

**DEVELOPING
MILITARY
LEARNERS'
COMMUNICATION
SKILLS**

USING THE
SCHOLARSHIP OF
TEACHING AND
LEARNING

EDITED BY MEGAN J. HENNESSEY, PhD



Developing Military Learners' Communication Skills Using the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

Edited by Megan J. Hennessey, PhD

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Introduction

Megan J. Hennessey, PhD

In the fall of 2019, a small group of educators representing multiple organizations in military education across the United States and Canada gathered at the Inter-University Seminar on Armed Forces and Society for the inaugural meeting of the Professional Military Education (PME) Faculty Consortium. This consortium was a new initiative spearheaded by Marine Corps University as part of that institution's Quality Enhancement Plan for regional accreditation, although it would become inclusive of educators across the joint force. As part of its initial meeting, the PME Faculty Consortium identified the need for a new type of colloquium that would address the scholarship of teaching and learning specific to PME. This colloquium took shape in 2020 as the Joint PME Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Forum (JSOTL Forum), hosted by the United States Army War College.¹

The first JSOTL Forum featured 37 breakout presentations of research by faculty, administrators, educational methodologists, instructional systems specialists, assessment specialists, and faculty developers working at PME institutions, along with multiple plenary sessions and collaborative discussions. These presentations represented topics in the following tracks: assessment, distributed learning, educational technology, evidence-based instructional strategies, faculty development, learning theories and andragogy, and research methods in the scholarship of teaching and learning. Completely by chance, a concentration of research presentations emerged focusing specifically on developing military officers' written communication skills through the scholarship of teaching and learning within PME. Those presentations became the basis for this special publication.

History

Communication skills for military learners are specifically highlighted in the most recent revision to the Officer PME Policy published by the Joint Staff. One PME outcome reads, "PME and JPME programs must provide graduates the knowledge and skills to prepare them for service as joint warfighting leaders, senior staff officers,

and strategists who . . . demonstrate critical and creative thinking skills, interpersonal skills, and effective written, verbal, and visual communications skills to support the development and implementation of strategies and complex operations.”²

Communication appears again in this policy as a joint learning area (together with “strategic thinking”) with a focus on perspective-taking, information literacy, persuasive communication, and synthesis skills appropriate to diverse audiences and environments.³ Skills development in these areas is expected for all levels of officer PME, from precommissioning to the general officer levels. Desired leader attributes for enlisted warfighters in communication are thin, however, and merely include the need to “anticipate, communicate, and mitigate risks” with no clarification on types of communication or applicable contexts.⁴ The accompanying vision document, *Developing Enlisted Leaders for Tomorrow’s Wars*, mentions communication once in regards to enlisted servicemembers’ ability to communicate “effectively through all levels of the chain of command.”⁵ Along with the 2022 Department of Defense Instruction 1322.35 on military education, the Officer PME Policy and Enlisted PME Policy represent the most current and most senior official guidance on communication skills development for military education institutions.

Communication skills have been a component of officer PME dating back to the origins of what we would consider modern PME itself. In 1801 when Gerhard von Scharnhorst became director of the *Militarakademie*, reimagined from the original 1763 *academie des nobles* under Frederick the Great, he included curriculum on foreign languages and instituted entrance examinations based, in part, on writing skills.⁶ Communication skills curricula have of course evolved since then, with a fairly robust record of public speaking and writing instruction during the World War II years.

In a 1943 edition of the *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, authors explain in detail the communication curricula at 390 colleges and universities across the United States intended specifically for Army and Navy officers. Along with instruction on proper “concise, orderly, and appropriate” military communication style, students were also instructed in listening and reading skills.⁷ Conrad Wedberg, speech instructor at the University of Redlands at the time and a veteran of World War I who remembered the chaos of misunderstood orders on the field, goes into remarkable physiological detail on vocal drills conducted on the athletic fields during these classes in the early 1940s:

The glottis must be open, the vocal cords relaxed and free, muscles at the back of the neck relaxed (for these are close to the arytenoids controlling the vocal cord adjustments), so that an enlarged volume of air starting from the bottom of the lungs may strike with unrestricted intensity against the sounding board of the hard palate. The head must be raised slightly, chin parallel to the ground, velum flexible and free, so that all of the oral and nasal resonance chambers are used for a maximum of explosive projection.⁸

In a time of unreliable radio transmissions, clarity and consistency of properly projected oral communication was a matter of life and death.

Communication skills for enlisted military learners became a focus of Air Force Chief Sam Parish's enlisted PME reforms beginning with the 1985 Noncommissioned Officer PME Policy Conference. At this conference, leaders emphasized a "whole person concept" for enlisted servicemembers' education, including communication skills development.⁹ More recently, in a 2010 hearing before the Committee on Armed Services in the US House of Representatives, directors of enlisted PME programs across every service testified on the prioritization of communication curricula in their various educational systems. A theme across every service was that "oral and written communication skills are fundamental to succeed as a leader."¹⁰ At least one director made specific mention of incorporating funding for permanent communication faculty at enlisted PME institutions into the Program Objective Memorandum budget.

Indeed, the 2000s into the 2010s saw the establishment of more permanent communication skills development resources in PME institutions for both officer and enlisted students and their respective faculty. Marine Corps University established its Leadership and Communication Skills Center in 2007 as part of a Quality Enhancement Plan accreditation project, and Air University followed suit with the founding of the Teaching & Learning Center—including a Writing Lab—in 2016. The Naval War College offers a Learning Commons that includes library, information resources, writing, and faculty development support, similar to the Army War College's recent founding of an Applied Communication and Learning Laboratory that merges similar resources. Additionally, there are satellite communication support services established at any number of distributed PME organizations worldwide.

Communication Skills Development and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

In 2018, then Secretary of Defense James Mattis made waves throughout the PME community with his claim in that year's *National Defense Strategy* that "PME has stagnated, focused more on the accomplishment of mandatory credit at the expense of lethality and ingenuity."¹¹ This declaration spawned multiple op-eds, including Tom Ricks's unforgiving claim that "many officer students at the war colleges and the staff colleges can't write, don't read, and resent attempts to make them think. And the system encourages such hebetude."¹² This critique is not new. The quality of PME students' communication skills has been questioned for well over 100 years. The US Army's School for the Application of Cavalry and Infantry, which opened in 1881, included instruction on "remedial writing" and was called "a remedial school for semiliterate officers."¹³ However, very few public voices, official or otherwise, from 1881 onward, offered empirical evidence to support these claims. There is no better time than now to evaluate and reflect on the PME learning ecosystem through the lens of the scholarship of teaching and learning.

With its known roots in Boyer's groundbreaking reframing of what research means to the professoriate, the scholarship of teaching and learning is "an intersection of teaching and scholarly inquiry in which faculty design, teach, and improve their students' experience."¹⁴ It is a rigorous form of inquiry exploring research questions on topics ranging from curriculum design to faculty development to programmatic assessments, all with the goal of improving student learning outcomes and, more broadly, the student experience. The scholarship of teaching and learning provides a methodological framework by which to consider how military education students perform in and out of the learning environment and how we can better organize to support them. It is discipline agnostic and inclusive of skills development curricula, making it an especially good line of inquiry for evaluating communication curricula in military education spaces at all levels and for all audiences.

This collection of essays will explore communication skills development in various forms across the spectrum of officer PME. First, Andrea Hamlen-Ridgely, assistant professor of communication at Marine Corps University, considers how faculty at the Marine Corps

Command and Staff College can help develop students' information literacy skills. She identifies a gap in research methods and foundational composition curriculum for incoming students and the challenge of blending military and academic writing style expectations. Hamlen-Ridgely, in partnership with a research librarian and an additional faculty member, designed a pilot program for master's degree-earning students, including scaffolded assignment interventions and additional seminar meetings. Mentoring, in various forms, was a key component of the intervention. In her critical reflection on initial findings, Hamlen-Ridgely acknowledges students' adverse reactions to the scaffolded instructional design of the pilot and their seemingly insurmountable unfamiliarity with basic elements of research.

Reading skills are obviously a contributing factor to successful research. In her essay, Dr. Brandy Jenner, a former postdoctoral fellow at the US Army War College (USAWC), describes her creation and validation of the Military Graduate Student Reading test, or M-GSR, as a diagnostic suitable for officer PME. The M-GSR is a 100-question multiple-choice test with similar difficulty and structure as the Graduate Record Examination, Law School Admission Test, and Medical College Admission Test in use for civilian graduate students. Reading comprehension questions in the M-GSR assess test takers' understanding of passages relevant to the military learning environment, such as Joint Military Doctrine. Additional questions testing understanding of definition/meanings, synonyms, and antonyms also contain military-specific verbiage especially suited to the strategic level curriculum of senior service colleges.

Jenner helpfully outlines USAWC student performance from the initial administration of the test (as well as faculty performance from test norming) and includes key recommendations for associated curriculum development. She finds only small differences in total score by service branch, suggesting that any trends in PME student reading skills may not be unique to any single branch's experience.

In their essay "Fostering Writing Improvement in JPME," Kathleen Denman and Dr. May Chung, both writing instructors at National Defense University (NDU), consider how PME writing centers can incorporate data from such diagnostics as the M-GSR and others into effective student and faculty support. They describe their work at NDU as grounded in an executive coaching model and pay particular attention to how this model allows for authentic interactions with international military officers. Denman and Chung provide a context

by which to understand communication skills development in PME, identifying potential areas of interest for future educational research.

Next, Jeffrey Turner, also at NDU, translates knowledge of the PME communication skills context to actually creating effective writing assignments. He compares the act of writing to that of design, with similar requirements for creativity, coherence, and cogence. Structured as an analysis of the curriculum review process at the Joint Advanced Warfighting School (JAWS), Turner's essay describes various assignments and the rhetorical rationale behind each, along with implications for instructional design, such as sequence and timing. Findings from his study of writing assignment redesign at JAWS suggest not only improvement in student learning outcomes (and associated assignment grades) but also improvements in knowledge retention, clarity of assessment criteria, and even overall faculty satisfaction.

Of course, the true value of student assignments is in the resulting feedback process. Stase Wells, Assistant Professor of Communication at Marine Corps University, outlines challenges that faculty, peers, and others face throughout this process, specifically related to relationship-building, limited time, lack of clarity, and—ironically—lack of communication about communication. Wells makes the case to incorporate PME writing centers directly into the feedback loop at schoolhouses. She identifies areas for future educational research specific to the benefits of dialogic feedback.

In the final essay for this collection, Dr. Jacqueline Whitt, former associate professor of strategy at USAWC and current Chief Learning Officer for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs at the Department of State, shares her experiences doing exactly that: incorporating dialogic feedback in the senior service college classroom. In an exploratory study, Whitt pilots the use of writing conferences to share feedback with students on various and multiple assignments in a JPME II course. While further study is needed, her initial findings suggest that students' writing improved more noticeably as a result of writing conferences compared to students from prior years who did not have access to the same style of feedback. Whitt includes specific examples and templates to guide faculty who may consider this approach, while reflecting on her own experience and the unique demands of this process.

Conclusion

Together, these essays address the full life cycle of communication skills development for officer PME, from brainstorming and research to drafting, assessment, and feedback. The authors answer the following questions, among others:

- What is the PME learning environment like for officers, and how does this affect communication skills development in particular?
- How can we best teach foundational research skills?
- What is the state of incoming students' reading skills and how can this shape curriculum development and teaching?
- What role does executive coaching play for writing centers in PME?
- What is the relationship between the design of writing assignments and student learning outcomes?
- What are challenges facing faculty and support faculty who are included in the feedback process for communication-related assignments?
- What are some creative approaches to providing feedback on student writing?

Crucially, the scholarship of teaching and learning lens frames these questions. This means that although research on PME students' communication skills development is just beginning, the questions asked by the authors here ARE researchable. Has PME “stagnated,” as Secretary of Defense James Mattis suggested in 2018? We can begin to answer that with empirical educational research—and our answers will have very real implications for not just PME, but our national security as well.

Notes

1. The 2021 JSOTL Forum was hosted by the Air University Teaching & Learning Center. In 2022, the conference underwent a name change to the Military Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Forum (MSOTL Forum), to be more inclusive of military education institutions outside of joint PME.

2. CJCSI 1800.01F, *Officer Professional Military Education Policy*, A-2.

3. CJCSI 1800.01F, *Officer Professional Military Education Policy*, A-A-1.

4. CJCSI 1805.01B, *Enlisted Professional Military Education Policy*, A-1.

5. Department of Defense, *Developing Enlisted Leaders for Tomorrow's Wars*, 4.

6. Martin van Creveld, *The Training of Officers*, 23.

7. "Speaking Instruction in College Military Units," 399.
8. Conrad F. Wedberg, "College Speech Goes to War," 7.
9. United States Air Force, "An Unfinished Journey."
10. House Armed Services Committee, *Transformation in Progress: The Services' Enlisted Professional Military Education Programs*.
11. Jim Mattis, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*.
12. Tom Ricks, "The Pentagon Condemns the State of US Professional Military Education."
13. Edwin Arnold, "Professional Military Education: Its Historical Development and Future," 16.
14. Ernest L. Boyer, Drew Moser, Todd Ream, and John Braxton, *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate*; and Mary Taylor Huber, "Foreword: Community-Organizing for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning."

Chapter 1

A Failure to Demystify the Research Paper

Andrea Hamlen-Ridgely

Few topics thrill a crowd of professional military education (PME) faculty more than discussing the state of officers' writing. More contentious is the debate over whether or why the quality of student writing has declined over the last several decades. Ask any faculty member at a PME institution why students have trouble with research papers, and most will tell you it's because they're part of the Twitter generation or that they never had to diagram a sentence. The researchers of the Citation Project—who have spent years investigating how students locate and interact with sources—would beg to differ. Rather, these researchers view the students' struggle to produce research-rich, analytical texts as an information literacy problem. That is, students are struggling to “find, retrieve, analyze, and use” information, and this issue has cascading effects on the quality of students' research papers.¹ Students spend most of the academic year trying to make sense of the research process and the university resources that can help them along the way.

So the question becomes, how can faculty who teach within a graduate PME program, in which there is no research methods course or first-year composition curriculum, help their students develop these information literacy skills and craft strong argumentative research papers that are more than a collection of quotations? In the fall of 2019, a group of faculty from Marine Corps University (MCU) developed a research and writing pilot program that aimed to do just that. This paper summarizes the literature that informed the formation of the program; describes how the program was administered; and reports on the results of the program, highlighting benefits, challenges, and areas for future opportunities.

What Is the Purpose of a Research Paper?

In keeping with Sun Tzu's maxim that “tactics without strategy is the noise before defeat,” we need to first define what we want students to accomplish by writing a research paper before shredding our old

lesson plans. The current Officer Professional Military Education Policy's (OPMEP) Joint Learning Areas for strategic thinking and communication might help provide some clarity on this point. The OPMEP states, "Joint officers demonstrate advanced cognitive and communications skills employing critical, creative, and systematic thought. They evaluate alternative perspectives and demonstrate the ability to distinguish reliable from unreliable information to form reasoned decisions. They persuasively communicate on behalf of their organizations with a wide range of domestic and foreign audiences. Via their communication, they synthesize all elements of their strategic thinking concisely, coherently, and comprehensively in a manner appropriate for the intended audience and environment."² If we want our students to succeed in these domains, the exercise of writing a research paper provides a venue for testing our students' skills. I can think of no better way to demonstrate the skills of "evaluating alternative perspectives and demonstrating ability to distinguish reliable from unreliable information" or to "persuasively communicate" and "synthesize all elements of their strategic thinking" than to write a research paper. However, most of the instruction we—at least at MCU—have been providing about writing research papers has focused more on requirements, due dates, and formats than responding to arguments, synthesizing complex information, or engaging in audience analysis. If we want to build a military of innovative problem solvers and persuasive communicators, it's time for us to meet students where they are.

