

Military Learners: Experience in the Design and Management of Online Learning Environments

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Abstract

Distant learning utilizing Web-based technologies has provided learners and educational providers with unprecedented opportunities. One sector rapidly adopting distant learning is the military learner, represented by active service persons and veterans. Military learners clearly exhibit the characteristics of adult learners; however, they may also represent a special class with unique strengths and weaknesses. The values and problems of classifying student populations are explored. Experience of dealing with military learners is analyzed in an attempt to highlight the opportunities and challenges that this group brings to online learning environments. While conclusions are drawn, it is emphasized that the military learners at the center of this study were re-enlisted and had long service records, making findings difficult to generalize to all military learners.

Keywords: Military, distant learning, adult learners, classification, learning design, learner attributes, experiential learning

Distant education provides geographically separated or socially isolated learners with an opportunity to engage in communities of learning. In recent years, increased Internet connectivity and new Web-based technologies have revolutionized the feasibility, attractiveness, and quality of distant learning opportunities (Moller, Foshay, & Huett, 2008; Taylor & Swannell, 2001). Cost reduction, flexibility of instruction, and innovative distant learning strategies have all given many educational providers competitive advantages in reaching new markets (Higgins & Postle, 1993; Taylor, 2005; Taylor & Swannell, 1997). Student enrollments in distant learning programs have increased dramatically. In the fall 2008 semester, 4.6 million students registered for a least one online course at American colleges and universities, a quarter of all enrollments. In the same semester, overall course enrollment increased by 1.2% while online enrollment was up by almost 17% on the previous year (Allen & Seaman, 2010).

As enrollments increase and include new student populations, it is important for educational providers to become more aware of the characteristics of those engaged in the educational environment. From a student perspective, distant learning is not only about access and technology; it is also critically about tuition, affordability, and anticipated return on financial investment. It is not surprising, then, that an increasing number of online students are connected with the U.S. military, which provides significant tuition assistance to active service members and veterans.

Tuition assistance programs associated with the U.S military have a long history, starting in 1918 in the wake of the First World War. In 2006, Department of Defense statistics indicate that approximately 300,000 service persons were enrolled in programs ranging from high school completion to doctorates. In that year, learners participated in almost 800,000 separate undergraduate and graduate courses while 8,000 earned baccalaureate degrees and 9,000 obtained their master's. In 2006, the total cost to the Department of Defense for all of these education programs was \$431 million (Barnard & Zardeskas, 2007, pp. 7-9).

In the 2007-08 academic year military learners represented 4% of all enrolled students in institutions of higher learning, evenly divided between two- and four-year programs. About one quarter of these learners constituted active service members; the remainder were veterans (Radford & Wun, 2009). In 2009, more financially generous veterans' educational tuition programs came into effect that will undoubtedly have a significant impact on educational providers, especially in a recessionary period when many seek educational qualifications to enter, or re-enter, the labor market. Current estimates indicate that there are

more than 23 million veterans in the U.S and that two million military personnel have fought in Iraq or Afghanistan and as such are entitled to special awards (Radford, 2009, p. vii).

For college administrations, the large number of financially qualified military students presents attractive opportunities for increasing enrollments. Short-term institutional expansion, particularly in the for-profit colleges that military learners generally prefer, has to be mediated by long-term considerations of demonstrated educational excellence. The Department of Defense examines programmatic and instructional quality when contracting with an educational provider or in disbursing tuition assistance payments. The implication of increasing numbers of military learners and educational quality are directly felt by those who design and manage online learning contexts. Quality is not an abstraction; it must relate specifically to the needs, expectations, and characteristics of the learners involved.

A Model: Creation and Sustaining Online Learning Environments

The degree to which military learners can be differentiated from non-military adult learners is an open question; hopefully, this article will stimulate empirical research to answer this question. Experiential learning gained from engagement with military learners suggests that they possess several characteristics that distinguish them from other adult learners.

This article reflects on creating online learning environments for military learners. It considers lessons learned and an emerging appreciation of the challenges and opportunities that such learners present in online contexts. An understanding of military learners is drawn from the author's five-year engagement as course designer and instructor with an accredited American university that has a long and successful relationship with the military. During those five years, the author has worked online with approximately 750 students enrolled in upper-level management theory courses.

