Creating a Learning Environment for the

Development of Interagency Leaders

by William J. Davis, Jr.

> *It became clear to me that at the age of 58 I would have to learn new tricks that were not taught in the military manuals or on the battlefield. In this position I am a political soldier and will have to put my training in rapping out orders and making snap decisions on the back burner, and have to learn the arts of persuasion and guile. I must become an expert in a whole new set of skills.*
>
> *— General George C. Marshall*

As the above quote alludes, it is generally accepted that leading the interagency requires skills that are not often taught in a singular organizational or professional culture. People have referred to it as the PhD level of leadership. That is precisely why so many leaders who have significant reputations within their area of expertise have often failed when they try to transfer those skills to the interagency without adaptation. But this dynamic occurs in all disciplines. Businesspeople, politicians, coaches, and military officers are a few of those who, in recent history, have tried to lead in unfamiliar environments and have struggled to succeed. Most national security professionals have learned how to lead within the explicit contextual confines of their organizations. For example, military members mostly rely on direct leadership principles exercised in an authoritarian construct, diplomats on a consensus-driven collaborative approach, teachers on a knowledge-seeking Socratic approach, and law enforcement officers on a law or principle-based approach. However, the problem with using one approach—no matter how adept the person—is that context and culture are intricate determinants of the success of any given approach. For example, while most military personnel succeed at leading in a military environment, they quit

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the teaching profession at the same rate as non-military teachers and for the mostly the same reason: frustration with failure to manage the classroom.[2] Two significant examples of this phenomena are former President Donald Trump's administration and Donald Rumsfeld's reign as Secretary of Defense. Both had a stated aim to bring business thinking and leadership to public policymaking. The results they experienced are exemplary of the angst an organization manifests when an approach from a particular cultural background is applied to a different one. Both are examples of failing to recognize that context matters. Unfortunately, most leadership models often give the impression that they are universal and will apply regardless of the context.

Developing Leaders

Because it is well documented that the environment of the interagency is unique, it follows that leading in the interagency will require the development of unique skills.[3] These skills are developed throughout one's life, and most leadership development models agree that leader development occurs in three environments—the crucible of experience, the academic environment of a shared classroom, and self-study. While it is often argued that experience is the most valuable aspect of leader development, it is offered here that, although experience may be the best teacher, it is the classroom that provides the greatest opportunity for experimentation and growth at minimal risk. When a leader is on the job and the organization is looking for results, tremendous pressure will often keep a leader from using different techniques that never have been tried before. As was mentioned in the introduction, a singular culture will have a preferred way to lead and straying from that entails risk. That is why so many leaders, even ones as revered as George Marshall, have difficulty when the cultural context of their environment changes. On the other hand, the classroom offers an environment

where experience, self-study, and academic intrigue can be brought together to develop new skills.

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However, a classroom learning environment that supports experimentation and leader development does not just happen, it must be created. Ron Heifetz, a leadership expert from Harvard University, has developed a teaching style that purports to do such a thing. It is called case-in-point teaching and is detailed in chapter two of the book *Leadership Can Be Taught* by Sharon Parks.[4] This article is not meant to be a review of case-in-point teaching and only is mentioned here to provide the reader with the theory upon which the rest of the article is based and to provide a venue for further study on this teaching style if desired.

Epistemological Philosophy

When a professional is working in an interagency environment to solve a problem, it is a good bet that the situation is volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA). However, top performance in a VUCA environment usually does not occur naturally—much education and preparation are required. That education and preparation needs to be done in an environment that reflects the VUCA environment. This paper presents ways that a faculty member of any institution can replicate VUCA in the classroom and better prepare students for success in the mostly unregulated terrain of the interagency. Unfortunately, oftentimes in education, teaching the objective process is the focus of the curriculum rather than the more difficult

task of teaching adaptive problem solving. A key to success in teaching the type of adaptive leadership required for interagency success is to have an epistemological philosophy that most knowledge is constructed and not objective.