Understanding the Scope of the Problem: Literature Review

The tendency for students to struggle with writing well-researched, original drafts is not a new problem nor a PME problem. David Bartholomae acknowledged this challenge in his foundational work "Inventing the University." Bartholomae asserts that to know one's audience, the writer needs to know what the audience knows and how they have come to know it.³ If academic writing means imagining the professor as "the audience," then this also means understanding the professor's point of view.⁴ He acknowledges that "writers who can successfully manipulate an audience" need to be able to imagine themselves as "equal or more powerful than those they would address."⁵ However,

this is immensely problematic for students because it means crossing a crucial power barrier between the role of the student and the role of the professor. Of course, in an academic environment, many students feel incapable of imagining themselves to be in a position that is “equal or more powerful” than that of their faculty, and these power structures are likely to be even more complicated in a military environment in which students are less powerful, not only by the nature of their level of education, but also by the rank that they wear on their shoulders. Further, even if students have mastered “academic” discourse in the past, PME often requires a blending of military and academic styles, making the idea of “audience” even murkier. As students attempt to translate new ideas and concepts into an unfamiliar academic language, “difficult and often violent accommodations” may occur.⁶ For instance, students who find it effortless to write an award for a subordinate might produce inelegant, or even incoherent, text when attempting to express themselves in a new discourse while addressing an audience they cannot fully imagine.

Bartholomae’s article shows us that writing is more than punctuation and elegant paragraphs; it requires some degree of make believe, imagination, and ability to negotiate power structures that faculty are likely not thinking about when they assign a paper. Several other authors, including Margaret Kantz, Sandra Jamieson, and Rebecca Moore Howard, have gone on to discuss other ways in which students struggle to become part of a discourse. While these authors frame the students’ challenges more in terms of how they incorporate and interact with source material, the students’ struggles are still the result of the same root problem: they are outsiders of the discourse they are attempting to model. Rebecca Moore Howard addresses the ramifications of this struggle to model academic discourse in her 1993 article, “A Plagiarism Pentimento,” in which she coins the term “patchwriting,” to refer to the practice of “copying from a source text and then deleting some words, altering grammatical structures, or plugging in one-for-one synonym substitutes.”⁷ Ultimately, Howard concluded that patchwriting is not a form of intellectual property theft but rather a way for someone outside of the academic community to join an academic conversation; “it is the outsider’s membership application.”⁸ However, instead of helping students secure their “memberships,” faculty often assume that students already possess the rhetorical skills to engage in academic discourse. That is, we are not meeting the students where they are.

The review of this literature suggests that the writing problems faculty are seeing at MCU are not new. They predate the flow of digital natives into the education system, and they extend beyond the walls of PME institutions. Many of these issues are also not pure writing problems; that is, they have relatively little to do with paragraph development or grammatical knowledge. The issue is also not one of academic integrity, though the practice of patchwriting may initially seem to flirt with academic integrity violation. Instead of extolling the virtues of sentence diagramming or belittling the public education system, PME faculty need to teach students how to locate, read, interact with, and respond to sources. If we fail to do this, we are inadvertently turning the research paper into an exercise of regurgitation as opposed to one of problem framing, synthesis, and innovative thinking.

The Mentoring Program: Structure and Theoretical Underpinning

In an effort to provide students with more targeted research and writing instruction, I (along with a research librarian and a Command and Staff College civilian faculty member), crafted an experimental pilot research and writing program. This program used scaffolded assignments to walk the students through the research and writing steps they would need to take to complete their Master of Military Studies (MMS) papers. In keeping with the idea that the research paper is as much about engaged reading and thinking as writing, we emphasized information literacy skills over correctness, and connections with sources over specific writing structure. We hypothesized that introducing the research paper through three different lenses (that of a writing center faculty member, that of a research librarian, and that of a faculty member with subject-matter expertise) might help students see connections between research and writing processes. Further, by introducing students to the discourse of research and by giving them the vocabulary to talk about their process, we hoped that students would be better able to articulate their own research problems and results. Developing this vocabulary might also allow them to use their resources (the writing center or research librarian) more effectively when they felt stuck or overwhelmed since they would be equipped to communicate what they needed help with.

During the fall of 2019, the seminar-based MMS pilot program was offered to 12 students attending MCU's Command and Staff College (CSC). CSC is a 10-month JPME-I schoolhouse that grants a Master of Military Studies degree to students who complete and defend a research-based master's paper. Most CSC students are O-4s, and about 30 of these officers are international military students. There are also a handful of State Department, FBI, and CIA professionals who attend the course.

It's important to note that when the pilot program was implemented in 2019, CSC students had the option of either enrolling in the MMS program and receiving a master's degree upon successful defense of a master's paper or opting out of the master's program and receiving a certificate of completion (upon successfully meeting the demands of the regular coursework).

While the standards for the master's paper are uniform across the university, the students enrolled in the MMS pilot program completed additional scaffolded assignments in the lead up to the final written research paper. These scaffolded assignments included a research proposal, a problem paper, a literature review, a partial draft, and two rough drafts (assigned in that order). Students also attended a one-hour seminar approximately three to four weeks before the due date for the first three scaffolded assignments (the research proposal, the problem paper, and the literature review). After the submission of the third assignment, students continued to receive written feedback on their work and were invited to engage in one-on-one meetings with the pilot program faculty; however, the seminar-based meetings stopped after students submitted their literature reviews. It's important to note that while students didn't necessarily volunteer to be part of the program, they knew that the particular faculty member they had chosen as their mentor was running an experimental research and writing group.

Scaffolded Assignments

Wood, Bruner, and Ross are often credited with developing the concept of scaffolding to describe the process of language learning in children and defined this concept as "the steps taken to reduce the degrees of freedom taken in carrying out some task, so that the child can concentrate on the difficult skill she is in the process of acquiring."⁹ Though this initial definition described an abstract pedagogical rela-

tionship between teachers and children, the concept of scaffolding has been applied to the structuring of curriculum and writing assignments. In the context of writing, scaffolding can be defined as the process of “structuring parts of a single assignment or designing a sequence of assignments so that they gradually increase in cognitive complexity.”¹⁰ In other words, scaffolding provides a means by which students become familiar with and master less complex cognitive tasks before moving on to more complex cognitive tasks.

The intent behind the pilot program’s scaffolded assignments was for students to gain foundational skills and competencies and to build upon them to reach a larger goal. For instance, students need to first learn how to use databases to mine relevant articles before they can craft a research proposal; likewise, they need to be able to respond to what others have written before they can be expected to put together a sophisticated, well-researched argument of their own. Therefore, we hypothesized that by implementing these scaffolded assignments, we could break the research process into more manageable chunks for the students in which they could master more basic research and writing skills before moving on to more cognitively challenging tasks.

The students also received two sets of feedback on all their scaffolded assignments; one set of feedback was from the civilian faculty mentor, and the other was from me, the writing center faculty member. Some students consulted with me multiple times throughout the process, engaging in a dialogue about revisions and idea development. However, the interaction with other mentees was more passive: They simply submitted milestones and received written feedback. As a result, while all students attended group mentoring sessions and submitted the scaffolded assignments for feedback, some of the students chose to engage with writing center faculty, reference librarians, and their faculty mentor more regularly and voluntarily.

Seminars

The pilot program seminars could be characterized as what Spiegelman and Grobman have called classroom-based writing tutoring—“writing support offered directly to students during class. . . . Classroom-based writing tutors facilitate peer writing groups, present programs, conference during classroom workshops, help teachers to design and carry out assignments, and much more. Their instructional sites range from developmental writing classes to first-year composition to writ-

ing across the curriculum classes to ‘content.’”¹¹ While Spiegelman and Grobman focus primarily on classroom-based “writing” tutoring, the model emphasizes “blurring and dissolving of boundaries,” as well as genre hybridity, which explores combining some aspects of traditional writing center models in new contexts.¹² Including reference librarians in the classroom with writing center faculty would seem to break down barriers between the research and writing process, and though these interactions occurred in a classroom, they preserved the student-centric nature of what a writing center traditionally does. The master’s paper mentor groups certainly exercised this aspect of hybridity in that it used a student-centric, community learning-based model; however, it introduced new elements to that model. Instead of limiting learners to interactions and instruction from writing center faculty, students were provided real-time feedback on their ideas from three different perspectives: that of a writing center faculty member, that of a research librarian, and that of their faculty mentor.

Individual Mentoring

In addition to attending seminars and completing scaffolded assignments, all the mentees were required to complete a face-to-face research strategy session. A strategy session is a one-on-one tutorial in which a student investigates his or her topic with the guidance of a reference librarian. During these sessions, students set up their library accounts, learn how to use RefWorks, develop pro and con words that they might later use as key search terms, and become familiar with the university’s databases. All the students in the pilot program had completed their first research strategy sessions by mid-November, two months before the first full draft of the master’s paper was due and five months before the final draft was due. Of the twelve students in the pilot group, three came back for a second research strategy session, and many others stopped by with follow-up questions during the year.

Below is an outline of the seminars students attended, scaffolding products they produced, and the required mentoring sessions they attended.

- Seminar 1: Introduction to the Research Process (research questions, generating hypotheses, setting up Refworks, using databases)

- Mentoring session with reference librarian: initiated by the student, completed after Seminar 1 but before Seminar 3)
- Scaffolding product 1: Research proposal
- Mentoring session with writing center faculty: initiated by the student, completed after submitting scaffolding product 1
- Seminar 2: Introduction to research problems; methods of inquiry
 - Scaffolding product 2: Problem framing paper
- Seminar 3: How to write a literature review
 - Scaffolding product 3: Literature review
 - Scaffolding product 4: Partial draft
 - Scaffolding product 5: First full draft
 - Scaffolding product 6: Second full draft

Results

The program concluded in spring 2020, which meant the constraints of COVID-19 prevented us from holding our last few seminar and mentor meetings. Further, time that we had intended to spend collecting data about students' perceptions of the program and year-to-year comparisons of students' writing was spent adapting our teaching and mentoring to what was then a new and unfamiliar on-line environment. These constraints precluded us from presenting any qualitative or quantitative data about the program's effect, but we've compiled some reflections on the experience.

Benefits

The primary benefit of the program was that it allowed new relationships to form between regular teaching faculty, the writing center, and reference librarians. Writing center faculty and librarians got to "see behind the curtain" in terms of how faculty mentoring and oral defense procedures work. Though I've been teaching writing at MCU for over fourteen years, the pilot program was the first chance I had to witness an oral defense. While the experience was a boon for me in terms of how I now conceptualize and coach students through the oral defense process, it also highlighted a larger issue: Writing

center and research support faculty know surprisingly little about faculty expectations. To build a coherent, effective master's paper program, that needs to change.

Additionally, the partnership gave writing center faculty and reference librarians a chance to showcase some of their skills and to demonstrate how they work with students. The experience may also have helped to dissolve some of the mystique of the writing center for my civilian faculty colleague. Instead of wondering whether the structural and rhetorical advice I was providing to students was consistent with his expectations, he was able to see all my interactions with students and to step in if what I was providing didn't align with his perspective. Finally, the program changed the relationship between the librarians and the writing center by establishing the groundwork for more collaborative ventures, such as new information literacy workshops we plan to offer during the next academic year.

The program also helped the reference librarian to see herself in a new light. Through the pilot program, she came to view herself as someone who is able to teach and mentor students, not solely as a provider of information. She's also placed greater importance on her interactions with faculty and sees a need to create faculty "buy-in" for library services. This buy-in tends to encourage students to visit the library and may play a role in student success.

Anecdotally, the writing center faculty member and civilian faculty mentor agreed that students in the pilot project tended to produce papers that were better researched and more analytical than in previous years. However, the number of students who failed to complete the program (2/12) and the amount of time it took students to reach completion remained relatively constant.

Challenges

While the quality of research and writing in the students' papers may have improved, the mentoring program was extremely time consuming. We had initially hypothesized that providing more research and writing instruction up front would mean more students would turn in their drafts early, but this was not the case. In fact, faculty spent more time reviewing drafts and scaffolding products, and arguably what we perceived as increased rigor could have been a result of increased feedback rather than improved understanding of the process or measurable learning. If we were to introduce this program

again, we would need to find a way to respond to the scaffolded assignments more efficiently.

Opportunities

Like many of the programs I read about in my research on information literacy, the pilot program failed because it didn't meet the students where they were. We constructed the program with the assumption that students had a baseline undergraduate understanding of the research process, but some did not. One of the ways in which this became apparent was in how the students reacted to scaffolded assignments.

Some students struggled with understanding how the scaffolded assignments related to the larger research paper. For instance, they saw the literature review as an add on assignment to the larger research paper as opposed to a piece of writing that would be integrated into the larger final product. Others completely discarded their literature reviews or wrote literature reviews on topics that were tangential to their actual research questions. A handful of students even questioned whether they would be charged with plagiarism if they cut and pasted portions of the literature review into their final drafts. Some of these misunderstandings about scaffolding could be linked to our failure to communicate the goals of these products and to link them to the final paper. However, the misunderstanding might also be linked to a general lack of experience with research, as students who have undertaken academic research in the past are more likely to be familiar with how these scaffolded products fit into the larger finished product.

Though the pilot program introduced students to some research basics, such as developing a research question, organizing and synthesizing sources, and writing a literature review, the information presented to students during the mentoring seminars was likely too general to produce any major changes in students' research habits. Recent scholarship on information literacy, such as the Association of College Research Libraries (ACRL) framework for information literacy, emphasizes co-creation and community learning in improving information literacy skills.¹³ Therefore, future iterations of this program should spend more time working through students' specific research problems in class. Faculty might also model how they have addressed similar research problems in their own writing. Finally, it could be helpful to create a class wiki or blog in which students dis-

play their writing and respond to their peers' writing projects. This could help students view the research process not as a regurgitation of ideas but as a dialogue about a subject they are passionate about.

The master's paper mentoring program was not the silver bullet we had hoped for, but it did help us to reflect on our teaching and assumptions about the way students conduct research. Regardless, bringing university resources together led to increased collaboration between the writing center and reference librarians, which we believe will be beneficial for students in the future. Further, it allowed CSC teaching faculty to gain some new insight into exactly how the writing center and reference librarians can guide their students through the research process.

Notes

1. Joint Education and Doctrine, *Officer PME Policy (OPMEP)*.
2. Joint Education and Doctrine, *Officer PME Policy (OPMEP)*.
3. David Bartholomae, "Inventing the University," 9.
4. David Bartholomae, "Inventing the University," 9.
5. David Bartholomae, "Inventing the University," 9.
6. David Bartholomae, "Inventing the University," 12.
7. Rebecca Moore Howard, "A Plagiarism Pentimento," 233.
8. Rebecca Moore Howard, "A Plagiarism Pentimento," 240.
9. David Wood, Jerome Bruner, & Gail Ross, "The Role of Tutoring in Problem Solving," 90.
10. Amherst College, "Scaffolding Assignments."
11. Candace Spigelman and Laurie Grobman, *On Location: Theory and Practice in Classroom-Based Writing Tutoring*, 1.
12. Candace Spigelman and Laurie Grobman, *On Location: Theory and Practice in Classroom-Based Writing Tutoring*, 4.
13. ALA, "Framework For Information Literacy for Higher Education."

