Marines' Insight into Why Cultural Training Was Not Effective for Them

To provide some concrete measures assessing Marine Corps culture and language learning programs, the U.S. Marine Corps Center for Advanced Operational Culture Learning (CAOCL) sent out a survey during February 2010 to 15% of all Marines with email addresses on the Marine Corps Global Address List, excluding general officers. CAOCL received 2406 valid responses from Marines, representing all 42 military occupational specialties, all ranks, and all educational levels.[1] Comparisons of the survey demographics to data on the Marine Corps as a whole indicate that respondents are representative of the Marine Corps with the exception of the lowest ranks.[2]

One of the areas of interest to CAOCL was Marines' perceptions of the impact of cultural training on their operational effectiveness. Of the 1999 Marines who had ever deployed or been stationed overseas, CAOCL asked, "If you have deployed within the last four years, have you received cultural training for your deployment location(s)?" One thousand three hundred eighty-nine of the 1659[3] who reported having deployed within the last four years said they had received predeployment cultural training.

Survey Population	2406
Ever Deployed/Stationed Overseas	1999
Deployed within Last Four Years	1659
Received Cultural Training	1389

Of the 1388 Marines who responded to whether their cultural training made them more operationally effective, the majority (80.8% or 1122) said it did. Nineteen point two percent or 266 Marines said it did not. The 266 Marines who did not find their cultural training effective were compared to the general survey population in terms of basic demographic characteristics (age, gender, rank, and education). There was no statistical difference demographically between these Marines and the overall survey population.

1 General officers were intentionally excluded from the population.

2 Because Privates (E-1s), Privates First Class (E-2s) and Second Lieutenants (O-1s) do not always have addresses on the Global Address List, these ranks are underrepresented in the data. As young Marines new to the Corps, these ranks are unlikely to have deployed in the past four years.

3 Due to different branches and sequels, total numbers of deployed respondents were not identical for the culture and language questions. One thousand six hundred forty-two respondents indicated that they had deployed within the last four years when answering the question, "Did you receive predeployment language training?" However, 1659 respondents indicated having deployed within the last four years when asked if they had received predeployment cultural training.

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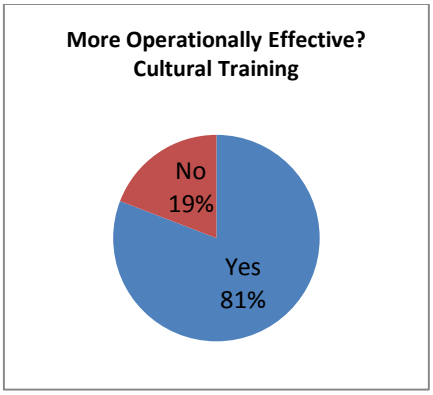

CAOCL then asked this subset of Marines in an open-ended question, "Please tell us why you think it was not effective," "it" referring to cultural training. Two hundred thirty-four Marines (88% of the 266 respondents) took the time to answer this question. Two major themes emerged: the lack of need for cultural capabilities and problems with instruction.

Method

CAOCL reviewed Marines' responses, identified themes present in the data, and assigned codes to them, using the inductive method of coding qualitative answers and the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences Text Analysis for Surveys 3.0 software. Because responses were open-ended, each response could express several themes and therefore require more than one code. The numbers below indicate the frequency that the themes emerged in the data. When all the code frequencies are added together, they surpass the total population of responses. Each code needs to be considered separately.

Challenges with the data:

One of the concerns with this data set is that some Marines have conflated the cultural and language training. There may be many reasons for this, the most likely being that the cultural and language courses were taught together, making it difficult for Marines to comment separately about one block of instruction. Another may be that the language training questions preceded the cultural training questions in the survey and both were very similar in construct. In 21 responses, respondents' comments seem to focus more on a language training issue than on cultural training and thus were labeled with the code "Language Related." These responses were still coded based on the reasons presented; however, when creating sub-categories within "Problem with Instruction," 10 responses that fell within this group were treated separately as "Answered Language" so as to not include language course critique in the analysis of problems with cultural instruction. There may be other responses that were directed more toward the language training, but that meaning was not apparent. These were included in the culture training analysis. Thus, the data must be considered with this understanding.