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One example of this is the approach taken when educating doctors. While it is important for doctors to know the 206 bones that make up the human body, that is not the purpose of medical school. I use this example because in a position I once held at a college, a school administrator who wanted more objective multiple-choice tests in the curriculum argued that every profession had knowledge that was important. I agreed that what he said was true, but that a higher-level school should not concern itself with measuring such trivia and that our focus was on ensuring higher order thinking and synthesis. So philosophically, as a faculty member who is interested in developing leaders who can succeed in the interagency, it is important that you at the very core should believe that what you teach is not objective knowledge, but the creation of new knowledge generated from multiple variables and inputs.

Start with a Foundation

It is recommended that faculty base their teachings on four pillars—focus on student learning not your teaching, establish relevance, focus on asking the right questions not providing the right answers, and finally, provide a free-flowing multidisciplinary approach to the topic at hand.

It is All About the Student

A faculty member can lecture (note: lecture is noted as one of the most ineffective methods for educating adults) for six hours on the National Security Decision Making process exemplified at the National Security Council, and at the end of it may feel good because he or she just dumped a bevy of knowledge upon the students. However, success is measured by what *the student* takes away, not how good someone feels about his or her lecture. It is important that the faculty member always focuses on the critical attribute of any lesson by answering the question, "What outcome do I hope to achieve by spending this time with you?" The ultimate goal is to make students prepared to solve problems in their career, and each lesson should contribute to that meta-objective.

Establish Relevancy

An unbelievable true story is one where a colleague of mine, who was teaching Joint Professional Education Phase II after the event of 9/11, never incorporated that event into the curriculum. His excuse was that he "didn't have time" in the curriculum to discuss the implications of 9/11. My retort was that he "didn't NOT have time." This faculty member obviously was ignorant to exactly what he was there to teach. He thought that his job was to teach known-knowns (objective knowledge) rather than to teach students how to apply that knowledge in the real world. *Especially* when educating interagency leaders, the goal is to have students use what they learn in bettering the integrated application of the instruments of national power in pursuit of national interests.

It is imperative that real world events are used in the teaching of courses whenever possible. The use of contrived scenarios can never match the complexity of real-world issues. While some may argue that they are able to better manipulate contrived scenarios to achieve learning objectives, the opposite is true. Most times I find that a contrived school-generated scenario has a parallel school-generated solution.

The real world holds no such school solutions and will require more critical thinking from the class to evaluate proposed answers.

Seek Adaptive Answers

This pillar is all about asking the right questions rather than seeking to elicit the proper responses. In the national security environment, there are usually many right answers to address the complex problems faced (this does not mean that there are no wrong answers, but usually there are competing solutions that can be considered appropriate for the problem.) The goal should be to get the student to think through the various options, not to derive the one that fits the paradigm of the day. Teaching students to use a singular formula or framework is not congruent with learning how to solve complex adaptive problems. For example, the Joint Strategic Planning System (JSPS) is a complex adaptive system, and to focus on the acronyms and documents of the JSPS is providing a disservice to the students. One must emphasize the WHY of each process and the interaction among the processes, not necessarily the acronym or name of the processes. The names change, the functions of the processes do not.

National Security is a Multi-disciplinary and Multi-functional Phenomenon

Even though design thinking should focus on the idea that problem framing (as it pertains to the multi-faceted national security arena) should involve trying to understand the intricate linkages of multiple systems, the tendency for faculty to want to teach a reductionist approach to national security is strong.[5] Unfortunately, many believe that considering too much complexity muddies the situation. An important aspect of making decisions in a VUCA environment is that more information often makes the picture more ambiguous rather than clearer. Considering how information-gap decision making (and there is always an

information-gap in decision making) affects risk is a primary skill that people who operate in the VUCA environment must develop. Therefore, it is imperative that the faculty make it a habit to elicit the impact that multiple disciplines have on national security and do not allow students to provide simple answers that in the real world could be inadequate. A good example of failing to consider the multiple variables inherent in any national security undertaking is the famous "radiator slide" that General Franks briefed to

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President Bush before Operation Iraqi Freedom, wherein the end state of the operation was written as "regime change" and "removal of weapons of mass destruction." Had General Franks taken a more multidisciplinary and VUCA frame on the problems, he might have foreseen some of the issues that would arise that caused the U.S. to stay in a very contested environment for many years.

