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## What the Army Taught Me About Teaching

By Martha Kinney

Thirteen years ago I began graduate school, and 24 years ago I was commissioned a second lieutenant in the U.S. Army. Of the two institutions — graduate school and the Army — perhaps surprisingly, my military experience has been most important in shaping my practices in the classroom. That may be because I teach survey courses at a community college rather than upper-level classes to interested majors at a research university. But, it is also because the military has honed the delivery of training over many decades, and, as I've discovered, military training methodology can work well outside of a military environment.

Every year, the Army recruits, at great expense, tens of thousands of young men and women. Given the costs of recruitment (and the dearth of eligible recruits), the Army cannot afford to lose many of these new soldiers. Army training is designed to take recruits who may know nothing about military life, discipline, or maneuvers, and mold them into warriors. Likewise, my task is to mold nascent scholars out of the under-performing, ill-prepared students who frequently show up in my community college classroom. I've found three Army practices most useful: making expectations explicit, the "crawl-walk-run" methodology, and formal evaluation of training.

Too often, we as instructors fail to adequately communicate our expectations to our students. Yes, we want a five-page analytic essay, but what does that look like? What are the components of a successful paper? And how do those components fit together? What sort of material should students use as sources? And how will students be assessed on this assignment? The army uses two tools to help its soldiers understand what's expected of them in a specific task. First, an Army trainer shows soldiers what success looks like by performing the task correctly in front of soldiers so that soldiers "see" success. In my classroom, students see — when the assignment is given — what success looks like. In the case of a formal essay assignment, I hand out a similar assignment which has received an A and we, as a class, discuss what makes this worthy of an A. At this point, I also hand students a rubric that delineates exactly how I will grade the assignment.

After doing this, I deploy the Army's second tool for communicating expectations — a checklist to make sure that the task or assignment is completed properly. This list tells students exactly what they need to do to insure their work meets the specifications of the assignment. Giving out a checklist may seem like it inhibits students' creativity, and I would agree in part with this criticism. But my students are more likely to leave key

components of a task out than they are to be extraordinarily creative — and for me, making sure students have a “cheat sheet” that spells out how to meet the standard is a fair trade-off. My students need to build their self-confidence, and this checklist gives them that needed boost, visibly letting them know they are meeting the requirements of the class.

“Crawl, walk, run” is both a philosophical and practical approach to assignments that works as well in my college classroom as it did for small-unit and individual training in the Army. In terms of Army training, doing a task at “crawl” speed means moving slowly and methodically through all steps, perhaps using a sand table to show individual or small unit movement through a field problem. In the classroom, it may mean taking a class through the steps of a research assignment — going to the library, using the search tools, writing a thesis statement, assessing primary sources, evaluating the utility of secondary sources, and preparing footnotes and a bibliography.

Once students understand the individual steps, then they are ready for the “walk” phase. In Army terms, the walk iteration means that soldiers perform the task on their own, at a slow speed, with careful evaluation by leaders. In my classroom, the walk phase usually means that students, working in groups, do several of the component tasks — select or analyze sources, write a thesis statement, or outline an argument, for instance — and then present their work to me and the rest of the class. This practice enables students to learn from each other’s work while allowing me to critique each group’s efforts in detail, so students also get the benefit of extensive feedback from me.

Now students are ready for the “run” — performing the assignment to standard on their own. “Crawl, walk, run” methodology allows under-prepared students the chance to build necessary skills incrementally, and it allows students who are already proficient to focus on individual steps that they may not have learned as well. Programmed correctly within the context of the course, such a methodology can also enhance a student’s understanding of course content — the crawl and walk phases can be used in earlier sections of the course so that students are working with different material each time while still honing academic skills.

Finally, the Army stresses constant evaluation of training effectiveness. Likewise in my college classroom, I constantly evaluate my own performance as well as that of my students. I evaluate myself in several ways — evaluating questions I get from students to see what was unclear, actively soliciting feedback from students about what was effective and what could be restructured for clarity or efficiency, and asking trusted colleagues to critique both assignments and my classroom delivery. The Army taught me to have a thick skin, and I appreciate receiving constructive criticism from students and peers. That criticism helps shape my approach to assignments in future semesters.

None of these techniques were either implicitly or explicitly taught to me in graduate school. As a teaching assistant, I watched instructors craft the delivery of their course content, but think very little about how individual assignments fit into the broad goals of their courses. Lectures, textbooks, exams and papers were all components of the course, but how they meshed together was often not clear — to me or to the students. This methodology may not make sense at colleges with exceptionally well prepared undergraduates. But at community colleges like mine, institutions that reach many students who either didn’t have great high school preparation or for whom it was a long

time ago, the training methodology I learned in the Army can be invaluable. My first department chair at Suffolk Community College used to tell me and my colleagues that our real focus should be on the middle third of the class. These Army practices help me do just that by showing capable but under-prepared students methods of achieving success using methodical guidelines. And what they learn in my class about studying and preparing assignments they can use in future classes.

Martha Kinney is an assistant professor of history at Suffolk County Community College and a lieutenant colonel in the Army Reserves. For more information about the Army's approach to training, a guide may be found here [<http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/policy/army/fm/7-1/fm7-1.pdf>].