In order to provide a framework for designing and managing of online learning environments, it is useful to begin with a generalized model of the process. Steeples, Jones, and Goodyear (2002) recognize the connectedness between distanced learners, instructors, and learning materials. In order to integrate these components they suggest a model with three interlocking components: pedagogical framework, educational setting, and organizational context.

- *Pedagogical Framework.* The starting point in course design is a consideration of the instructor/designer's overarching philosophies regarding content, learners, and pedagogy: the pedagogical framework. This conceptualization is then translated into learning activities, instructor strategies, and the active management of the learning space: the educational setting.
- *Educational Setting.* It is here that instructor and participants interact and where learning is initiated and sustained. This setting is characterized by learning opportunities and constraints. These include participants experience, subject matter complexity, technology and platforms employed, and the manner in which learning dynamics will be initiated and supported. Educational settings and pedagogical frameworks must be aligned with, and moderated by, a third element: organizational context.
- *Organizational Context.* This is the macro-environment within which learning is created and delivered and includes college participation rules and policies, student assessment criteria, instructor feedback and evaluation, equity and respect in the learning environment, quality control and assurance of educational results, and the comparability between courses taught on campus and at a distance.

Pedagogical framework, educational setting, and organizational context constitute a dynamic whole which, for optimal effectiveness, should be aligned. Changes in one domain may have repercussions in another. Steeples et al. (2002) note that the organizational context ultimately provides 'the process through which a pedagogical framework feeds into design and management of the educational setting' (p. 332).

Pedagogical Framework: Learning and Learners

By definition, pedagogical frameworks are rooted in 'high level pedagogy' and value-decisions about learners and learning. Educational settings require these conceptual positions to be expressed in learning goals, activities, and assessment. Conceptual positions and intended learner performance are mediated by either instructor experience or empirical findings within a scholarship of teaching and learning.

What is a military learner?

'Military learner' is used here to describe students on active service in the military or veterans separated from the military. The focus of this article is on the active military member, simply because this is the group that the author has encountered. Learners are best considered as individuals each possessing a unique set of educational needs, strengths, and weaknesses. Learning environments, however, are rarely designed for the individual. They are designed for a group of students that possess a range of attributes. Group parameters have pragmatic value; however, there is always the risk of relying on generalizations that are too broad or that fail to adequately embrace the range of attributes of the individual involved.

Any classification of learners should provide utility and benefit in the instructional design and administration processes. Classification, and subsequent statistical monitoring, can also be a potent way of making visible those who might be at a disadvantage, subject to neglect, or have a history of being discriminated against. The use of self-designated ethnic classification, for example, has been used to explore performance differentials among students groups. Class identification, and a resulting sensitivity to the needs of that class, can potentially lead to a better understanding of the dynamics of learning and educational inclusion (Horn, Peter, & Rooney, 2002; Richardson, 2009; Severiens, ten Dam, & Blom 2006).

Class boundaries, even when self-attributed, often lack specificity and may obscure rather than illuminate. In the U.K., for example, the ethnic classifications produced by the Office of Public Censuses and Surveys (OPCS), which is widely used in higher education research, can (Bonnett & Carrington, 2000) 'be criticized as being ambiguous, anachronistic and discrepant with commonly held subjective definitions' (p. 491). The designation of a specific learner class, informal or institutionalized, should be approached cautiously and is only appropriate if it leads to more effective instructional design or redresses prior discriminatory practice. It is a matter of debate as to whether 'military learner' classification is helpful in considering learning dynamics and improving learning outcomes.

Certainly, as will be discussed, there is a cluster of challenges and considerations that is strongly associated with the military learner; however, further research is required to reveal the degree to which these characteristics accurately and consistently define the military learner, differentiate them from other working adult learners, and are useful in addressing educational issues.