The Best Ways to Support Creating a Learning Environment That Supports the Four Pillars

The following ten ways are offered to shed the most debilitating aspects of any classroom—standardization and predictability—while at the same time being able to meet the educational intent of the institution. The classroom is often too predictable. The class starts with a warm-up, which is usually a video clip, then there is a bevy of PowerPoint slides that recap the required reading, some discussion, and then some sort of small exercise. This formula is what students

have come to expect and employing a differing philosophy will cause some consternation. Do not let this consternation guide your decisions. Students will eventually realize the worth of the case-in-point classroom. I can attest to this as I have been using this unorthodox method for twenty-five years and have not received a negative student review in the last twenty-three years or so.

> **...you should speak only about 5% of the time. And when you do speak, it should always end with a question...**

1) Keep dialogue open

While this is a value that many faculty like to espouse, I have found in my years of observing classroom discussion that it is not always a practiced value. Let us be honest, the overwhelming cultural value of hierarchy is strongly ingrained in most classrooms.[6] The professor is the answer person. In addition, the tradition of the leader having the last word is also deeply ingrained in most cultures. It also is quite common for many to interpret disagreement with insubordination. A way to ensure that the classroom becomes a place that can be an adult learning environment where intellectual debate is valued is to model that behavior early in the course. A tactic I like to use is to have a faculty member I know who is oppositional to my perspective on a subject visit the classroom early in the class (often on the first day of classes) and have that faculty member offer a counterpoint in a very informal manner while I make it a point to model debate. Once this is modeled, I tell the students that this is what I would like to see among and between the faculty and students. It usually opens things up. In addition, I ensure that I do not pontificate, which brings up the next point.

2) Speak only 5% of the time

One of the more difficult techniques for a faculty to master is to not speak unless necessary. Because you are usually only one of fifteen people in the classroom, I would offer that you should speak only about 5% of the time. And when you do speak, it should always end with a question so that you are a catalyst for further discussion, not a purveyor of known-knowns. For example, if a class was on the introduction of the attributes of a collaborative leader, most faculty might show a PowerPoint presentation with a list of those traits, providing insights to each attribute in a lecture like format. Although the faculty member might ask for insights about each attribute, this is an inadequate way to hold the class, because first, the students were supposed to read the material the night before, and most of what you will be doing is repetitive. Second, you will be providing the insight (think lecture) when it should be the students who need to think about the topic and internalize the critical attributes. So, you should start with a series of questions. This gets the students beyond the usual mind-numbing mechanistic approach that many have.

In addition to the question offered, a faculty member should have a series of about six or more questions that encourage the students to think about the process. In addition, the faculty member only needs to ask questions, if a student perhaps states something that is "off," then the faculty should redirect that information. For example, if a student confuses the concepts of soft power, smart power, and sharp power, the faculty member should note that the student appears to have misunderstood the concepts and then ask the class for a technique or techniques (metaphorical thinking, etc.) that they may use to have a better understanding of the topic. The students have the knowledge, one just has to be able to (and want to) tap into that knowledge. A difficult part of this is being comfortable with silence. After you ask a question, often

the students will wait for the faculty member to answer it (visit a classroom and note how often this is done). Let that silence stand. If you must break it, then ask if it is not clear, or ask a follow up question that might be easier for the students to answer. Do not answer your own questions.