Chapter 2

Developing a Military Graduate Student Reading Diagnostic Exam

Brandy M. Jenner, PhD

Introduction

For more than two decades, strategic communication, defined as “sharing meaning with others in support of national interest” has been a subject of interest to the US military.¹ In 2018, this interest reached the School of Strategic Landpower at the United States Army War College (USAWC), an institution for senior military officers and federal government employees. That year, the institution piloted the Nelson-Denny Reading Test (NDRT) in response to the desire to measure and subsequently improve communication skills among the executive-level graduate student population. The assessment is a widely known and used test to measure vocabulary, reading comprehension, and general reading ability; however, it was initially developed for a general education context and for students ages 14–24. The school chose the NDRT because it had been shown to be suitable for assessing vocabulary and reading comprehension in both adolescents and adults. However, after initial administration of the NDRT, it became apparent that the test’s efficacy at measuring vocabulary and reading comprehension in adults did not extend beyond the end of the traditional college years. Thus, a new instrument was needed. In response to that need, the author created the Military Graduate Student Reading Exam (M-GSR).

Background

The NDRT was created in 1929 and remains largely unchanged today.² The first part of the test, vocabulary definition questions, is made up of 80–100 multiple-choice items, which include five possible answer choices each. The second part, comprehension, requires students to read six to seven passages and to respond to 35–40 multiple-choice questions, based on the content of those passages, half literal

and half interpretive. The NDRT is a timed assessment, with 15 minutes allowed for the vocabulary section and 20 minutes allowed for the comprehension section. A score on the NDRT is a combination of the total number of correct vocabulary answers added to twice the number of correct comprehension answers. After the two scores are added together, the score is then converted into a grade-level equivalent; for example, a score of 11.2 means the student reads at just above an 11th-grade level.

New Instrument Creation

To meet the needs of the USAWC, the author created a new instrument based loosely on the NDRT. The new instrument is called the Military Graduate Student Reading Diagnostic Exam and consists of a vocabulary section and a section on reading comprehension. My initial design of the M-GSR was guided by the robust literature on educational and psychometric testing as well as critiques of the NDRT.³

The vocabulary section of the M-GSR comprises 100 multiple-choice items including Graduate Record Examination (GRE), Law School Admission Test (LSAT), and Medical College Admission Test (MCAT)-level words, as well as some of the more advanced Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB) words, to increase the difficulty in line with the new audience of USAWC students. The section is divided into synonyms, antonyms, and definition/meaning questions in alignment with various graduate-level vocabulary assessments. The antonyms section was added to increase difficulty in line with the finding that although synonym and antonym tests assess similar content, responding to an antonym test requires more complex cognitive processes than responding to a synonym test.⁴ The author also decided to eliminate the time limit for test-takers, on the basis of findings from Baldwin et al. that time limit does not bias scores on the assessment.⁵

The decision to integrate vocabulary and reading comprehension as a single instrument was based on work by Widhiarso and Haryanta, which finds that an integrated instrument represents students' abilities more accurately than results from separate instruments.⁶ The section on reading comprehension in the M-GSR requires students to read six passages and to respond to 30 multiple-choice questions based on the

content of those passages. Passages were sourced from open-source documents such as *The Federalist Papers* and other historical writings, Joint Military Doctrine, USAWC course texts (e.g., *The Art of War*), game instructions (with strategy components), and other procedural texts. These passages are more appropriate for an executive-level student audience than the passages contained in the original NDRT. The M-GSR also pares down the number of answer choices in both the vocabulary and reading comprehension sections from five to four. This is in line with findings from Haladyna and Downing.⁷

Piloting the M-GSR

For both evidence-based and logistical reasons, the author chose to pilot the M-GSR as an un-timed assessment in the “quiz” tool of the Blackboard Learning Management System. The section order was static, but the questions were randomized in order within each section and the answers were randomized in order with each question.

Before piloting the exam with the student population, the assessment was normed with a small group of faculty. Following the norming process, the exam was rolled out to the resident-student population of the Strategic Landpower Studies master’s program at the USAWC. Overall, 260 students completed the M-GSR during Fall 2019 administration. During the initial norming administration, 36 faculty members completed the assessment. Both students and faculty took the exam anonymously. Below is a comparison of the student and faculty overall scores.

Table 2.1. Student-faculty percentage score comparisons for the M-GSR

| <i>Measures</i> | <i>Students</i> | <i>Faculty</i> |
|-----------------|-----------------|----------------|
| Min | 28% | 37% |
| Mean | 70% | 72% |
| Median | 72% | 74% |
| Mode | 76% | 79% |
| Max | 89% | 90% |

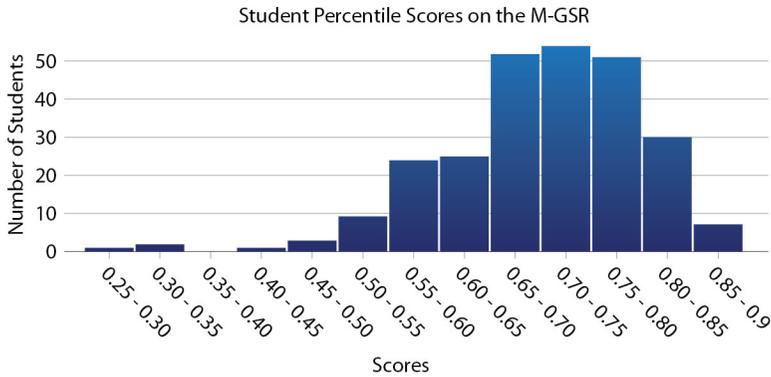


Figure 2.1. Student percentile scores on the M-GSR

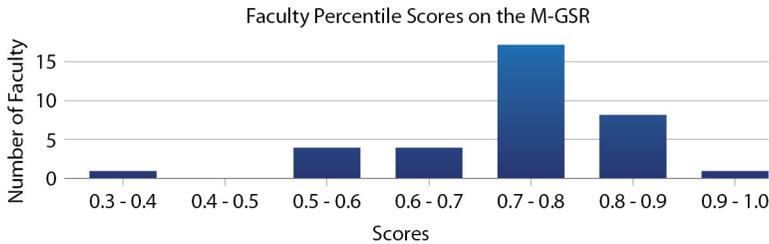


Figure 2.2. Faculty percentile scores on the M-GSR

Clearly, both students and faculty found the assessment sufficiently challenging. However, there is a significant difference between the scores of students and faculty, with faculty scoring statistically significantly better, as predicted. One unanticipated issue arose: as a result of removing the time limit, students spent much longer on the exam than had been intended. The average time to complete, after removing extreme outliers, was about 90 minutes.

For the pilot administration, student test-takers were asked to rate their knowledge of vocabulary, their reading comprehension skills, and their motivation to do their best on the exam. On average, students rated their vocabulary and reading comprehension skills either moderate or high. Students self-reported high and average levels of motivation to do their best work on the exam. The motivational numbers indicate that the student scores reported in this document likely represent an accurate picture of military graduate student performance in vocabulary and reading comprehension.

Findings by Section

Student performance varied by section of the assessment. Table 2.2 shows the breakdown of which sections were the highest scoring for students. Overall, students scored highest on the definition and meaning section and lowest on the antonyms section.

Table 2.2. Average student score by exam section

| <i>Exam Section</i> | <i>Definition and Meaning</i> | <i>Synonyms</i> | <i>Antonyms</i> | <i>Reading Comprehension</i> |
|---------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|------------------------------|
| Average Score | 78% | 67% | 61% | 68% |

More than 85 percent of students received their highest score on one of the sections with questions most closely matching the NDRT (the definition and meaning section or the synonyms section). The antonyms section seemed to be the most difficult section for students. In line with prior research, performance on the M-GSR synonyms section closely resembled performance on the definition and meaning section—with the caveat that this section seemed slightly more difficult for students—and the antonym section proved the most difficult of all the vocabulary sections. Some student responses to questions in the synonym section give a troubling indication of possible misunderstandings or gaps in knowledge (e.g., When asked for a synonym for “theory,” 55 percent of students incorrectly selected “belief” as the best answer).

Overall, students performed well on the reading comprehension section. Within the reading comprehension section, students were most likely to answer questions related to drawing inferences—those questions that ask for a statement’s intended meaning—incorrectly. Like the synonym section above, this may give USAWC faculty insight into a possible gap in knowledge, which could lead to an instructional opportunity.

Branch Differences

Since the student population included individuals from each branch of the military as well as civilians, differences in scores by military branch were investigated. However, we found only small differences in total score by service branch. Table 2.3 below shows that Army and Marines service members scored, on average, lower than other branches. Civilians and members of the National Guard scored

the highest on this exam. However, the Army branch also had the largest variance in total score.

Table 2.3. Average student percentage score by service branch

| <i>Branch</i> | <i>Number of students</i> | <i>Average score</i> |
|----------------|---------------------------|----------------------|
| Army | 182 | 70.15 |
| Marines | 13 | 70.17 |
| Navy | 8 | 71.95 |
| Air Force | 23 | 71.19 |
| National Guard | 11 | 73.14 |
| Civilian | 15 | 73.89 |

Conclusions from the Pilot Administration

Overall, the M-GSR gives an accurate snapshot of USAWC student performance in vocabulary and reading comprehension. There is little to concern college administrators in this exam; rather, it shows that while there are small differences in performance on the exam, average performance ranged between about 67 percent and about 74 percent. This signals that there is neither a ceiling nor a floor effect and that this is an appropriate diagnostic for the population.

My recommendation was to administer a post-test version of the diagnostic at the conclusion of the academic year, which would facilitate the collection of data on the value added of the USAWC curriculum in terms of vocabulary and reading comprehension. Unfortunately, AY 2019–2020 was not an ideal year, and post-test administration of the M-GSR failed to receive sufficient student scores for data analysis and comparison.

Revising the M-GSR

On the basis of the pilot administration of the M-GSR, the author made several alterations to the exam which were guided by both the USAWC data and best practices.⁸ In the vocabulary section, I decided to eliminate the definition and meaning subsection, which produced results that were similar to the synonyms section. Additionally, I transferred some of the more challenging vocabulary words from the now eliminated definition and meaning subsection into the synonyms and antonyms sections to account for the reduced number of questions.

Those vocabulary questions that resulted in a discernible pattern of incorrect student answers were also removed. In the reading comprehension section, I eliminated one of the passages and attendant questions to decrease the overall time the exam requires to complete.

Next Steps

The M-GSR is scheduled for continued administration at the US-AWC; however, administration in spring 2020 and the 2020–2021 school years has yielded fewer responses than the initial administration, largely due to issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The NDRT has received criticism for the ease of “passageless” administration, in which a student sees only the answer sets, not the passages, yet is still able to select the correct answer.⁹ Thus, one direction for future research would be to test a “passageless” administration of the M-GSR with a small sample of test-takers to see if this instrument differs from the NDRT and to further assess the instrument’s validity. On the basis of the results from the vocabulary section, the instrument might also be used to systematically investigate the misconceptions and gaps in knowledge of the general USAWC student body.

Notes

1. Department of Defense, *Strategic Communication*, 2009.
2. Cummins, “Test Review.”
3. American Educational Research Association. *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing*; Darling-Hammond, et al. *Criteria for High-Quality Assessment*; Baldwin, et al. “*Effects Of Extending Administration Time*,” and Ready, et al. “*Passageless Administration of the Nelson-Denny Reading Comprehension Test*.”
4. Widhiarso and Haryanta, “Comparing the Performance of Synonym and Antonym Tests.”
5. Baldwin et al, “Effects Of Extending Administration Time.”
6. Widhiarso and Haryanta, “Comparing the Performance of Synonym and Antonym Tests.”
7. Haladyna and Downing, “How Many Options is Enough?”
8. Banta, et al, *Assessment Essentials*; McCowan and McCowan, *Item Analysis for Criterion-Referenced Tests*.
9. Coleman, et al, “Passageless Comprehension on the Nelson-Denny Reading Test”

Chapter 3

Fostering Writing Improvement in Joint Professional Military Education

Kathleen Denman and May Chung

Introduction and Problem Statement

Each year, writing instructors at National Defense University (NDU), a Joint Professional Military Education (JPME) Level 2 school on Fort McNair in Washington, DC, meet adult learners who “can’t write.” They self-identify or are recommended to seek writing guidance by a faculty advisor after the first writing assignment of the year. Students who attend NDU are typically officers from O-4 to O-6 (majors to colonels), or senior leaders from civilian agencies, such as the Departments of Justice, Homeland Security, or State, for example, and many others. Over 130 students also come from over 60 countries to study at NDU as International Fellows. The students at NDU study for ten months and earn a master’s degree in strategy.

Many of the students who attend NDU are fine writers. Some are outstanding. Some have writing skills that have atrophied from disuse, which are fairly easy to remediate. A few truly do produce “word salad.”¹ Whether the students’ need for writing instruction is minimal or acute, the work of writing instructors is to foster their resilience as writers and learners to improve their writing and critical thinking and then take those skills with them when they graduate and return to their service or agency.

Literature and Research

The need to improve student writing in professional military education (PME) is established in policy so that seemed a logical place to start. The Officer Professional Military Education Policy (OPMEP) from May 2020 promises, among many outcomes, that JPME graduates will demonstrate “effective written, verbal, and visual communication skills to support the development and implementation of strategies and complex operations.”² Writing effectively is even one of the top

six Special Areas of Emphasis (SAE) of the OPMEP. SAE 6 calls for the ability to write “clear, concise, military advice recommendations.”³³ The writing center at NDU exists because our stakeholders demand it: our accrediting body, our graduates’ employers, the military services, and the Joint Staff.

Researching writing improvement in senior military officers did not produce a robust reading list. The population is specific and unique. However, knowledge of adult learning theory, and research into the effectiveness of different kinds of writing feedback proved useful. Research into executive coaching also proved fruitful, as executive coaching is an excellent model for fostering writing improvement at the professional level of NDU students. Finally, years of professional practice at different levels of PME have revealed what works in teaching writing improvement to this unique population of adult learners. In addition to researching from literature found through the database of NDU’s library, we asked open-ended questions of our students and of the faculty. We studied student survey results collected from course surveys and year-end surveys, institutional research data, and the library’s year-end surveys, with particular focus on student comments.

The Link between Writing and Critical Thinking

Critical thinking is an essential skill sought at NDU; in fact, it is the outcome perhaps most desired by external stakeholders. The mission statement of NDU specifies that “NDU educates joint Warfighters in critical thinking and the creative application of military power to inform national strategy and globally integrated operations.”³⁴ The writing center’s role in this important outcome is to support and emphasize the connection between writing and critical thinking. Writing both reveals and develops critical thinking, as research reveals. Marvin Swift, in his article on business writing, points out that “the improvements we make in our thinking and the improvements we make in our [writing] style reinforce each other.”³⁵

Using good professional or business writing as a model is worthwhile in the PME environment. The senior-level military officers and civilian national security leaders who attend NDU must develop their critical thinking skills as well as a clear and concise writing style. As Swift states, “By objectifying his thoughts in the medium of language,

[the writer] gets a chance to see what is going on in his mind.”⁶ Writing clearly results from thinking clearly, but writing clearly also causes the writer to think more clearly. Revising one’s own writing further links critical analysis and writing improvement. Rewriting, as Swift puts it, “is the key to improved thinking. It demands a real open-mindedness and objectivity.”⁷ Getting students to participate in voluntary writing improvement activities is the goal and challenge of the writing center at NDU.

Executive Coaching as a Model

A writing center in a traditional university setting usually has peer tutors who assist undergraduate students in tutoring sessions to provide conversation and feedback on student writing. NDU writing instructors engage in this work too, but since we also instruct, conduct writing workshops, and provide faculty development on writing, especially assessing student writing, the writing center here is a slightly different model. We are subject-matter experts, not peer tutors. Including executive coaching in our instructional framework is a good approach to our executive-level adult learners, more so than if we pursued a more traditional university writing center approach.