Adult Autonomous Learners

Most online course design appreciates students as adult learners: self-directed, autonomous agents in the learning process. Self-directed means (Knowles, 1975) taking 'the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes' (p.18). Autonomous learning is characterized by desire, resourcefulness, initiative, and persistence (Ponton, Carr, & Derrick, 2004). Adult learners display, or are capable of displaying, independence and autonomy in the learning process; understand their legitimacy in the process; and take personal responsibility for learning activities and outcomes (Ponton & Carr, 2000).

Military learners encountered in this study epitomize adult learners. They are self-directed and autonomous and wish to be understood and treated as such. They possess maturity and often have a significant record of professional responsibility and accountability. The socio-cultural context of learning in the military is different from that in higher education in terms of power, authority, and critical appraisal of the learning process. While generally self-directed and autonomous students, in formal learning contexts, often have to be encouraged to recognize themselves as legitimate participants. The learning environment should acknowledge, encourage, and support the desire, resourcefulness, initiative, and persistence of course participants. In this context, the instructor might profitably assume a guide-on-the-side role; that is, 'facilitating but not leading' the process (DeLoach & Greenlaw, 2007).

Stereotypes and Labeling

Military learners, as evidenced by comments made in the author's online classrooms, frequently indicated they are targets of stereotyping in their interactions with non-military publics. Often, there is negative stereotyping that depicts the military as an occupation of last resort, distanced from contemporary society, and engaged capriciously in unwanted foreign conflict. The degree to which such stereotypical views are more widely held is unclear; however, Ackerman and DiRamio (2009) refer to an incident in which 'a sociology professor "referred to the American soldier as a terrorist" in a class in which a combat veteran was a student. In protest, the veteran did not complete the final exam and failed the course' (p.11).

Such confrontational incidents degrade personhood and provide an unwelcome backdrop against which other military learners have to approach their learning journeys. Of course, stereotyping does not only come from faculty. Ackerman and DiRamio (2009) cite the example of 'a Marine who served in Afghanistan was called a traitor in class by another student because he expressed opposition to the war' (p. 11).

When dealing with the unknown, there is a tendency to perceive the individual as a group representative and to interpret behavior in terms of stereotypic norms. Stereotypes are (Gadon & Johnson, 2009) 'cognitive structures that incorporate a variety of features about social groups, including physical characteristics, attitudes, behavioral tendencies, and affect associations' (p. 637; see also Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Kunda, 1999). Stereotyping is intuitive and automatic, providing a heuristic tool for making sense of social contexts where there is information overload, or a need to minimize cognitive resources in decision-making (Macrae, Milne, & Bodenhausen, 1994). Nevertheless, stereotyping depersonalizes the individual by focusing on imagined results rather than on unique performance. Once stereotypic roles are assigned, subsequent behavior becomes seen in terms of a self-fulfilling prophecy, in which the performance of the labeled individual 'conform to expectations' (Chen & Bargh, 1997; Kunda & Spencer, 2003; Lepore & Brown, 1997).

Different societies have different perceptions of the military based on national values, historical experience, and socio-economic considerations. Often the stereotype is skewed and non-representative of the individual. Often perceptions are ambivalent, confused, or shifting – idealizing the young men and women setting off for conflict zones, while demonizing the traumatized combatants who return. Familiarity does not necessarily lead to a reduction in stereotyping. What is required is an openness to explore, relate, and push beyond assumption. Instructors, and others in the educational space, are in a unique position to productively challenge stereotypes, rather than perpetuate them. They can create environments sensitive to real needs, authentic aspirations, and prior experience. Instructors, in teaching or mentoring roles, are probably most effective when they are empathetic to students as individuals and challenge preconceived expectations regarding anticipated performance.

The Educational Setting: Learning Experiences and Opportunities

Attributes of military learners, which can be considered in learning contexts, include maturity, experiential richness, international and intercultural awareness, motivation, and a history of organizational commitment and sense of community. Military learners also have to contend with limiting factors in their online coursework and the attainment of their educational goals: scheduling and work flexibility, unpredictable sudden deployment and operational duties, and technical matters such as Internet access and bandwidth availability. Possibilities and constraints in the educational setting are summarized in Table 1.