3) Use "you are" questions

This technique is simple but very effective at taking the student out of the "I do not know anything" mode and putting them into a different role. "You are" questions put the student in a different mindset and will set them up for success after the classroom. In the "you are" questions, the students role play. For example, "you are the combatant commander…" or "you are the UN or USAID representative…" This approach provides the real-world context. The answers to these types of questions are very rarely school solutions, and most of all, the entire class can critique the answer. Each person in the class will most likely have a differing perspective or varying priorities. Each will determine the key pieces of information missing. Collectively, the class will create a cornucopia of discussion that will increase the critical thinking of the group.

4) Provide minimal direction or "A blank whiteboard is the best teacher"

This technique always discombobulates the students and a good many faculty. How will they know what to do if we do not provide them the format and requirement? I will never forget the words of a senior military officer who just returned from being a chief of staff during Operation Iraqi Freedom. I asked him what we needed to improve as a force and he said solving problems without direction. I often see this from my students. "Tell us what you want, and we will give it to you," they say. My philosophy is just the opposite—you provide me what you think is a good answer in a good format and together we will judge whether you have communicated your solution well. The world is not about formats,

it is about solving complex problems and then effectively communicating the solution. While I will provide some theoretical frameworks to use, I will not provide precise "fill-in-the-blank" format that is usually the hallmark of junior personnel. The interagency for the most part does not have doctrine or formats, so providing minimal direction might be the most important aspect of developing leaders. I (and many others who have adopted this approach) have received significant feedback from graduated students who thank us for this aspect of their development. A blank whiteboard is the best teacher.

> **Leading the interagency is about people not products.**

5) After-action-review the process first

After an exercise, it is common to "take a brief" and critique a product. However, the essence of an exercise is best served if the process is critiqued first not last. Start the briefings with questions such as—"What was the most contentious point in the brief?" "What pieces of information did you wish you had to make the result better?" "What points are not getting briefed that might possibly be important?" "What was the communication dynamic in the group?" These types of questions *before* the brief relax the students and provide a perspective on their product they did not have. Leading the interagency is about people not products. In addition, this review of the process tends to decrease the defensiveness and thereby increase the critical thinking of the participants.

6) Teach the subject being brought up at the time

This is generally one of the more difficult adjustments that faculty must make. Most curricula, although divided up into neat two- and four-hour blocks for the most part, is contiguous

and interrelated to a degree that makes it hard to teach only the portion prescribed for the day.

For example, the subjects of multinational operations, incorporation of industry, force management, strategy, planning, etc., are all systems that coexist and are interactive. Thus, when teaching the subject of force development, the impact of allies should be addressed. The extent to which it is addressed, using case-in-point teaching, will depend on the students. The curiosity and experience of the class will determine the focus on this system. Meanwhile, the faculty member must be adaptive and should discuss its impact to a satisfying degree. The faculty member must then be able to integrate the issue into future teaching, and not be so obstinate as to go back over the issue when the subject comes up later as a formal part of the curriculum. What should the faculty member do when it later is a part of the formal curriculum? The faculty member takes the students to a deeper level of understanding. This takes a lot of practice. Like my 9-11 example previously highlighted, a faculty member must be able to go beyond the mind-numbing presentation of slides and bring the curriculum to life. This requires much work.

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7) Do not compartmentalize your subjects

This is analogous to the previous practice. When teaching the course, it must be addressed as it would be in on-the-job-training in the real world. The mental model of crawl-walk-run is outdated when it comes to adult learning. The experiences that adults have need to be tapped into so that the complexities of the course are addressed up front. I used to teach faculty development for a university and would tell the faculty to "start at the end." This technique is analogous to the "flipped classroom," however, even though touted by many, it is rarely used correctly. Jump into complexity right away. Use real world examples that are not so simple, and the students begin to see not only that the concept is not simple (few are), but that in application there are a multitude of ways to apply it. This dive into complexity is disconcerting at first, but the class soon embraces this way to learn, and in my experience, produces very positive feedback from students.