Executive coaching has become a very popular avenue of professional development. Douglas Hall and others in 1999 wrote that “busy executives need help to make . . . needed changes in real time, on [the job],” just like students in their writing at NDU.⁸ Furthermore, “coaching is meant to be a practical, goal-focused form of one-on-one learning for busy executives.”⁹ This type of learning aligns neatly with the model of writing improvement at NDU through the combination of classroom instruction, writing workshops, and one-on-one consultations. Hall and others contrast external and internal executive coaches, pointing out that “internal coaches are preferred when knowing the company culture and politics is critical, when easy availability is desired, and when personal trust and comfort are at a premium.”¹⁰ We writing instructors are both outsiders and insiders: We are not faculty members who will grade the students’ writing, but we work in the same unique PME culture as the students do. Writing instructors are paired up with component colleges, so we get to know the faculty, curriculum, and assignments. We are not active duty in the military nor senior-level civilians in a government agency; how-

ever, we are used to engaging with them, are comfortable with them, and can understand their professional language enough to help them translate it to clear, concise writing.

Writing instructors are also “external and internal” coaches when it comes to providing feedback to students on their writing. We do not grade the students’ written products, so our assessment can be more of a dialogue with the student, since it occurs before the paper due date. Students can “reflect on and interpret written feedback. Students perform the role of critical connectors,” and this reflection is an important element in developing critical thinking skills.¹¹ Students who use the writing center receive formative comments rather than summative comments, that is, feedback that arrives in time to assist them in improving their writing before it is evaluated by the grading faculty. Melanie Weaver points out in *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education* that “summative assessments are too late, giving students no opportunity to act upon feedback in order to improve upon a piece of work” and that formative evaluations are “developmental, not judgmental.”¹² This point about formative feedback needs to be made clear to students, and we make sure to mention this early and often during introductions, in-class instruction, in one-on-one consultations, and in emails, if that is the only avenue of communication with a student. Reminding our senior leader students of the benefit of formative feedback positively affects their ability to accept comments on their writing and lessens the impact of the perceived power differential between our “expert” feedback and their “novice” writing. Feedback provided before evaluation time allows us to build trust, because as Carless wrote in 2013, in terms of assessment, trust is “an indispensable aspect in assessment because it enables students to be fully involved in assessment activities, even if it means they reveal their vulnerability.”¹³ Trust building is the key to every aspect of improving student writing at NDU.

Another way to build that trust and foster writing improvement is to refrain from judging students who struggle with writing. When delivering bad news to any stakeholder, it’s important for the coach to remain nonjudgmental and empathetic. Delivering bad news to an executive-level stakeholder requires some diplomacy. Writing is hard work, and as Grenny and Maxfield put it in their *Harvard Business Review* article on providing negative feedback to leaders: “It’s counterproductive if you telegraph frustration. Nothing destroys safety more reliably than a sense of derision.”¹⁴ If the students don’t feel safe

showing their written work, that is unequivocally unhelpful in producing improvement in student writing. Therefore, when teaching in front of a large group, avoiding the temptation of sarcasm about student writing is vital. Using examples of student writing on slides which contain mistakes for the audience to revise is a practical application of revision skills. Poking fun at those examples would be a mistake. Far better is to remind the students frequently that it's an exercise in learning, and even the most senior-level professional can make mistakes when the due date for a written product is imminent; therefore, revision is a key skill to producing an excellent written product. In one-on-one consultations, remaining calm and upbeat in the face of student frustration is equally important.

Finally, focusing not only on writing for academic assignments but also writing as professional development can attract JPME students to writing center activities. Students' academic workloads are heavy and not always focused on writing, or sometimes writing assignments are due so soon that there's not enough time to seek writing support. One course director's writing guide for students at NDU states that "[e]xecutives are universally starved for time, and thus any product put before them must be concise. This is not merely brief, as a short but poorly written memorandum could result in no decision or a poor decision. Inevitably, that becomes more work."¹⁵ Creating classes, workshops, consultations, and resources tailored to students' needs contributes to a professional development or executive coaching framework of writing improvement.

Four Elements of Writing Center Support

In practice, writing instructors at NDU accomplish the work of fostering writing improvement through four main approaches.

In-Class Instruction

One primary aspect of writing center work at NDU is classroom or workshop instruction, in the library or in component schools. We hold lunchtime sessions which are available to students, but not required. Class topics have evolved through research and experience of what writing skills adult professional military officers need. Many adult writers in professional military education struggle with similar writing issues, since writing well is a perishable skill and styles of

writing vary depending on audience, purpose, and environment. The needs of students and faculty continue to lead the evolution of classes and workshops.

Lunchtime classes include Introduction and Thesis Statement; Organization and Structure of an Academic Paper; Source Citation and Avoiding Plagiarism; Logic, Reasoning, and Counterargument; and Revision through Critical Thinking, among others. The majority of these senior-level military officers and national-security leaders are already proficient writers; many are not only college graduates but also already have one or more graduate degrees. Those writing classes, many students report, are all the refresher they need to be able to transfer their professional writing skills into an academic setting.

The class instruction portion of the executive coaching model provides the learners with our mutual vocabulary and a baseline of understanding that we can use throughout the year in our one-on-one consultations and when they receive written feedback on their papers. In-class instruction and workshopping papers further provide opportunities to win over the audience, to engage them, and to appeal to their professionalism, all in the effort to make them want to continue working with the writing center and improve their writing.

One-on-One Consultations

One-on-one consultations between student and writing instructor are the most valuable element of the executive coaching/writing center approach at NDU. They give the instructor the opportunity to engage one developing stakeholder at a time, to encourage, to provide positive feedback, and to frame negative feedback in a constructive way. One-on-one consultations are particularly helpful with students who are not confident in their writing ability or who have received critical or even demeaning feedback from a professor. As noted by James O'Toole and Warren Bennis in their *Harvard Business Review* article from 2009, "Beneficial as candor may be, great unintentional harm can be done when people speak honestly about difficult subjects."¹⁶ Having the opportunity to listen and encourage a student individually can both elevate confidence and model how to deliver and receive a bad news message in a constructive way.

Furthermore, one-on-one consultations allow the instructor not just to engage and encourage student writers but also to demystify feedback. Writing comments in the margin of a Word document ne-

cessitates extreme summarizing and can be incomprehensible to the receiver. In-person conversation allows the instructor to translate, to illustrate, to explain another way until the student understands the feedback on the paper, a crucial step to writing improvement. Writing feedback is important and is correlated to positive outcomes in terms of student engagement and ultimately, performance.¹⁷ Feedback that is relevant to the assignment, which not only points out errors but also suggests an alternative and that balances positive remarks with constructive criticism, contributes to fostering learning and writing improvement.

The one-on-one consultation also allows the writing instructor to use interpersonal skills to de-escalate what can be perceived as a power differential between the student writer and the giver of critical feedback. When a student receives harshly critical feedback on a paper from a professor, learning stops for a time. Ivan Chong notes that “written feedback exerts a negative impact on receivers’ emotion.”¹⁸ He points to Harre’s 1999 positional theory, which highlights the power relations among people and “the rights they enjoy in their position.”¹⁹ Students, in the position of receiver of writing feedback, feel powerless in relation to the person giving the writing feedback: “From the perspective of positional theory, written feedback is given by the more experienced other, the teacher, to the students, who are positioned as the ‘novice’ in the learning process.”²⁰ If the students perceive criticism or judgment, it causes a negative emotional response. Positive feedback is necessary to overcome this, as the negative emotional response harms learning. As Weaver reveals from research from Boud and Hounsell, “Judgmental statements . . . are seen as unhelpful (by students) and, particularly if critical or dismissive, can cause anger or hurt, resulting in students becoming unreceptive to tutor comments.”²¹ No writing improvement will result from judgmental writing feedback—that is counterproductive. Critical feedback should not be judgmental to be instructive. The one-on-one consultation allows for personal communication, coaching, to overcome that barrier.

Of interest, the Federal Reserve Bank in Philadelphia created a writing center in the hopes of improving the “clarity and impact of their written reports.”²² This is an excellent example of blending the writing center model with the executive coaching model. The writing instructor there created feedback sessions that were voluntary, in person, and removed from the oversight of management (the outsider

expert model). Her assessments of reports before and after feedback sessions indicate improvements in “overall quality, organization, clarity, support and analysis, and grammar” in written reports.²³ As Josh Bernoff concludes in his article on this writing center in a professional environment, “Editing fixes mistakes. Editorial coaching is more helpful.”²⁴ The one-on-one consultation element of the writing improvement framework at NDU is essential to maximize writing improvement among students.

Reviewing Papers

One challenge with a student population of senior leaders who are in a ten-month JPME master’s degree program is that they are pressed for time. They have classes and reading, tests, team-building exercises and games, field study trips, and many other obligations and opportunities. So unfortunately, sometimes students do not follow up in person when they receive feedback on their papers. Sometimes, the best they can do, or the only feedback they feel they need, is commentary on an emailed paper. In that case, our only available outreach is comments in the margin. While this is the poorest form of writing instruction, realistically, some of the students are very proficient writers and report later that they did find it helpful. As for the students who send a draft with significant writing issues, I email their papers back to them with comments in the margin and urge them to meet for the one-on-one consultation.

The drawbacks of relying solely on feedback in the form of marginal comments include that the student might not understand a comment, the student might perceive judgment or negativity in a comment when none was intended, or the feedback might not be applicable to the learning outcomes of the assignment. David Nicol, in his article “From Monologue to Dialogue,” writes that written feedback “is essentially a one-way communication, (and) often has to carry almost all the burden of teacher-student interaction.”²⁵ He calls it “impoverished dialogue,” and it can contribute to the sense of powerlessness that does not foster learning.

Furthermore, written feedback can be perceived differently depending on how proficient or challenged the writer might be.²⁶ Less proficient writers focus on word choice and grammar rules, Chong finds, while stronger writers “focused on more global issues like idea organization and content.”²⁷ Less proficient writers also tend to take critical

feedback very hard, harder than stronger writers, according to research. However, as Weaver points out, “The slightest good comment made makes a student feel good and tutors need to remember this.”²⁸ Including a positive comment in marginal or in-person feedback can go a long way in allowing a writer to accept shaping comments.

Faculty Development

Briefly, we should also include faculty development as an important outreach effort of the writing center that positively impacts student writing improvement. By engaging faculty, writing instructors can unify NDU’s approach to writing improvement. Often, for example, new faculty have unrealistically high expectations of student writing. Faculty development includes a grade-norming exercise intended to launch discussion and improve writing feedback to students. New faculty read three student papers from the previous year: an “A” paper, a failing paper, and a satisfactory but not stellar paper. Predictably, without any normative instruction, new faculty assessments of the papers vary significantly. Discussion ensues. As one faculty member memorably declared, “These students are senior officers. Their writing should be one hundred percent perfect. Error-free.” Opening up that line of discussion is useful. Each year, new faculty have to get this idea out in the open to hear how it sounds out loud and see if it can stand up to the good-natured argument of their peers. Writing instructors can guide the discussion but do not need to elaborate much on the point. New faculty become acculturated, and the normative assessment exercise is a valuable tool ultimately in helping their students improve in writing. One-on-one faculty outreach and engagement, offering to support and assist faculty by helping their students with writing, is part of our everyday work too and further contributes to writing improvement.

Strategies for International Officers

Every year, thousands of international officers from all around the world attend training at PME universities in the United States. These high-ranking military officers come with a wide range of literacy skills, both in English and in their native languages. Their success at NDU, and often their follow-on career trajectories, often hinges on their ability to clearly communicate and effectively transmit informa-

tion through writing. Helping them improve their writing can be a challenge for faculty and writing instructors, so here is one approach to consider when trying to support international officers who might be struggling to write academic papers in English.

A wide range of linguistic diversity creates a need for examining language in relation to cross-cultural competencies. As Lourdes Orna-Montesinos underscores in her article, “English as an International Language in the Military: A Study of Attitudes,” “Of particular concern for military communication have also been claims about international security and about the vital consequences of the miscommunication problems.”²⁹ Linguistic misunderstandings can become critical in joint security cooperation, when instances of miscommunication can result in conflict in theater. However, the onus in many PME circles still seems to fall upon the student to acquire English as fast as possible to avoid these mistakes. Instead of forcing students to write in an academic battlefield, writing instructors have a unique opportunity to try to learn from the perspective of students’ native languages and mitigate these miscommunication moments from the source. Starting from that point, rather than an exhaustive exercise in proofreading and correction, will yield better understanding between student and instructor. It aligns more closely with the executive-coaching model endorsed here.

To illustrate, here is an example from Ortega of a text written by a Taiwanese student: “There are so many Taiwan people live around the lake.”

A writing teacher would probably respond with this feedback: “There are so many Taiwanese people who live around the lake.”³⁰

Typical feedback would include adding “ese” to Taiwan, making Taiwanese a modifier for people and the relative clause “who” which would describe the subject, Taiwanese people. However, a little more insight into the student’s native language yields an entirely different perspective. Mandarin Chinese, or the language spoken in Taiwan, is a Topic-Prominent language, which means the speaker explains the topic first and then comments on it. The speaker has decided to use a close English substitute, the existential “there,” a grammatical form that recognizes the existence of a piece of information, and then changes the topic slightly to fit their original meaning. For this speaker, “There are so many Taiwanese people who live around the lake” actually more closely means “Many Taiwanese people, they live around the lake.”

Small differences in meaning like this example may not seem significant, but this approach can bring the student and instructor closer to mutual understanding and is a stronger place to start in writing improvement than correcting grammar and spelling errors. For writing instructors, knowledge of the grammatical structure of the students' native languages could enable a very productive discussion of the speaker's true intention. In this case, the lesson that would be most helpful to the student is to guide them to structure their thoughts more closely to the subject-predicate form of English: "Many Taiwanese people live around the lake."

The more authentically the international students' writing aligns with their true meaning, the more effectively they will communicate. While of course it's not possible for the instructor to learn all languages and their grammatical structures, the writing instructor is, however, trained to notice the patterns in student writing. All it takes is a little bit of curiosity to ask, "What do I know about this student?" or "What is their language background?" or "Why would this student be making this language choice?" Discussions with other faculty who know the student, or faculty who specialize in linguistics or cross-cultural competence, can help build understanding and are good places to start to improve the English writing skills of international officers.

In another example, a student wrote, "At the beginning of the nuclear era, policymakers and strategists believed they could manage the *defies* for victory posed by nuclear weapons by applying the theories of strategic bombing."

The NDU writing instructor questioned the word "defies." What was the student defying in this instance? It only took a quick Google Translate search to see that *défi* means "challenges" in French, and this student was codeswitching into one of their acquired languages. Once again, the one-on-one writing consultation can allow writing instructors to discuss language choices and cultural or pragmatic differences. After all, a student will continue to make these linguistic "errors" if they do not understand the reasoning behind the differences. Teachers can partner with faculty to discuss the best practices for accommodating international officers, especially those with limited English proficiency.

Creating a collaborative learning environment that includes the exchange of linguistic rules promotes cross-cultural sensitivity and discussions of appropriate communicative strategies. After all, "successful communication is vital in a multicultural mission."³¹ Many of our

international students are senior military officers in their countries. Many are promoted when they graduate and return home to senior leadership positions. These students need to hone their writing ability to achieve mission goals as well as to secure peacekeeping operations in a multicultural and multinational context. For international military officers, writing instructors and faculty should add to their approach an element of linguistic and cross-cultural appreciation. International students' native languages and linguistic transference play a transformative role in fostering their writing improvement.

Conclusion

Students at NDU are voluntarily attending writing improvement classes and workshops, seeking consultations, and sending papers to receive formative feedback. Writing instructors are being invited to conduct faculty development related to writing. Good reviews from students and faculty provide optimism that we are on the right track. Using an executive coaching model blended with traditional writing center practice builds trust among students and faculty at NDU. Lessening the perceived power differential between writing instructors and students by fostering a positive climate is beneficial to the effectiveness of our efforts too. Ultimately, the goals of writing instructors at NDU are to develop the link between writing and critical thinking in our students and promote their self-efficacy as writers. We want them to graduate, succeed as leaders in their fields, and demonstrate clear and concise communication, whether out in the field conducting joint operations with strategic partners, on senior staffs, or in their civilian government agencies. Fostering writing improvement in JPME improves critical thinking and communication among our warfighters and senior strategic leaders: It's the mission of the writing center and demanded by our stakeholders.

