academies because the organization can eliminate candidates who do not yet possess the requisite knowledge; feedback from the assessment will inform the Marine what topics they should focus on prior to reapplying for their resident PME. This diagnostic also provides a framework from which leaders can tailor their mentorship to their Marines by focusing on what the academies will focus on, standardizing efforts across the Service. Next, just as civilian institutions have midterm exams, the academies will need to develop a formative assessment to provide feedback to students, ensuring students are retaining the information. The formative assessment can have aspects of multiple choice, but that should not be the primary method for this test. The passing or failing of the formative assessment would not be grounds for retention in the academy; rather, it is a tool with which instructors use to modify their instruction to better fit the students. Lastly, the summative assessment should be a culminating event, involving both written and practical application portions. The written portion would determine whether the Marine has retained the requisite knowledge of their grade, and the practical application would evaluate their leadership and field craft abilities. These portions

should be weighted equally to ensure a Marine cannot graduate without passing both sections. Utilizing summative assessments is another way to ensure a quality product across the force. If a corporal passes the test, then they have demonstrated the potential to be promoted to sergeant. Instituting more comprehensive assessments will allow for a more proficient force.

The institution has taken the first step in creating an intellectual edge over the rest of the world by prioritizing learning with its publication of *Learning*. However, to execute the intent from the Joint Chiefs, a reevaluation of PME content and instructional methods must be conducted. Additionally, the delivery of material and skills gained through PME can be overhauled through the implementation of career instructors. Lastly, the institution needs to place a larger emphasis on assessments across the force to develop the intellectual edge needed. This endeavor is not an easy undertaking, and it will likely take years until these improvements are standard, but it is critical to begin the process now to better prepare the force for the conflicts of tomorrow.

Notes

1. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Developing Today's Joint Officers for Tomorrow's Ways of War: The Joint*

Chiefs of Staff Vision and Guidance for Professional Military Education & Talent Management, (Washington DC: 2020).

2. Megan Eckstein, "Marines Issue New Doctrine Prioritizing Learning," *United States Naval Institute News*, (May 2020), available at <https://news.usni.org>.

3. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCDP 7, Learning*, (Washington DC: 2020).

4. Dr. James Lacey, "Finally Getting Serious About Professional Military Education," *War on the Rocks*, (May 2020), available at <https://warontherocks.com>.

5. Ibid.

6. *Developing Today's Joint Officers for Tomorrow's Ways of War*.

7. "Marines Issue New Doctrine Prioritizing Learning."

8. *MCDP 7, Learning*.

9. Ibid.

10. John Timmer. "College Students Think They Learn Less with an Effective Teaching Method," *Ars Technica*, (September 2019), available at <https://arstechnica.com>.

11. Ibid.

12. Diana S. Correll, "A Culture of Learning: Why the Marine Corps is Promoting Education, Training in its New Doctrine," *Marine Corps Times*, (May 2020), available at <https://www.marinecorpstimes.com>.

13. Staff, "MarineNet Curriculums and Seminar Programs," Marine Corps University, (n.d.), available at <https://www.usmku.edu>.

14. *MCDP 7, Learning*.



The joint force has already made significant investments in enlisted education. (Photo by Airman 1st Class Corey Pettis.)