Maturity and Experiential Richness

Military learners are likely to possess a rich experiential history, with exposure to organizational culture, leadership, decision-making, different management styles, and other managerial involvement and organizational engagement. Many have participated in different kinds of training programs and, depending on age and rank, may possess considerable supervisory and management experience. Often, relative to non-military peers, they may have exacting and critical jobs and responsibilities; however, this is not always the case. Rather than assume, a better strategy is to survey new course participants as to their job descriptions, prior management experience, and other course-relevant. Survey completion should be voluntary, confidential, and seek information that clearly relates to the functioning of the educational setting and administration of the course.

Prior experience is potentially a valuable asset in the learning environment. Reflection and a critical consideration of what has been done in the past can allow students to consolidate subject matter presently studied. Reflection and reconsideration also point to new ways of doing things. Often, students lack an experiential base for such consideration; however, military learners are generally characterized by maturity and experiential richness. In designing the educational setting students learning activities exploiting prior experience can be used effectively. As Paul Ramsden (1992) notes, 'learning involves comprehending the world by reinterpreting knowledge' (p. 26). Reinterpretation can come about through activities that encourage reflection (O'Hanlon & Diaz, 2010), prompt reexamination of espoused-theories and theories-in-action (Argyris, 1982; Argyris & Schön, 1974), and rely on various forms of double-loop learning (Kolb, 1984).

Table 1. *A summary of learning opportunities and constrains related to military learners in the educational setting.*

Attribute	Student characteristics	Learning opportunities suggested
Maturity and Experiential Richness	Depending on length of service may have considerable training, managerial/supervisory experience. May have broad and diverse operational/ organizational team/ group experience that can be utilized/ reflected upon.	Deep, as opposed to surface learning strategies. Focus on higher order cogitative competencies: analyzing, evaluating, and creating. Appreciation of organizational cultures
International and Intercultural Awareness	Depending on length of service and tours of duty may have considerable awareness of foreign cultures.	International context familiarity. Hofstede's (1991) national difference. Intercultural issues in management, international business, and human resource management.
High Levels of Motivation	Military is goal-orientated. Perseverance expected. Disciplinary framework and acceptance of responsibility.	Motivational element can be effectively incorporated in curriculum/ classroom dynamics, feedback.
Organizational Commitment and Sense of Community	Military learners seem to sense a common commitment and wiliness to work constructively together.	Group/ team/ collaborative learning. Formation of online sense of community. Learning spaces benefit from sharing, support, encouragement.
Scheduling and Flexibility	Unexpected work increase, sudden deployment, culture of 'the mission comes first'.	Flexibility in classroom, assignments, participation. Accommodating schedules. Equity considerations must be afforded non-military learners in the same learning environment.
Internet Accessibility	Access often difficult, sporadic, or impossible on deployment.	Reconsideration of participation. Individual mentoring strategies. Collaborative projects difficult.

Participant maturity and experience can also provide a useful scaffold for initiating a deep learning approach to learning. Unlike surface learning, deep learning involves higher-order cogitative skills seeking novel solutions in reviewed scenarios. Learners are can be encouraged to share experience, engage in critical dialogue and aim for growing enjoyment and satisfaction in the educational process (Biggs, 1999). Deep learning is not an inherent property or predisposition of the learner, although it is can be more easily cultivated in those with higher levels maturity. Rosie (2000a; 2000b) considers deep learning a pedagogical strategy, which instructors can promote, rather than a natural student attribute. Ability and confidence required to adopt deep learning strategies are enhanced by prior experiential engagement. Similarly, maturity and experience favor learning designs that accentuate higher-level cogitative exploration: analyzing, evaluating, and creating rather than knowing, understanding, and applying. (Bloom, 1956; revised Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001).

International and Intercultural Awareness

A higher level of international and intercultural appreciation is often encountered among military learners. Undoubtedly, such awareness is mediated by time and place of service, as well as personal factors. The experiences gained in this present study derive from re-enlisted military members currently serving in Europe, or deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan. Many of these students have acquired local language skills;

some have married non-Americans. They also display a rich awareness of international contexts and familiarity with intercultural issues.