Notes

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4. Mission Statement, NDU website, <https://www.ndu.edu>.
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6. Swift, 62.
7. Swift, 62.

8. Douglas T. Hall et al, "Behind Closed Doors," 39.
9. Hall, et al, 40.
10. Hall, et al, 40.
11. Ivan Chong, "Interplay among Technical, Socio-Emotional and Personal Factors in Written Feedback Research," 186.
12. Melanie R. Weaver, "Do Students Value Feedback?" 382.
13. Carless, 2013, cited in Chong, 189.
14. Joseph Grenny and Brittney Maxfield, "Giving Feedback," para. 8.
15. Daryk Zirkle and Kathleen Denman, "CIC Writing Tips for Students," College of Information and Cyberspace, National Defense University, 2021.
16. James O'Toole and Warren Bennis, "Spotlight on Trust," 60.
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18. Chong, "Interplay among Technical, Socio-Emotional and Personal Factors in Written Feedback Research," 190.
19. Chong, 190.
20. Chong, 190.
21. Boud and Hounsell cited in Weaver, "Do Students Value Feedback?" 381.
22. Josh Bernoff, "Why Your Organization Needs a Writing Center."
23. Bernoff.
24. Bernoff.
25. David Nicol, "From Monologue to Dialogue," 501.
26. Chong, "Interplay among Technical, Socio-Emotional and Personal Factors in Written Feedback Research," 191.
27. Chong, 191.
28. Weaver, "Do Students Value Feedback?" 388.
29. Concepción Orna-Montesinos, "English as an International Language in the Military," 89.
30. Lourdes Ortega, *Understanding Second Language Acquisition*.
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Chapter 4

It's Not You, It's Me **Changing PME Paradigms in Developing, Designing, and** **Deploying Writing Assignments**

Jeffrey Turner

Introduction

Writing assignments are an overlooked part of course and curriculum development. They aren't quite assessment, even though writing assignments are key tools for accurate assessments and measuring outcomes. Writing assignments aren't quite course content either. Assignments are typically the last thing a faculty member creates, after they spent hours identifying reading materials, sorting the materials, creating lesson plans, and identifying outcomes, yet writing assignments are the first things students tend to look for when they read syllabi and course guides. Writing assignments occupy a sort of liminal space that often relegates them to prompts or simple questions, without much consideration given to the role they play in manifesting the concepts and the ways of thinking specific to a discipline, field, or course, let alone the genres of writing specific to a knowledge area.

In my engagement with the Strategy Field of Study Chair at the Joint Advanced Warfighting School (JAWS) as part of a Writing Across the Curriculum effort, we discussed how writing could transform and improve student outcomes. The Chair noted that few students demonstrated or were even able to articulate the knowledge and intellectual processes necessary for the faculty of the field of study to feel comfortable labeling the students as novice strategists. Despite his and the faculty's frustration, we had several discussions about strategy and writing before we even considered changes to the curriculum. Over the course of the discussions, we identified significant similarities between strategy and writing and composition as academic disciplines.

Writing and strategy are fundamentally interested in design. Design is an "iterative decision-making process that produces plans by which resources are converted into products or systems that meet

human needs and wants or solve problems.”¹ Of course, iterative means process, with particular attention to a messy nonlinear process. A text is a system designed for communication, and a text often is a plan, denoting the concepts of a plan, or it constitutes the documents that lead to a plan. Fundamental to strategy is that design aims to fulfill needs and find solutions, aka strategic ends. In many military cases, design precedes planning because it makes it possible for staffs to plan; strategy needs to be user focused since people will need to operationalize it.² Writing is focused on design since it becomes the basis for how a reader will experience and navigate a document.

Design is also concerned with coherence and cogence. A written document, to be successful, needs to be coherent. Different genres achieve coherence in different ways. Research papers need to cohere around the problem statement and the research question(s), and the methods of research are really the operationalization of the research question that leads to a design—the linking of the user’s goals and their available ways. Argumentation tends to cohere around the thesis statement and the supporting points. In both research writing and argumentation, not only are papers internally coherent, but they—ideally—are also cogent regarding the facts and representation of source information, such as expert perspectives and data. Strategy needs to cohere with the problem as well, while maintaining cogence with the strategic environment. A coherently designed strategy is explicable, accounting for the realities of the strategic environment and working toward specific goals or ends.³ Said another way, strategy describes a process to achieve an end through a deliberate design. And those ends are often ephemeral in the long term since the conditions driving strategy change and staff officers rotate.

Strategy and writing share a unique relationship to the paradox of process and product. Process, for instance, is uniquely emphasized by both fields. A good strategist is always revising and reconsidering strategy through a series of iterations just as a good writer revises and reconsiders structure, paragraphs, and sentences. Both the strategist and the writer are interested in product, but product is understood to be the result of process. At some point in our conversations, I shared the writer’s adage: “Writing projects are never completed, merely abandoned.” Translated to military strategist-ese, it might sound like: “A strategy is never completed, merely handed off to another staff officer.”

To guide design and frame process, understanding and applying purpose and audience to written assignments is crucial. Purpose is

not only understanding what needs to be said and why but is a leveraging of a particular genre to channel the “what” and “why” through.⁴ Genre, as understood in a technical sense, is the form a written response takes to meet the exigencies of a particular community or organization’s requirements, and recurring situations naturally tend to mean that the writing takes on similar patterns and forms.⁵ Those requirements go well beyond style because the form of the document itself, its structure and organization, is directly linked to the requirements of the exigencies.⁶ In that sense, genres are used to fulfill purpose while purpose is distributed throughout genres, and genres indicate a specific audience. It is difficult to replicate that audience specificity in the acontextual classroom, and audience specificity is often given short shrift. Yet, audience specificity is often something students clamor to understand when they ask, “Who are we writing for?” and “How much should we assume the reader knows?”

In our discussions, the chair and I found that strategy and writing also had similar cognitive patterns. For students to become better strategists, for students to begin working in the paradigms of process and product, coherence and cogence, and purpose and audience, requires specific approaches to cognitive development. We noted that strategy and writing required similar cognitive engagement. Understanding strategy as process—perpetual and ceaseless analysis ending in a product enabled by an artistic mindset, making connections between seemingly disparate ideas and fields and data—offered a model for understanding how strategists think. The connection-making plays out in terms of coherence and cogence. A writer, like a strategist, often needs to make intuitive or inductive leaps then build and explain backward. Coherence and cogence are associative and playful, synthetic as much as analytical. The ability to explain backward begins to highlight the role of audience and purpose. Being able to express the logic of the intuition and induction are crucial to getting buy-in from stakeholders, leaders, and readers alike. Leadership and institutional buy-in is critical to operationalizing a strategy. An intuitive idea, no matter how correct or insightful, will never be convincing for a senior leader who will be forced to justify their decision-making.

The focus on cognitive attributes and activities became the basis for thinking about how to revise the strategy curriculum and demonstrate student achievement. Students needed to be making connections and working with the course material rather than just absorbing it. What we desired exceeded mere engagement. We wanted to give

the students the freedom and agency to develop their own strategic theories, using the strategic readings as jumping off points. In giving them that freedom, we also saw the need to ensure they explained their thinking, demonstrating awareness of and familiarity with the work of the strategic theorists they read and discussed. Lastly, students needed to be able to communicate it to a variety of audiences, and while we envisioned the audience as primarily senior leaders, we also understood that a good staff officer can influence and shape entire staff dynamics and outcomes. A good, if not a great strategist is defined by their ability and agency to make connections ceaselessly and incorporate information in an unending process despite being required to deliver products. A good strategist can make intuitive and inductive leaps, but they are also able to articulate the logic and process to an audience. The communication to an audience always happens for a specific purpose, and a strategist is flexible enough to shape and express their thinking to a variety of audiences and circumstances as exigency requires.

In asking for those three things—the ability to make connections, explain intuitive leaps, and vary communication to the audience, we came to a strategic inflection point. The field of strategy rarely emphasizes how to develop strategic thinking, as its focus is on the strategic thought itself. The strategy field lacks a pedagogy to guide the development of such cognitive capabilities, but writing and composition, given its historical development from the study of rhetoric, has exactly such pedagogical tools. Writing and composition, especially as it tends to exist at the graduate level, nurtures agency, cognitive flexibility through metacognition and transfer, an understanding of audience and purpose, and possesses the pedagogical tools to guide the development of strategists and the nurturing of strategic thinking. Specifically, audience and purpose, framing and contextualizing, with agency, are the foundational elements of writing assignment design. But we delved even deeper. On the basis of that understanding, we began to rethink what the strategy field of study was doing, why it was doing it, and how it might develop the three cognitive attributes we identified. We looked holistically across the curricula. We examined the existing goals and outcomes, often rewriting those statements to appreciate our new understanding. We then taxonomized the content, identifying and grouping the foundational or atomistic areas from the complex or molecular. We rearranged and regrouped the course materials around the activities of strategic thinking rather

than the knowledge areas; epistemological awareness is a crucial area endemic to writing and composition.⁷

The key to making the whole endeavor effective, however, hinged on the quality of the writing assignment design. The pedagogical bases for thinking about audience and purpose, framing and contextualizing, and agency were crucial to avoiding the errors of the previous curriculum. There is a tendency in the academy, not just in professional military education (PME), to believe that a prompt is enough or should be enough for students to generate strong written responses. Oddly enough, the logic gets twisted in the sense that faculty often believe that less is more because it preserves agency; they are giving the students freedom to choose and exercise their ideas. But agency in a vacuum is an impotent agent. Gravity and friction are essential to walking; without them we'd never have left the oceans. Without the constraints of contextualized and framed writing assignments that indicate purpose and audience, students flail. Without writing assignments designed with rhetorical boundaries influenced by pedagogically sound praxis, students flail. Without a person or community to direct their response to, students tend to write incredibly generically or fall back on default modes rather than developing and exercising new cognitive attributes. In the absence of sound writing assignment design, faculty must consider the fact that weak written responses from students epitomize the break-up line, "It's not you, it's me."

Fundamentals of Writing Assignment Design

In working to improve the writing assignment design of the JAWS Strategy Field of Study we emphasized three fundamental areas. First, we focused on understanding how students enacted or demonstrated the course and curriculum learning goals and outcomes, which led us to focus on specific cognitive skills and attributes; the written product should demonstrate specific types of thinking that should show an inclusion of the information, theories, and events/people the students had read and discussed in class. Second, we focused on the rhetorical aspects of the writing assignment to identify and articulate the purpose, audience, and context that framed the assignment. Lastly, we focused on sequence and timing to ensure that the writing assignment offered the students the opportunity to engage in a process that

led them to demonstrate their learning and thinking. Of course, all of that is bracketed by the fact that we tempered our expectations. Just as writing is a process, writing assignment design is iterative. We planned and scheduled to make tweaks and improvements each year on the basis of changes to reading, student products, and student course feedback.

Goals and Outcomes in Terms of Cognition

Writing assignments are most commonly used to demonstrate student achievement. Assessment, however, is a limited pedagogical perspective for why students are asked to write. This is not to suggest that assessment is not important, especially as PME enters a new period of outcomes-based education as prescribed by the Officer Professional Military Education Policy Foxtrot (OPMEP-F).⁸ In consideration of our recognized cognitive attributes, we primarily understood writing to be the process by which students would think through and develop their theory of strategy, which would then enable assessment of the degree of learning. Working backward from the program and course outcomes through the notion of strategy as an unending process of analysis and evaluation as it comports with writing as a process also led us to discover the primary conceit of the revisions: Writing would serve as the means by which students would develop their own theory of strategy.

Taking that perspective encouraged student agency because they would no longer serve as receptacles for information but would be forced to work with the sources and theorists as peers in a flattened hierarchy. It also focused us on the relationships between the information and theories, which proved to be a key term as we crafted specific assignment language because it forced students to make connections, which was both active agency and process through engagement, that typified the cognitive attributes we desired. If strategists as described by cognitive attributes are about making intuitive connections followed by rational explanations, then blending relationships between sources and information and theorists is exactly what a strategist does. A strategist in a combatant command is constantly synthesizing intelligence and shifting theoretical perspectives to interpret the information. The assignment, it became clear, really was about crafting the rhetorical framework in terms of purpose and au-

dience to facilitate inquisitiveness based on working with sources to piece together a rational approach.

Rhetorical Considerations: Purpose, Audience, and Context

Rhetorical considerations are things most faculty resist in their writing assignment development. Even in the absence of more holistic approaches to writing assignment design that demonstrate clear intentionality, faculty could facilitate improvements in writing assignments simply by grounding them in clear rhetorical considerations. Too often, faculty skimp on the details in the actual assignment, which leads students to struggle to determine who they are writing for and why they are writing. In the absence of those details, the lack of rhetorical cues often leads to meandering thinking or exposition about details that are unnecessary.

In the professional world, particularly true for officers entering senior-level PME, the context of the organization they write in has implicit contextual cues that determine audience and purpose. When an officer receives an assignment, they are told who they are writing for, and if it is not stated directly, it is clear from the context why they are being asked to write. For instance, awards and performance reviews have clear audiences and purposes to suit specific contexts. In fact, the purpose, audience, and context are so clear the genre conventions are repeatable, both in terms of standard forms as product and borrowing of language from previous examples as process. Students are often tuned to sense those rhetorical cues and account for them unconsciously when they are immersed in professional contexts. In the absence of such embedded rhetorical cues, academic environments are best defined as conditional rhetorical spaces dependent on the faculty member to provide and articulate those clues.⁹ When faculty members fail to provide rhetorical cues, they fail to condition the rhetorical space in a way that immerses the student in the context that drives writing decisions and the application of appropriate models. To allow for student success, academic environments must explicitly provide students the clues they would otherwise gain from immersion in their professional environments.

In our work on the strategy curriculum, we found the best overlap for rhetorical cues came from thinking about authentic assessments. Authentic assessments are assessments that students, upon graduation from the program, will likely encounter. For one assignment we

used a ghost email scenario. In the scenario, the J5 has just returned from a meeting with the Combatant Commander (CCDR). She, the CCDR, has acknowledged the new strategic guidance from the White House and asked the J5 to conduct an initial evaluation of the new strategic guidance against the theater strategic plan, identifying specific problems. The CCDR needs the initial evaluation before the weekend because she plans to use it as a guide for her reading. The J5 asks the student to conduct their analysis in the form of an email and send it to them before a specific deadline that day. The J5 specifically states they will only give it a cursory review before making the email the basis of their email to the CCDR.

Notice all the important rhetorical cues in the guidance. The framing and contextualizing to develop an audience and purpose constituted almost three-quarters of a page. The specific cognitive activity, or the prompt proper, was a single sentence. Because of that framing, the student knows they need to assume the J5's identity, and the email needs to be of a caliber to speak to a CCDR. Within that audience and identity, the student has a greater degree of awareness about the level of detail and the theories or logic they need to explain, which is crucial to the student understanding the materials from the course and the degree of reference. They probably don't need to cite Quincy Wright, for instance, but they can use Wright's concepts because they know the J5 and the CCDR are familiar. In terms of genre, they know that an email needs to be to the point, maybe there are some bullets, but it should be mostly complete sentences. Generally, it probably shouldn't be longer than a page. Even further, the paragraphs should probably lead with specific problem statements followed by several sentences of explanation that show disconnects between the new strategic guidance and the current theater strategic plan.