8) Never provide known-knowns unless…

One of the worst techniques for critical thinking is to present students with a PowerPoint slide that contains a list of lessons learned or things to consider. Why think further about the topic, if you, the faculty, have presented me with the school solution? Even if the faculty tries to elicit discussion after the slide is shown, it is usually truncated. However, if one asks a question without showing the slide, it will force the students to think about the subject at hand. The students have done the reading, thoughtfully approached the subject, and will have some relatable experiences.

For example, putting up a list of "Top ten things to consider when leading within the interagency" is an invitation to truncate thought and discussion. As the authoritarian faculty member, you are in essence and by default providing the answer. I have seen this done way too many times. The faculty member tries to invite discussion on the topic by saying things like "What is not up here?" or "What do you think so and so means?" Ron Heifetz asserts that faculty never do this. The question is more constructively asked as "What are the top ten things to consider when leading within the interagency and defend/explain your answers?" This puts the learning onus on the students. The one exception to this is when, during the act of delving into deeper aspects of the topic, there

appears to be the wrong impression of a concept, then as the faculty member you should invite the class to correct it. At the end (which seems a bit backwards) of the discussion, it is okay to provide the precise definition (unless a student provides it earlier in the discussion). As a faculty member you are trying to generate internalization of the concept, not memorization of the concept. The difference between the two makes all the difference.

9) Challenge students to enhance leadership skills

There are technical problems and adaptive problems.[7] While solving each type of problem requires leadership, adaptive problems require a more comprehensive leadership approach. As such, the goal of the majority of education institutions should be to develop adaptive leaders. Challenge your students early to treat the classroom as a leadership laboratory, wherein each one develops the skills necessary to lead. Most times students focus on getting the "right" answers in class or providing the most complete answers. While these are admirable pursuits, the more sought after goal should be to develop the team. Students can practice things such as convincing others, defending their position, cajoling allies, emotional temperance, eliciting key information, determining how various perspectives should impact the design, etc. All of which are critical attributes of an adaptive leader.

10) Innovate how to internalize

This harkens back to the philosophical pillar that it is what the student learns that is important. There are myriad ways to help the students internalize the critical attributes of any lesson. These techniques are well-documented in college teaching texts. However, the one that students have said was the most effective was to present them with something real-world and have them apply the day's lesson to that. The lesson comes to life, and I have heard students say that they will never forget some lessons because of the relevance of the application.

It is a never-ending learning process for faculty

I invite the reader to revisit and reflect on the quote at the beginning of this article. This article provides one perspective on how a faculty member can make this happen. It is not meant to be an authoritative piece or the final word, but part of a continuing conversation on education. I offer that using the various techniques in pursuit of having students increase the capability to solve complex problems is not only a never-ending learning process for faculty, but an uncomfortable one as well. One has to read the room throughout and audible an innumerable number of times when using case-in-point. I invite the reader to perhaps use the information within this article to audible and change some small aspect of his or her teaching to improve the student's learning and ability to lead in the interagency. **IAJ**

Notes

1   Stephen A. Shambach, ed., *Strategic Leadership Primer*, 2nd ed. (Carlisle Barracks: U.S. Army War College, 2004), 1.

2   W. Owings et al., Troops *to Teachers Grant Study 4* (Norfolk, VA: Old Dominion University, 2014), https://www.odu.edu/content/dam/odu/offices/tcep/docs/troops-to-teach-eval-2012-13-tech-rprt.pdf

3   W. Davis, "Why We Keep Getting It Wrong: What Makes the JIIM So Different," *Interagency Journal 8*, no. 4 (2017): 48-54. Also, Google "How different is the interagency system," and it resulted in 351,000 hits with the first page showing sources from 6 different federal agencies.

4   S.D. Parks, *Leadership can be Taught: A Bold Approach for a Complex World.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2005.

5   D. Eikmeier, "Simplicity: A Tool for Working with Complexity and Chaos," *Joint Forces Quarterly 92* (2019): 30-35.

6   The author studied post-doctoral at three civilian universities and found his observations of predictability, hierarchy, and other phenomena mentioned to be endemic to most classrooms.

7   R. Heifetz, Leadership *Without Easy Answers*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994.