As with prior experiential learning, exposure and familiarity with different cultures provides a significant opportunity for the course designer. Issues of international difference, intercultural sensitivity, communication differences, and aspects of national difference can be explored more deeply and meaningfully. Course participants might not have developed well-considered appreciations of international contexts, or acquired sophisticated intercultural competencies; however, they are well positioned to do so in terms of prior experience and current situation.

Many learning possibilities suggest themselves. For instance, Hofstede's (1991) work on national difference – seen in terms individualism/ collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and masculinity/femininity – is a standard item in courses dealing with international management. Individual student analyses of national difference can be used as a starting place to note idiosyncratic variation in assessment, leading to a reconsideration of the complexities and difficulties of national generalization, stereotyping, and generalizing from a national level to an individual one (Maitland & Bauer, 2001).

High Levels of Motivation

Military learners generally demonstrate a high level of motivation in starting and completing their coursework. They are influenced by a military culture that values perseverance, tenacity, and positive outcomes. Motivation is a critical issue in distant education success and motivational elements are often a feature of such learning environments; sometimes informal, sometimes as an engineered element of course design with the application of standard motivational theories (Chen & Yeh, 2009; Debnath, Tandon, & Pointer, 2007).

Currently, the most popular motivational theory in online interaction is goal setting, which specifies clear behavioral targets, monitors performance, and provides clear and timely feedback on performance (Latham & Locke, 2007; Locke & Latham, 1990; 2002). This motivational approach has been employed with apparent success in the author's own online instruction.

The educational experience affords intrinsic and extrinsic rewards. Intrinsically, course participants can be encouraged to set personal learning outcomes for the course, to reflect on them, and to align expected outcomes with personal goals (Morisano, Hirsch, Peterson, Pihl, and Shore, 2010). Extrinsic rewards are revealed in discussing motivation and accomplishment with military learners. Younger learners may look towards completion of a university degree as a significant asset in promotion or gaining commissioned officer status. Older military learners often embark on a higher education program as a way of preparing for separation from the military. With military learners, where the Department of Defense reimburses tuition expenditure only if the student completes a course successfully, there is another strand of motivational energy in the equation.

Organizational Commitment and Sense of Community

Military learners, certainly those who have re-enlisted, have gained considerable organizational experience during their service. They have aligned themselves with the ethos and core values of military organizations and culture. All military learners will have had a rich and extended exposure to organizational (military) culture: values, symbols, ritual, myth, and epics. Prolonged and intense experience of the military as pervasive organizations and bureaucracies provides a fertile context for theoretical considerations of organizations, reflection on prior experience, and a deeper appreciation of issues such as communication, organizational behavior, leadership, and management studies generally.

Strong personal identification with the military, familiarity with teamwork and collaboration, all create the opportunity for addressing issues such as community building in online contexts. Community, or at least an authentic perceived sense of community, can help create a cooperative, safe, and supportive context for the online learner (Song, Hill, Singleton, & Koh, 2004; Swan, 2002). The feeling that the learner, who is physically distanced and isolated from peers, is part of an accepting and supporting community online can increase motivation and reduce course attrition (Rovai, 2002). In designing and delivering online courses, a critical element is the construction of an environment where learning can take place and where a sense of social belonging can occur (Sadara, Robertson, Song, & Midon, 2009).

A natural affiliation exists between members of the military and this can be utilized in building online communities of learning. Shared values, common experience, and commitment derived from military service all provide an initial sense of community. A community of learning online, however, may stress different values and permit participants to assume different roles. The strengthening of personal bonds

and trust can be used to shift the nature of the online community to one based on common academic issues, genuine dialogue, critical honesty, mutual respect, legitimacy in the learning process, and a sense of common endeavor.

It is as yet unclear whether bonding between military learners is stronger than their bonding with non-military learners or whether bonding between military participants might create a potential split in a more comprehensive community in online environments where non-military participants are also present.