Rhetorical cues are crucial to writing assignment design because they serve as guiding points for otherwise nebulous, unconditioned, rhetorical spaces that are the academic classroom. Writing doesn't happen in a vacuum. Writing is situated, which also means there is no such thing as generic writing. Despite the supposed similarities, writing a strategy for a Fortune 500 company is not the same as writing a strategy for the military, and even in the military, strategies vary significantly. By deliberately constructing the rhetorical space and providing cues, students begin to understand how to interpret those cues and translate and apply them to written documents. When students return to the professional context, awareness of and the conscious

ability to identify cues means they transition into roles and become more effective more quickly. Faculty members can facilitate even deeper learning by offering models that serve as genre exemplars. The prevailing approach has been to use the best quality work as models for students, but more recent research suggests that the cues in high quality work are often revised out of final documents, making it difficult for developing students to identify key features. Instead, faculty should offer students successful but improvable documents as models and explain what works and how it can be better. Especially in the initial deployment of an assignment, faculty may find it helpful to develop their own model, which clarifies their expectations and highlights any obvious weaknesses in the rhetorical cues.

Sequence and Timing

The order of writing assignments and the use of multiple writing assignments as scaffolding to build student skills are fundamental elements of assignment design. It is also important to arrange the assignments and place them at the specific times in the curriculum that are most conducive to or require the employment of writing skills to engage with the material. Sequencing assignments to ensure students develop skills that lead to and employ more complicated skills over the duration of a course needs to occur in conjunction with the timing of the assignment, especially with a sensitivity toward other course work, since the compressed and accelerated course structure of most PME programs means students are taking several intensive courses simultaneously.

Sequencing is the order in which assignments will occur. It often depends on the arrangement of content. The primary concern is the epistemological arrangement of the material. How is the faculty member choosing to group readings and course materials? For a history course, arrangement typically happens chronologically around an event or a person. Then, within that arrangement are specific issues or perspectives on that event. Often, faculty also try to apply generic approaches, such as old to new or simple to complex, to arrange the course material. For some disciplines such approaches are not inherently wrong. For instance, in philosophy, tracing an issue from its origins to its increasingly specific branches can become invaluable. For material that seeks to find connections and patterns, however, such an approach can be limiting and hinder student devel-

opment because the course itself doesn't highlight the rationale for the arrangement.

Interdisciplinary fields like strategy often demand more consideration to be successful. Since strategy is always dependent on the context or, to use the term of the field, the strategic environment, providing students the tools to evaluate and interpret the environment is crucial. The strategy department chair arranged all the readings around that simple goal. A strategist, to interpret and evaluate the environment, tends to look at systems, international relations, geopolitics, founding principles and world order, strategic culture, economics, and strategic thinking. From a military strategist's point of view, those are the fundamental areas a student needs to learn about to survey the strategic environment. Strategic thinking, the process of cognition and the cognitive attributes, becomes the process that pulls all of those seemingly disparate areas together. Understanding that, strategic thinking was introduced last in the course structure, right before the strategic environment assignment. Students were asked to explain the relationships between several of the areas of strategic environment, that is, why and how the areas they chose were related. The assignment explicitly restated the eight areas (including an introductory class).

The ability to complete an assignment that explained the relationships and foundational theories became essential to the students' ability to progress into the next course, National Security Decision-making, because without an awareness of the thoughts and patterns of thought that enable decision-making and the ability to articulate and explain the differences and similarities, students would struggle to understand decision-making itself as a cognitive and social process. The first assignment on the strategic environment enabled students to understand decision-making, and after decision-making, we place another assignment to require them to engage in a higher level of thinking. In other words, we scaffolded the assignments through sequencing, and timed them to correlate with the cognitive and thinking processes.

Those deliberate steps led to the final activity within the strategy field: assessing the various strategic plans. Bloom's taxonomy probably has some explanatory power here, and it justifiably serves PME well in the formulation of outcomes. Bloom's, however, is limited in its ability to zero in on the specific cognitive acts and the nuance relative to the content. Paying attention to the organization of the mate-

rial and structuring it in a way that enables progression through the levels of thought appropriate to the discipline are crucial to successful assignment design. Sequencing and timing are difficult. Most faculty members learn implicitly and replicate courses they took, but analysis of the content and ordering readings around the development of cognitive activities that culminate in writing assignments that facilitate that activity become crucial to not only demonstrating learning but also to allowing learning to happen. Under this paradigm, writing is no longer something someone does after they learn, but, rather, it becomes the constitutive and transformative act of learning itself.

Final Thoughts

Writing assignment design is a much more holistic approach to teaching than simply generating a prompt. When I work with faculty complaining about the quality of student writing, I often find myself trying to determine if we are in the faculty lounge where griping about students is something of a pastime to simply pass time, or if the faculty member seriously believes that their students just don't get it. If the latter, I often ask them why they think that is. Those conversations often lead to the faculty member's realization that they play a significant role in weak student writing because of poor assignments. Improving writing assignment design leads to improved student writing.¹⁰ In the strategy field of study at JAWS, we saw both ends of the curve shift upward by approximately five points. Students who would have passed responding to the previous assignments now achieved even higher marks. Students who would have failed responding to the previous assignments now passed comfortably. Faculty were much clearer about what they were looking for as they read, responded, and graded. They were also happier because they had less paperwork due to failing students who required remediation. Even subsequent courses that built on the strategy coursework noted improvements in the application of strategic theory, which meant that students were retaining the information and transferring more readily. Efficient and effective—is that allowed in government work?

When considering developing writing assignment design, look holistically across your curriculum. Be able to explain what you really want students to do, especially for the military profession that really needs specific types of thinking. Consider writing as a process of

thinking that results in a process that repositions writing as a tool for development rather than merely a thing that shows if students developed. Borrowing from writing and composition pedagogy and incorporating it into your course lead to improved assignments that account for rhetorical context and deliberately offer cues. The framing of specific course materials and the contextualizing of the assignment itself are crucial for students' ability to transfer the knowledge from the PME classroom back into their commands. Incorporate models that are good, and fifteen minutes walking students through the models, explaining what works, why, and how to make it even better will pay dividends later, most immediately because you won't have to answer the same question ten or fifteen times. Consider how you sequence throughout a course or curricula, timing assignments to highlight key moments that align with crucial points of development and sequencing in a manner that progresses from foundational skills to more complex skills. If a student is struggling with foundational skills, you will know earlier and be able to address issues through revisions that enable success in later aspects of the program.

Perhaps most important when considering writing assignment design: Don't only focus on what your mentors did in the classroom. I find it better to think about why they did it and whether, as a student, I learned what they wanted me to. I often find that they struggled to articulate the real lesson. They were doing what their mentor did and so on and so forth.¹¹ If we take seriously the calls to address stagnation and to improve critical, creative, and communicative thinking, then developing assignments that ask for and treat those areas differently may be a fundamental area to initiate change. A willingness to accept responsibility for ways we can improve student outcomes will be a determining factor in being able to say in the faculty lounge that it is them, not us.

Notes

1. Stefan Banach and Alex Ryan, "The Art of Design," 105. The definition is used at the School of Advanced Military Studies, and it is the definition from the International Technology Education Association.

2. Banach and Ryan, 106.

3. Banach and Ryan, 106.

4. James Reither, "Writing and Knowing," 621.

5. Charles Bazerman, "Speech Acts, Genres, and Activity Systems," 311.

6. In my teaching experience, students and faculty alike tend to overemphasize style. In my research, I believe this tends to be a cultural phenomenon not unique to the military but emphasized through the military's approach. There was a time at the turn of the twentieth century when the military focused on genres and general correspondence. Sometime in the early to mid-twentieth century, the military switched to style guides, which deemphasized form and genre, focusing instead on grammar and mechanics. There has been, over the last 10–15 years, something of a cycle back towards correspondence guides, but the distribution is often limited to secretariat entities.

7. See Paulo Freire for a practical explanation of the ways different groups taxonomize information, especially the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* discussing how farmers farm instruments compared to academics.

8. Department of Defense, *Officer Professional Military Education Program*. <https://www.jcs.mil/>.

9. Chris Anson, "The Pop Warner Chronicles," 542.

10. Traci Gardner, *Designing Writing Assignments*, 1–3, <https://wac.colostate.edu/>.

11. Michael Carter, "Ways of Knowing, Doing, and Writing," 385–86.

Chapter 5

Building Trust and Success through Dialogic Feedback in Joint Professional Military Education

Stase L. Wells

In response to the National Defense Strategy's assertion that "PME has stagnated,"¹ hotly contested debates on *how* to increase rigor within professional military education (PME) institutions have flourished. Dr. Megan Hennessey's *War on the Rocks* post provides a thoughtful consideration within which to frame this concept, positing that rigor should be measured not only by students' preparation but also by that of faculty, who must "adopt the role of—simultaneously—facilitators and disruptors, and who must, along with the institution, value formative assessment just as much as, if not more than, summative assessment."² The importance of feedback in assessment and student achievement is well-explored in the literature, yet the *how* is similarly disputed.³

In graduate-level joint professional military education (JPME), incoming students and incoming military faculty face a similar challenge: Students come to resident JPME with a breadth of experience but often are not sufficiently prepared for the rigors of graduate-level academic research and writing; in much the same way, incoming military faculty can use their experience to mentor students as military leaders, yet many struggle to provide usable, actionable feedback on students' written projects. Judith Hicks Stiehm, author of *U.S. Army War College: Military Education in a Democracy*, demonstrates an area of contrast between student/faculty relationships in JPME institutions and those of civilian academic institutions, arguing that given students' comparative experience and education level, "instructors are known to be very much like themselves; awe is not part of the equation."⁴ JPME writing center faculty have a unique opportunity to fill the aforementioned gaps and assist both populations in developing the use of feedback in improving communication skills. The practical experiences of faculty at Marine Corps University's Leadership Communication Skills Center (LCSC), informed by existing research and viewed within the context of dialogic feedback, reveal the instructional support role of JPME writing centers in the feedback loop between students and faculty and encourage an interactive learning

exchange that promotes trust, negotiates meaning-making processes, and clarifies expectations—ultimately factoring into students’ academic achievement.

The importance of feedback—both formative and summative—resounds in the literature.⁵ It is not only prominent in writing center pedagogy and practice but also informed by interdisciplinary research. Gail Crimmins and others begin their article by defining high-quality feedback as essential to learning—not simply as evidence for a given grade or evaluation, but more importantly as a practice to improve students’ self-regulation and self-directed learning processes.⁶ And Glen Whitman and Ian Kelleher, authors of *NeuroTeach: Brain Science and the Future of Education*, devote an entire chapter to formative assessment and argue that the act of giving students “more frequent, nonthreatening, or low-stakes, feedback on their understanding is critical to memory consolidation” and is one “of the most underutilized yet critical teaching and learning strategies” validated by research in the field of Mind, Brain, and Education Science.⁷ Rubrics corresponding to grades on written assignments and scaffolded assignment milestones requiring mentors’ feedback on mentees’ written drafts serve as evidence that graduate-level JPME institutions recognize the importance of feedback in teaching and learning processes, but several challenges exist as students and faculty grapple with how to use feedback in a constructive way.

Yang and Carless’s article identifies common student grievances about faculty feedback, citing reports that it is often “inadequate in helpfulness, timeliness, consistency, specificity and clarity.”⁸ First, the helpfulness of feedback is very much dependent upon the student/faculty relationships which inform the feedback loop, and in JPME, these relationships are unique. Active-duty military officers, sister service military officers, international military officers, and civilian interagency partners have varying educational backgrounds, career experiences, areas of subject-matter expertise, and perceptions of how a faculty/student relationship should function. These differences affect the degree to which students place value on faculty feedback. Faculty differences also play a role here. Stiehm describes the distinction between civilian graduate-school faculty (the PhDs), whose devotion to their subject-matter expertise “can involve a lifetime of commitment,” and military faculty, who are often asked to teach content without the same level of expertise and “have vast experience but are neither experienced as educators nor academically expert.”⁹ Feed-

back provided to students by faculty who are considered near peers may be deemed more or less helpful depending on who is responsible for the summative grade and how the faculty demonstrates subject-matter expertise and treats the hierarchy within the education institution.

A second, key challenge for both students and faculty is a lack of time. The compressed nature of resident JPME is beneficial in that it allows graduates to apply what they have learned immediately upon return to the operating forces and follow-on career assignments, but it arguably does not fully allow for adequate reflection periods in between assignments during the academic year. Thus, faculty do not have sufficient time to provide quality feedback, and this delay means students are often unable to reflect on the feedback and apply lessons learned to subsequent assignments.

Another common challenge is a lack of clarity in the connection between the faculty's feedback on the paper and the grade given to the student. For example, a faculty member may give a student an A-minus and comment, "Good job." Although the fairly high grade and comment may seem connected to the faculty member, such a discrepancy could confuse a high-performing student and result in questions like the following: "If I did a 'good job,' why didn't I get an A?"

Still another challenge to address is a lack of communication between students and faculty about writing. This challenge is often compounded by several underlying factors, including, but not limited to, time constraints, differing cultural-values-based approaches to teacher/student interactions, students' reticence to share their own vulnerabilities, and the perceived barriers inherent in the broader hierarchical structure within which PME takes place. Yang and Carless argue this "imbalanced teacher-student power relationship . . . can impede students from becoming active agents in the feedback process."¹⁰ Ultimately, where the feedback loop is concerned, the institutional structures that make the military so effective may be hindering students' willingness to take risks and to share their challenges with those above them, which can negatively influence students' cognitive ability to understand and narrow the gap between their current skill level and their desired academic performance.

Even in cases where faculty provide exceptionally clear feedback to students, Min Yang and David Carless cite Price, Handley, and Millar's earlier argument that "students often do not understand the purposes of feedback, sometimes privilege written over verbal feedback

and may have received little modelling or guidance on how to use feedback.”¹¹ Without a clear understanding of *how* to revise global and surface-level issues in their writing, students may find it challenging to use feedback constructively; instead, the common issues described above can cause emotional stress, particularly given JPME’s ties to promotion/advancement and in the case of Marine Corps University (MCU) specifically, its response to the rigor debate: a mandate for all eligible resident students to complete the requirements for a master’s degree.

In seeking rigor while simultaneously addressing the challenges shared by students and their military faculty, JPME institutions should consider adding another agent into the feedback loop: JPME writing centers comprising qualified support faculty are uniquely positioned to facilitate the use of dialogic feedback in a successful learning exchange. Carless defines dialogic feedback as “interactive exchanges in which interpretations are shared, meanings negotiated and expectations clarified” that are “facilitated when teachers and students enter into trusting relationships in which there are ample opportunities for interaction about learning and around notions of quality.”¹² The interactivity of such exchanges allows students and faculty to use feedback as a tool for action, skill development, and long-term improvement. To be effective, though, Carless argues dialogic feedback requires a supportive learning environment that allows for open discussion, which inspires confidence in all participants to take risks and to demonstrate vulnerability as they share their strengths, challenges, and critiques with one another.

In a JPME classroom, it is more common to hear vulnerability described as something to exploit in one’s enemy; however, in near-peer relationships between student military officers and military faculty, vulnerability is both possible and mutually beneficial. It is also possible for vulnerability to be a successful tool in civilian student/military faculty and international military student/military faculty relationships; however, differences in these demographics change the level of perceived risk of one’s vulnerable disclosure. Kelli Halfman conducted a qualitative research study within the lens of grounded theory to explore how vulnerability in higher education classrooms impacted students’ educational experiences. She found vulnerability was a process whereby students’ willingness to be vulnerable increased when instructors practiced empathic responsiveness and struck what she termed an appropriate disclosure balance. She also

found vulnerability was a pathway to connection, which she argues is the root of the learning experience: “Not only does vulnerability allow students to deeply engage and make connections to course content, vulnerability can also be used as a vehicle to foster interpersonal relationships within the classroom.”¹³ Faculty and students who show willingness to be vulnerable during their interactions will likely find taking such a risk acts to increase, rather than decrease, the trust needed for dialogic feedback to be successful.

The writing center’s very nature suggests a connection to both students and faculty fostered by tools like vulnerability, as well as a collaborative spirit that supports both sides in their communication skill development. This is evidenced by the mission of the LCSC, an instructional support resource for the MCU community, which includes not only students but also faculty and staff: “to support the Marine Corps University community in its efforts to prepare and develop effective leaders who are strong thinkers, writers, and speakers.”¹⁴ Figure 5.1 provides a visual representation of the parallel efforts undertaken by LCSC faculty to support students in the development of graduate-level academic research and writing skills and to support faculty in providing usable, actionable feedback on student writing.

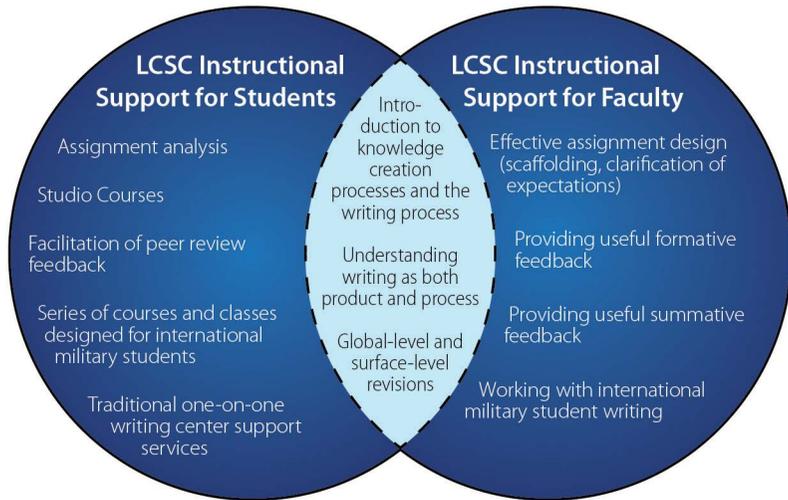


Figure 5.1. The Leadership Communication Skills Center’s role in the feedback loop

At the beginning of each academic year, LCSC faculty facilitate a faculty development workshop where incoming military faculty clarify expectations on students' written projects and engage in a grade-and feedback-norming exercise. Faculty come away with a deeper understanding of the connection between assignment design and the quality of students' responses. Further, the PME writing center faculty gain a clearer understanding of assignment intent and faculty expectations for students' written work—this can then improve the quality and utility of assignment analysis workshops provided to students as they begin the invention stage of the writing process. During the initial faculty development period, LCSC faculty also provide guidance to military faculty on using formative and summative feedback in assessments of students' written projects. This includes sessions on how to work with international student writing and how to encourage international students' seminar participation. And in terms of modeling dialogic feedback, LCSC faculty reviews of students' diagnostic essays in the first month of the academic year are beneficial in opening dialogue between the students and faculty about gaps that may exist between students' current written communication skills and their desired skill levels.

For students, LCSC faculty provide an extensive array of support options designed to promote dialogic feedback in the feedback loop between students, support faculty, and schoolhouse faculty. They give formative feedback on drafts of written projects—this feedback is offered at all stages of the writing process. In addition, they assist students in revising their written projects before submission for a grade in accordance with formative faculty feedback. To open dialogue among students, improve trust, and ultimately build academic communities of interest among students within the schoolhouse, LCSC faculty also facilitate peer review workshops for students as they revise and edit their own written projects. And after students receive a grade on their written projects, LCSC faculty offer individual consultations where they assist students in understanding summative faculty feedback and encouraging dialogue between students and faculty. International students are encouraged to utilize all the aforementioned LCSC student service offerings and are also offered a tailored instructional support package, which begins one week before the start of the academic year with an intensive graduate communication preparatory course designed to introduce communication expectations and standards for graduate work in an American JPME

institution and support international students in developing the skills and strategies needed to succeed in their graduate work at their respective schoolhouses.

The rationale for integrating writing centers into the feedback loop at JPME institutions becomes clear when viewed through the lens of dialogic feedback. According to Carless, feedback intended to foster dialogue has the added benefit of relationship building and trust building among all actors in the feedback loop—both in terms of competence trust and communication trust.¹⁵ Empathy and respect are needed among all actors to create this kind of climate, which evidence suggests is key to academic success. Further, repeated interactions between actors in the feedback loop can aid in the development of trust.

Writing centers' unique diagnostic work with students and faculty is hands on and laboratory style in nature—and often repetitive depending on students' needs and levels of initiative—which encourages dialogue, risk-taking, transparency, and willingness to act on feedback. LCSC faculty members' experience suggests students may be more willing to admit writing challenges and areas of deficiency to support faculty than to faculty responsible for providing summative feedback/grades on their written projects. Anecdotal evidence also suggests incoming military faculty have an increased level of comfort sharing concerns about their own abilities to identify and respond to students' writing issues with writing center faculty versus with the students they are asked to instruct and mentor. These concerns may include insecurities about their limited prior experience in education, a lack of time to conduct scholarly research because of competing demands, and a lack of comfort with the subject-matter.¹⁶

By entering the feedback loop, JPME writing center faculty can assist in increasing the frequency of dialogue and improving the quality of the feedback provided from students to faculty, from faculty to students, and from students to their peers. Civilian writing center faculty at Marine Corps University, for example, have devoted their entire careers to mastering their subject matter, and they continually seek out professional development opportunities to ensure they stay abreast of emerging research and trends in the field. They are uniquely positioned to demonstrate the importance of dialogic feedback to faculty and students who, if left to their own devices, may not be as willing to effect such a change given the short duration of their time at the schoolhouse (ten to twelve months for students and typically three years or less for military faculty). An important added

benefit is that by entering the feedback loop in an instructional capacity versus solely a peer tutor capacity, writing center faculty's validity increases—further building trust in the writing center's ability to support students and faculty, and furthering cohesion between schoolhouse faculty and support faculty. All of this ultimately benefits the students, who consequently feel supported by all actors in the feedback loop and develop self-regulation skills to improve as communicators—not only while in the classroom but also in their follow-on career assignments and future leadership roles. As does the National Defense Strategy, so too should JPME institutions be thinking forward on the long-term strategic impact of teaching and learning processes—if done mindfully, dialogic feedback allows an opportunity for such reflection.

In 1985—one year before the Goldwater-Nichols Act, four years before the Skelton Panel and the founding of Marine Corps University, and 22 years before the inception of Marine Corps University's writing center—Muriel Harris wrote an article in *The Writing Center Journal* conceptualizing the “ideal” writing center. Although she argues no two writing centers are exactly alike, the best writing centers, she says, are committed to change, evolutionary growth in a theoretical sense that is validated by the realities of their day-to-day pedagogical practice.¹⁷ One important way in which JPME writing centers can validate not only their existence but also their role in furthering the mission of their respective institutions is through entering the feedback loop and promoting the use of dialogic feedback between students and faculty. Carless and others in the existing literature on the topic advise against the use of feedback as a one-directional transmission from faculty to student. Particularly in JPME, where adult learners come to their respective schoolhouses with a breadth and depth of career experience and subject-matter expertise that differentiates these institutions from traditional civilian academic institutions, further research is needed on the benefits of dialogic feedback in PME teaching and learning environments.

Notes

1. Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*, 8.

2. Megan Hennessey, “Reframing Rigor for Senior Service Colleges.”

3. Adapted from Susan Askew and Caroline Lodge, “Gifts, Ping-Pong and Loops—Linking Feedback and Learning,” in *Feedback for Learning*, ed. S. Askew (London:

Routledge, 2000), as quoted in Min Yang and David Carless, “The Feedback Triangle and the Enhancement of Dialogic Feedback Processes,” 286. Feedback is defined here as any and all forms of dialogue that act in support of informal and formal learning and skill development. The benefits of peer feedback (e.g., peer review) are acknowledged; however, the article’s focus is solely on faculty and writing center support faculty feedback.

4. Judith Hicks Stiehm, *U.S. Army War College: Military Education in a Democracy*, 58.

5. Eberly Center for Teaching Excellence & Educational Innovation, “What Is the Difference between Formative and Summative Assessment?” Formative feedback is a low-stakes form of assessment provided to learners while the paper is in draft form for the purpose of development and improvement; summative feedback is a higher-stakes form of assessment provided to learners after they have submitted their final written product for evaluation.

6. Gail Crimmins et al., “A Written, Reflective and Dialogic Strategy For Assessment Feedback That Can Enhance Student/Teacher Relationships,” 141.

7. Glenn Whitman and Ian Kelleher, *NeuroTeach*, 21.

8. Yang and Carless, “The Feedback Triangle,” 286.

9. Stiehm, *U.S. Army War College: Military Education in a Democracy*, 82.

10. Stiehm, 289.

11. Stiehm, 289.

12. David Carless, “Trust and its Role in Facilitating Dialogic Feedback,” 90.

13. Kelli A. Halfman, “Student-Instructor Negotiations of Vulnerability in Higher Education,” 46.

14. Marine Corps University Leadership Communication Skills Center, “Mission.”

15. Carless, “Trust and its Role in Facilitating Dialogic Feedback,” 92. Competence trust is, as the term suggests, trust placed in a person’s competence or “a person’s ability to carry out a task efficiently and effectively.” Communication trust is defined as trust in someone’s transparency, vulnerability, and integrity—the belief that someone is acting with others’ “best interests at heart.”

16. Stiehm, *U.S. Army War College: Military Education in a Democracy*, 69.

17. Muriel Harris, “Theory and Reality: The Ideal Writing Center(s),” 9.

Chapter 6

No Comments **Using Conferences for Writing Instruction and Summative** **Assessment in Professional Military Education**

Jacqueline E. Whitt, PhD

Just before the start of a recent academic year, I read an article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, “Why I Stopped Writing on My Students’ Papers,” by a composition professor Michael Millner.¹ Millner was frustrated with what he perceived to be a lack of engagement on the part of students with his comments on their writing assignments. So instead of writing any comments at all, he invited them to have a one-on-one conversation.

As I have some mildly rebellious tendencies when it comes to pushing boundaries in the professional military education (PME) classroom, this article prompted me to ask, “What if instead of writing comments or making corrections on student papers, I tried this—holding short one-on-one conferences to provide students feedback, have them work on specific areas in their papers, and give them their grades?” With the blessing of my department chair and after a brief consultation with the professor of educational methodology, I decided to pursue this method of providing feedback to my seminar students in the core course I was teaching in the fall. Although it is a decidedly small sample size and personalized to my classroom and seminar, my experience was very positive, students were receptive, and it is a method I would recommend to others.

This chapter briefly analyzes the context of writing instruction in PME, discusses my experience running a small-scale experiment in a war college classroom, and concludes with some recommendations for instructors who are interested in experimenting with using writing conferences for writing instruction and summative feedback.

Writing Instruction in Professional Military Education

PME includes military education at “five formal military educational levels: precommissioning, primary, intermediate, senior, and GO/FO. In addition to these formal levels are multiple learning op-

portunities that are made available by the Services during an officer's career."² The value of writing clearly, concisely, and persuasively is taken as a given for professional advancement and achievement at senior levels of leadership. In the 1980s, General Maxwell Thurman was dissatisfied with the state of "Army writing" and formed mobile training teams to improve skills in the active force and established guidelines in Department of the Army Pamphlet (DA Pam) 600-67, "Effective Writing for Army Leaders."³ Those in charge of setting guidance for Joint PME (JPME) instruction in the United States (namely, the Joint Chiefs of Staff J7 and the Military Education Coordination Council) have emphasized the importance of writing in recent years. One of the formal outcomes for PME is that officers "demonstrate critical and creative thinking skills, interpersonal skills, and effective written, verbal, and visual communications skills to support the development and implementation of strategies and complex operations."⁴ The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Special Areas of Emphasis for JPME for Academic Years 2020 and 2021 included, as the final item, "Ability to Write Clear and Concise Military Advice Recommendations."⁵

But the place of writing and writing instruction within PME curricula is fraught. Debates about the purpose of PME—and the ideal student composition for its classrooms—find new life in online forums every few years and are often framed in terms of rigor, selectivity, and professionalization. Before attending intermediate- or senior-level PME, students' development as writers varies depending on their commissioning source and primary in-service education. Developing basic writing skills is usually associated with the attainment of an undergraduate degree. That is, students receive formal writing instruction as part of their commissioning requirement. Beyond that, arguments about PME seem to pit proficiency against mastery, the attainment of knowledge opposite the development of skills, and esoteric versus practical concerns.

Writing sometimes appears as part of these debates: What kinds of writing do students need to practice? Should the schoolhouse focus on academic style and forms of argument, analysis, and research or rather double down on pragmatic forms of writing (e.g., backgrounders and memos)? To what extent should PME instructors (who are usually not formally trained in rhetoric and composition) be expected to provide writing instruction? Should there be institutional support for writing development? If so, what kind and at what level?

Larry Miller and Laura Wackwitz articulate a position that seeks to reconcile critiques about the lack of rigor in PME from civilian academics and critiques about ivory-tower isolation in PME from military professionals. They write,

Though some have argued that JPME develops leaders, not researchers, strategists, not writers, the importance of effective written communication cannot be [overstated]. Without quality writing and attendant critical thought, knowledge and valuable experience are lost. Without research and perceptive interpretation of experience, insight is debilitated. JPME must, therefore, recognize all Senior Service College students—regardless of their prior writing experiences—as scholars in the making, individuals whose potential and promise for the future must not be overlooked or left undeveloped.⁶

But how, exactly, to do this work is an unsettled question. Several programs integrate basic writing instruction into orientation programs or courses that might include lectures, exercises, low-stakes assessments, and books and materials issued to students. In recent years, many PME schoolhouses have developed specialized programs for developmental writing support, including the Teaching & Learning Center at Air University, the Writing Center at the Naval War College, the Learning Resource Center at the Command and General Staff College, and the Applied Communications and Learning Lab at the US Army War College. The staffing, functions, and support available in each of these organizations varies, however, and developing student writing is often seen primarily as a function of classroom instructors and capstone paper advisors.

Thus, for most of the PME experience, students write, professors respond, and students go on to write other papers. Instructors develop their own styles and preferences for giving feedback, and students—like students everywhere—do a variety of things with that feedback. Most papers in resident and distance PME are related to coursework and written in isolation by single students, and the writing process (e.g., prewriting, drafting, feedback, and revision) is not formalized. Assignments outside of the capstone project are rarely scaffolded, and revision of course papers is usually only involved in the case of a failure to meet the minimum standard. Professors may meet with some students in advance of submission to discuss their writing assignments, and others may agree to look at partial or full paper drafts, but these

interactions are limited and not required. Other professors prefer not to discuss assignments in advance of submission.

Institutional, Course, and Instructor Context

As in most things related to pedagogy and andragogy, the institutional context, course context, and instructor and student profiles matter significantly. The case explored in this article took place at the US Army War College (USAWC) in the Resident Education Program during a year of in-person instruction (although translating this technique to a virtual/remote environment would be relatively easy given access to video-conferencing and collaborative platforms). The USAWC educates a mix of senior field-grade US military officers (from all components and services), senior US Government civilians, and international military officers of equivalent ranks. USAWC instructors include a mix of currently serving US military officers, professionals from the interagency, civilian academics, retired military officers and practitioners, and international fellows.