Scheduling and Flexibility

Most adult learners are challenged to find time in their busy schedules for online courses. This is particularly the case with the military learner, who is frequently subject to unanticipated increases in workload, temporary deployment, or extended exercises. In the author's pre-course survey, participant concern regarding unanticipated scheduling issues ranks as the key consideration in projected ability to satisfactorily complete the course. Changes in workload and/or location are neither within the student's control nor, given the nature of military service, negotiable. In discussing this, students frequently note: 'The mission comes first'. Generally, in their comments, military learners affirm that the military welcomes and encourages higher education; however, in operational terms, they also concede that it must always assume a secondary priority.

Unanticipated interruptions impact course participation, student interaction, and collaborative activities. Interaction, both learner-learner and learner-instructor, is a significant component of the educational process (Gosmire, Morrison, & Van Osdel, 2009). Exchange of viewpoints, respectful criticism, and emerging dialogue all promote active learning and reflection (DeLoach & Greenlaw, 2007; Levine, 2007). Synchronous participation and exchange are probably most effective; however, asynchronous alternatives allow for considered contributions to be made to collective discussions and conferences. Opportunities to catch up on interrupted work should be considered. Collaborative projects, while having many educational advantages (Brindley, Walti, & Blaschke, 2009), might be reconsidered in light of the fragmented participation that many military students often experience.

As autonomous learners, course participants should be supported in budgeting their time, preparing realistic timelines for learning activities, and establishing workable deadlines for assignments. One obvious advantage of online education is flexibility but, as Dianne Conrad (2009) notes, 'although most online courses ... permit more flexibility than traditional place-bound courses, absencing oneself from an online learning experience can take its toll on learners' (p. 14).

That toll, on the individual and the group, is seen in the disruption of the social, cognitive, and instructional presence that is a critical part of the learning environment (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000). Flexibility, in terms of scheduling course requirements, administration of the learning environment, and instructor attitude should inform instructional design and engagement with participants.

Internet Accessibility

Over the last few years there has been a redistribution of foreign-based U.S. military from Western Europe to theatres of action such as Iraq and Afghanistan. Military learners in these locations ('in-country' or 'down range') often find that Internet access is limited, intermittent, or simply impossible. Restrictions on Internet access may be for several days or longer.

Sometimes, such lack of connectivity forces a deeper consideration of the conditions and situations that military learners face in completing their studies. Recently, a soldier apologized to the author for the lack of her participation in online conferences. She was stationed in Afghanistan and a fellow soldier had been killed in action. The base was placed on a communication blackout until the soldier's parents had been officially notified of his death. While the presenting issue was one of communication/ participation, there is clearly a deeper impact of this incident on the learner, and others like her, which may affect her ability to deal with the learning demands of the course.

With present trends in deployment, Internet participation difficulties will most likely increase, rather than decrease. Even when Internet connections are available for academic work, connection speed and bandwidth may present limiting factors. These limitations should be taken into account when considering the technical design and bandwidth requirements of the virtual classroom.

Organizational Context: Policies and Equity

Online educational environments are embedded in a broader organizational context, which include college policies, accreditation requirements, and other stakeholder interests. In developing 'military-

friendly' or 'veteran-friendly' campuses, or learning environments (Ackerman & DiRamio, 2009), administrations should undoubtedly strive to understand and respond to the needs of these learners and provide the quality and excellence in education that they seek, and deserve.

The Boyer Commission (1998), reviewing higher educational practice, called for 'academic bill of rights', through which colleges and universities might make fundamental learning commitments to all students. This bill includes 'maximal opportunities for intellectual and creative development' and 'careful and comprehensive preparation for whatever may lie beyond graduation, whether it be graduate school, professional school, or first professional position' (p. 12).

Military learners should not be considered an exception, or a privileged class; however, they do possess distinct characteristics. Through a greater appreciation of their needs and potential, college administrations might be better able to craft environments that are receptive to those needs. Military learner needs and perspectives do not necessarily conflict with those of non-military learners; however, college policies, while being sensitive to the characteristics of this group, should be equally applicable to all learners and ensure equitable consideration.