At the time of this micro-experiment, I was a professor of strategy in the Department of National Security and Strategy, responsible for teaching the core course, War, Policy, and National Security (WPNS), to a single USAWC seminar of 15 students. WPNS is a core course, collaboratively developed by faculty and taught using a common syllabus and assignments. In this version of the course, there were three writing assignments, all of which required an argument and the use of course texts: 1) a short (<2 page) argumentative paper answering one of three questions about Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*; 2) a short (4–5 pages) argumentative paper responding to one of three questions related to a major course concept; and 3) a final paper (6–8 pages) on a case study about a contemporary national security issue. Given the timing of course papers and grading deadlines, I decided to use the conferencing strategy for the first two papers and to offer traditional written feedback on the final paper. I explained the scheme to students at the beginning of the course. I also offered students a choice to opt-out of the conference and receive written feedback instead. No students exercised this option. Thus, I conducted 30 one-on-one conferences with students to discuss their first two papers. Conferences lasted for approximately 20–30 minutes. I followed up after each session with an email.

My experiences in PME and with writing instruction also provided important context for my decision and implementation of this idea. I had been teaching in a PME context for more than a decade (at a military academy and two senior service colleges) when I decided to pursue this method of writing instruction in my war college seminar. During my own undergraduate education, I worked for one year as a peer tutor at my university writing center, and in graduate school, I worked for two years as a tutor in the university writing center. Both jobs involved some training and significant experience in the pedagogy of writing instruction, conducting writing conferences, and providing formative feedback on student papers. As a faculty member at two war colleges, I also worked with my colleagues to integrate skills-based writing instruction into the foundational courses for resident students. I have given lectures on effective writing and developed extensive materials on writing for classroom use.

Process and Questions for Consideration

This section outlines the process I used to plan and conduct writing conferences and includes a list of questions for consideration for each step of the process for others to use if they are designing a similar intervention. This process firmed up after about three conferences with students—if I could go back and do the first few over, I would. While I had an idea of what I wanted to accomplish, it took a couple of tries to get the rhythm of the meetings right.

Scheduling

My experience in two writing centers led me to estimate that I could conduct these sessions in about 20 minutes each if I had read the paper in advance. I aimed to spend about 10 minutes reading each paper before meeting with the student. To provide a bit of flexibility, I scheduled conferences 45 minutes apart. Ultimately, most conferences drifted toward 30 minutes, rather than 20. Given my level of introversion and the intense interaction of these meetings, I aimed to schedule no more than three conferences in a row. The greatest constraint was scheduling these conferences during normal workday hours. While grading can often take place during evenings and weekends, using this model meant carving out a significant amount of time during a standard workweek.

Questions to consider:

- When do you plan to do an initial reading of the paper? How long will it take you to read (quickly) and mark areas for discussion?
- When are students available for conferences? When are you available for conferences?
- How should students sign up for conferences?
- How long do you want to allow for conferences?
- How many conferences in a row do you want to schedule?

Instructor Preconference Review

Whereas Professor Millner (whose article inspired my experiment) decided to not read submissions in advance and instead ask students to take the lead on their conferencing conversations, I did not think that would be efficient or effective with my student population. I decided I would read each paper quickly in advance of the writing conferences. While I usually prefer to grade and provide feedback on hard copies of papers, in this case, I decided I would review the papers in digital format, for speed, and to enable us to use the digital copy to work on during the conference. I used a simple color-coding scheme to mark sentences, words, or sections that I wanted to discuss during the conference: blue highlighting for higher-order concerns (e.g., thesis, argument, organization, development, evidence) and yellow for lower-order concerns (e.g., spelling, grammar, style, citation format). I did not make marginal comments or corrections on the papers.

Questions to consider:

- How will you review student submissions—digitally or hard copy?
- How do you want to mark/identify topics for discussion?
- How closely do you want to use a rubric to guide your discussion?
- What is your primary goal for conducting writing conferences?

The One-on-One Conference

When planning for the writing conferences themselves, I wanted to set up a conversational, collaborative, and coaching environment. I planned to do most of the agenda setting, as these conferences were intended for both formative and summative assessment, so I needed

to communicate my assessment of the paper in accordance with the USAWC writing rubric. Given my office set up, I arranged to sit beside the student in front of a computer monitor, mouse, and keyboard. Before the conference, I opened a copy of the student's paper in Microsoft Word, saved a local copy and set the document to "Track Changes." I had the student control the keyboard during the conference. We shared control of the mouse to move about the paper. I kept handwritten notes of the conference on a 5x8 index card.

I opened the conference with an open-ended prompt such as, "Tell me about your process for writing this paper." "What part of the paper are you most/least happy with?" "How did you arrive at the thesis for the paper?" and "What part of the paper did you struggle with the most?" I asked these questions to collaborate on agenda setting and altered my response depending on their answers. Often, their answers led me directly to one of my goals for discussing a higher-order concern in the paper.

As we came to one of the highlighted sections in the paper, if there was a revision that was needed, I asked the student to use the keyboard to revise the passage in real time. The most frequent revision activity was revising a thesis statement or topic sentence. Some students worked on adding analysis to quotations or evidence, and still others worked to clarify confusing sentences. We went through the paper focusing on higher-order concerns first, then went through, with any remaining time, to tackle specific lower-order concerns. They made those corrections in real time as well.

At the end of the conference, I asked each student to identify at least one issue that they wanted to focus on improving for their next paper. I generally added one priority to the list, and we negotiated a third. I recorded these focus areas on my index card with notes. The final piece of the conference was to give my grading assessment to the student.

Questions to consider:

- How will you collaborate with students?
- How will you allow or account for student agenda setting?
- What kinds of open-ended questions will you ask students, based on your initial reading of the paper?
- How will you deal with running out of time?
- How will you ensure the student has access to the feedback generated during the conference?
- How will you communicate your grade/assessment of the paper?

Follow-up

After each conference, I wanted to create a record of the grade and to follow up on the conversation. I created a template to make this process more efficient. The email was meant to summarize our conversation, to reinforce the next steps we discussed, and to memorialize the grade. I composed the email based on the handwritten notes from the conference. Each email took about five minutes to compose. A sample follow-up email is included as Fig. 6.1.⁷

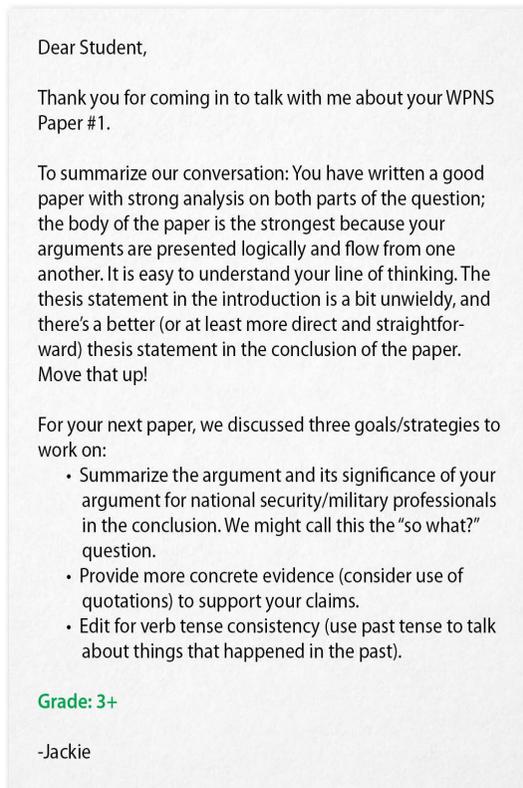


Fig. 6.1. Sample follow-up email to student after concluding the writing conference

Questions to consider:

- How will you follow up with students after the conference?
- What items will you emphasize in your follow up?

Student Reflections

Students who received feedback on their first two WPNS papers responded positively. After the course was completed, I asked students (via email) to provide me with any feedback or recommendations. About half the seminar responded to this request, and their responses are included in Fig. 6.2. Students appreciated the relational nature of the conversations and feedback that emphasized dialogue and asking questions. Several students also identified that this mode of feedback held them accountable for doing the work and was more useful for thinking about how to improve future assignments than traditional feedback. They concluded that conferencing feedback was sticky and memorable. At the same time, they acknowledged the significant time commitment involved in the conferencing model. They also noted a desire for durable feedback—that in addition to the conference, they needed something written down to refer to.



I think in an unconstrained resource (time) environment, the face-to-face interaction and feedback is the best option for those who desire constructive feedback. In fact, I personally gained a lot sitting in your office and you having me rewrite my thesis statement and discussing in depth. That being said, that takes a lot of time from students/instructors and may not be suited for everyone or every assignment. My recommendation (like you did), is to open the invitation to those who seek feedback in face-to-face dialogue, while offering the written feedback venue for those who desire it, or are happy to “meet the requirement.”

— Active Duty O-5

I suppose I would say that with the written feedback, it is a bit of a “one-way feedback session.” As we are all busy and need to move onto the next thing, the paper is scanned, and filed away; a really enterprising student would pull out the paper when writing the next one to not make the same mistakes. The conference, on the other hand, was more of a dialogue, and the student had an opportunity based on your prompts to think through how some logical flaw could have been covered better, how a re-structure could have been opportunity, and so on. As [another instructor] would say, probably a bit more “sticky.” On the con side though, certainly more time-intensive for both parties, although mostly for you.

— International Fellow





Regarding your writing conferences, I liked them. For me, they helped me to better understand and assimilate your feedback, and I enjoyed talking with you. Relationships are always helpful in learning. I think once we had a “writing conference,” but I never received my paper back with your comments. I kind of missed not capturing a few of your thoughts on paper, that I could go back to later. Maybe I should have taken my own notes while you talked. I guess in a perfect world I would like a little of both: verbal and written feedback.

— Reserve O-5

I think I learned a lot from the conference as you clarified a few things for me. I could ask questions and you were also able to show me what you meant with what you wrote. I prefer that type of feedback. I must also state that your feedback was constructive for me and it made me leave your office a better person because you dealt with my writing and not me. Keep up the good work.

— International Fellow



I appreciate the time you took to meet with each student. I learned the most from our sit down sessions. In fact, I can still remember the point you asked me to work on. I don't remember as much from the written comments on the third paper (perhaps because it was the last paper!).

— Active Duty O-5

I think it is well documented that I am a hesitant, if not reluctant student. I found my individual pre-writing or brainstorming meetings with you extremely useful. The same goes for the writing conferences. I gained more out of the face-to-face meetings, than the written. You are held more accountable and can ask follow up questions or clarifying questions in the face-to-face conferences. To a reluctant student, the written comments are acknowledged, but not as impactful as the conferences. I appreciate all your assistance this year. This has been a hectic year, but I did get a lot out of pre-submission conferences and then writing conferences. I think at the beginning of the writing season, more face-to-face is useful and would get folks off on the right path. A lot of maneuver guys have not done academic writing in decades. [Sentence deleted.]

— Active Duty O-6



I thought the writing conferences were very valuable. The face-to-face interaction and feedback were better than written comments. Relationships are better built in the conferences than via written comments. Your comments were good but the conferences were better. I would appreciate it if all writing assignments were followed with conferences. This may not be possible due to time constraints. Then, I suggest that at least the first written assignment in any course be followed with a conference.

— National Guard O-5



Fig.6.2. Student feedback on writing conferences. This feedback was solicited specifically in response to an instructor request for this paper. Students are identified by component and rank to preserve anonymity. Their comments are used with permission. Comments are presented in full, with two exceptions noted in brackets, to preserve anonymity and to remove comments critical of another institutional initiative.

Instructor Reflections and Conclusion

Perhaps the key question is this: Would I do this again? The answer is an unreserved yes, although, as with almost any pedagogical ex-

periment or innovation, I would make some modifications in future iterations. My most important observation (although this is difficult to evaluate concretely) is that students' writing improved more noticeably in this course than in others I have taught. It also enabled me to engage in at least two one-on-one conversations with each student in my seminar, and I appreciated this opportunity for coaching and establishing a relationship with my students. I found my grading and assessment using this method was more reflective and more focused than when I have provided traditional written feedback. Conferencing with students forced me to articulate my responses to their paper as a reader. Because I was reading quickly to assess and evaluate, I had to make fast decisions about the places where conversation and collaboration would yield the most significant returns. In this way, conferencing enabled me to focus on higher-order concerns more effectively. The writing conferences were intense, both in the time required and in the level of interpersonal interaction. They required significant mental, physical, and emotional energy; conducting more than three in a row without a substantial break would have been, I believe, inadvisable.

My background and experience mean I enjoy talking about writing with students, but you do not need to be an expert in formal writing instruction to use this method. Because the conference allows for two-way communication, some of the traditional challenges with written feedback can be more easily mitigated. You can see right away if a student understands a particular critique or question, and they have the chance to respond to your queries—and perhaps even to revise in real time with an instructor's support. For instructors who do not have significant background or experience in writing instruction, structuring the conference as an opportunity to assess and evaluate a piece of writing as a *reader* is invaluable. You can focus on the pieces of the paper that are intriguing, confusing, illuminating, or problematic. The conferencing model may make it easier to focus on substance and higher-order concerns.

Given that writing instruction in PME is in flux, and that professors are on their own when it comes to offering writing instruction and support, using writing conferences for summative feedback is worth exploration for individual instructors when the institutional and course contexts will allow. This method is unlikely to be suitable for everyone or every context, although I think most people teaching in PME *could* modify it to suit their skills and style. The most signifi-

cant challenges are scheduling and the time commitment involved. Still, the potential advantages are clear: writing conferences enable building coaching relationships with professional students, encouraging reflective grading practices, forcing instructors to focus their feedback, and returning decision-making authority and autonomy in writing to students. Conferences can be facilitated with collaborative technology for in-person and virtual environments.

The greatest constraint (and the greatest commitment, on the part of the instructor) is time. The question, then, is whether the investment of time is worth the benefits—in terms of writing instruction and support, in terms of meeting the relational and professional development goals of PME, and in meeting students' affective needs. Writing conferences, even when used for summative feedback and to communicate a formal grade assessment, provide opportunities for advancing all three goals.

Notes

1. Michael Millner, "Why I Stopped Writing on My Students' Papers," <https://www.chronicle.com/>.
2. OPMEP, A-3.
3. Aaron Childers, "Army University: The Educational Component of the #Human Dimension."
4. OPMEP, A-2.
5. Special Areas of Emphasis for JPME, 6 May 2019.
6. Larry D. Miller and Laura A. Wackwitz, "Strategic Leader Research" 41.
7. It is clear from the student feedback (Fig.6-2) that, in at least one case, I failed to attach the "track changes" paper to my follow-up email. I apologize!

Abbreviations

| | |
|-------|--|
| CCDR | combatant commander |
| CSC | Command and Staff College |
| GRE | Graduate Record Examination |
| JAWS | Joint Advanced Warfighting School |
| JSOTL | Joint PME scholarship of teaching and learning |
| JPME | joint professional military education |
| LCSC | Leadership Communication Skills Center |
| LSAT | Law School Admission Test |
| MCAT | Medical College Admission Test |
| MCU | Marine Corps University |
| MECC | Military Education Coordination Council |
| NDRT | Nelson-Denny Reading Test |
| NDU | National Defense University |
| OPMEP | Officer Professional Military Education Policy |
| PME | professional military education |
| POM | Program Objective Memorandum |
| SAE | Special Areas of Emphasis |
| US | United States |
| USAWC | US Army War College |
| WPNS | War, Policy, and National Security |

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DEVELOPING MILITARY LEARNERS' COMMUNICATION SKILLS USING THE SCHOLARSHIP OF TEACHING AND LEARNING

Communication skills are often touted by policymakers and pundits alike as invaluable for military servicemembers. However, research informing how to develop these skills in our existing military education system is limited. This collection of essays by scholar-practitioners working in the American joint military education system answers the following questions, among others:

What is the PME learning environment like for officers, and how does this affect communication skills development in particular?

How can we best teach foundational research skills?

What is the state of incoming students' reading skills, and how can this shape curriculum development and teaching?

What is the relationship between the design of writing assignments and student learning outcomes?

Through the scholarship of teaching and learning, this book offers a unique glimpse into practical approaches to develop military learners' communication skills.