Caveats, Considerations, and Conclusions

The first caveat regards the limits of samples of military learners that the author worked with. With reference to the larger population of such learners, these samples were opportunistic and generated by convenience and expediency. Students were all business administration majors with considerable military experience enrolled in the author's courses. This sample may differ significantly from one including freshly enlisted military personnel serving on their first tour of duty. A random sample (n=30) from the 165 class members that the author worked with in the calendar year 2010, indicates that sample members:

- were currently serving in the U.S. armed forces
- estimated they would separate from the military after 17.8 years
- had already served 12.5 years at the time of course enrollment
- were in their senior year and pursuing four-year degrees in accounting, human resource management, or management.

Restricted sampling means that observations might not reliably describe the broader classification of military learner and should be used with caution in generalizing specific finding to the class as a whole.

There is reluctance to construct learner classifications which may do a disservice to distance learners by further promoting a failure to recognize and respond to their individuality. Classification, if it is to be meaningful and constructive, should provide helpful and useful considerations to inform the instructional design and promote learner engagement. Appropriate and effective design, especially in distant learning, requires the creation of a bridge between the assumptions and considerations of the instructor/designer and the presumed culture, expectations, and abilities of the targeted learner.

Rogers, Graham, and Mayes (2007) note that frequently 'the instructional designer unconsciously assumes the learner is a lot more like himself or herself than they in reality are; they seriously underestimate how important the differences in context are' (p. 212). Classification should at a minimum illuminate those differences and assist the instructional designer and course manager.

Some further considerations are in order:

- With the increasing percentages of military learners, active service persons and veterans, this class – if indeed it does prove to be a reliable and consistent class – requires greater exploration from an educational perspective. Prior experience, prior transferable learning, levels of autonomy, instructional design and the management of the online course are all areas that require more investigation.
- Designers of online learning environments, and their college administrators, have a vested interest in quality assurance and educational excellence. So do other stakeholders in the educational process, especially when they are paying for it. There is still discussion as to the rate of return, in financial terms, of the Department of Defense investment in military education; however, there is evidence that distant learning has a significant impact on the lives of service persons and the military. Reviewing the navy's tuition assistance program, McLaughlin (2010) notes that 'sailors who utilize the TA [tuition assistance] program reenlist at much higher rates than those who do not enroll in the TA program. Sailors who enroll in DL [distant learning] classes reenlist at even higher rates than those who enroll in traditional classes' (p. 43).

- Education is not restricted to the college. There are many educators within the military. There is merit in an exchange between instructional designers, military and academic, about the characteristics of their learners that they work with. It is more than likely that issues of common interest and experience will outweigh institutional differences (Bonk & Wisner, 2000).
- Much of the learning within the military centers on training, which focuses on a narrow range of cognitive and behavioral outcomes and is usually of limited transferability. In a world of growing complexity and change more effort is now invested, especially with officers, in capacity building and developing human capital. Such education satisfies military goals but is also more transferable to civilian life and careers. In looking at military leadership, autonomous life-long learning, and the role of the ROTC (Reserve Officers' Training Corps), Mensch and Rahschulte (2008) note: 'educators must develop a greater level of resourcefulness and persistence among the men and women who will become officers and defenders of our nation' (p. 271). A fuller appreciation of the military learner may prove equally beneficial to both the academy and the military.

Mensch and Rahschulte (2008) summarize the critical nature of training and education in the military as follows:

Every mother, father, sister, and brother expects our service men and women to have the best leadership ... so that in the moment of life or death, when decisions must be made in an instant, the leader will understand the situation, critically evaluate the possibilities, use good judgment, and execute the decision with confidence. (p. 271)

Similar expectations might also legitimately attach to the military learners in higher education. These learners should be empowered to gain critical thinking skills, deepen discernment, and master the bodies of knowledge that are studying. Military learners should be encouraged to reflect on prior service experience, value prior training and learning, and transfer military learning into their current academic work. Service experience and new academic understandings provide effective ways of preparing military learners for the civilian workforce and continuing careers. Prior experience and new understandings provided by effective online environments also allow military learners to perform their present professional duties. Online educational contexts are being challenged to create spaces where synergistic learning can take place through a deeper and more considered appreciation of those who participate within them. The military learner, a more frequent participant in contemporary online environments, presents us with the opportunity to become more acquainted with relevant issues in teaching and learning that might contribute to that synergism.

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