Key Themes:

1. Did Not Need Cultural Capabilities

The most prevalent theme identified was that Marines did not need to have cultural capabilities, and thus the training was not effective. One hundred thirty-one respondents (56%) identified this as a

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problem. CAOCL created a cluster of three codes that comprised the "No Need Cluster" category: No Contact with Locals, Not My Job, and No Need (see Appendix A). Within this cluster, the main reason provided was no contact with the local population (96 responses), as represented by such statements as "I had no interaction with the local populace." (Respondent #1615) and "Did not use it or interact with locals. Never left the base." (Respondent #988). In addition, there were those who indicated that their job did not require cultural capabilities (85 Responses). Many responded with comments such as, "Never had to use it to perform my duties in my MOS." (Respondent #24), "I didn't have a chance to leave the wire in my billet." (Respondent #1525), and "Good information, but was never in a position where the information was used or necessary." (Respondent #1497). Rounding out this cluster is the generic category of "No need" to distinguish those responses that expressed no or limited need to use language from those that just stated they did not use it. Seventeen responses fell into this category. Respondent #38 captures the essence of this group's concern, when he stated "I haven't had to use it yet and I've been here for 11 months."

2. Problems with Instruction

The second major theme that emerged was problems with instruction. Seventy-seven respondents (33%) identified various problems with the instruction they had received (see Appendix B). The most prominent problem was content related (35 responses). CAOCL created a cluster of four codes that comprised the "Content Problem Cluster" category: Too basic, superficial; content off target; characterization of studied population; and content was incorrect. Most Marines within this cluster felt that the content was too basic (17 responses). For example, Respondent #1608 noted, "The training was one or two brief classes that covered very general information, equivalent to marksmanship classes of 'Aim your weapon at the target. Don't point it at yourself.' Very check-in-the-box training." Respondent #1869 was much more frank, stating "too generic."

Several Marines (9 responses) raised concerns that the training was not focused on the right types of information, explaining, for example, that "none of the lessons were for you to learn how to socialize but rather were scare tactics saying 'oh don't do this because it offends them,' 'don't do this, don't do that' when I believe that scares the people to stay on and not try to go create an image which can curve the locals views on us." (Respondent #259), and "It was a lip service aspect tied into the Language course. It never focuses on the area the unit will deploy to vice broad trends in a very macro view. (Pashto culture vice Noorzai tribe culture, etc.)" (Respondent #1676).

Marines also expressed concern about how culture and peoples were being presented (8 Responses). One Marine (Respondent #1784) mentioned that "Most of it was too 'formal.' I don't need the Emily Post version of etiquette, I need to be able to be comfortable around locals and know the subtleties that make people more comfortable." Another (Respondent #1600) highlighted one of the challenges faced by instructors when asked to characterize a people in a short, concise class, explaining "Because each AO is different. People in cities act differently than people in the country. We are trying to standardize something that is non-standard."

More concerning are those Marines (6 responses) who indicated that the content was inaccurate or outdated. Their comments ranged from "Cultural training was not accurate and was outdated." (Respondent #1664) to "I found a lot of what was told to me inaccurate and someone's opinion rather than factual, useful information. . . ." (Respondent #218).

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Many Marines felt that there was not enough training or time dedicated to training (22 responses) and that the predeployment training cycle did not afford enough time for such training (8 responses). Comments like "Not long enough" (Respondent 195), "Not enough time allotted for this type of training." (Respondent #1305), and "Short class and no chance to use." (Respondent #1903) are representative of Marines' concerns about training time and the amount of training that was available. Eight Marines identified the predeployment training cycle as part of the problem, noting that "It is a short amount of time. It is done all at once. There is additional training being completed in addition to ensuring the Marines you are responsible for are taken care of. Saying farewell to family, etc. It should be a year round training evolution or offered as such." (Respondent #1483), and "It was a fire-hose method of instruction, integrated with other training (weapons, driving, communications, etc.) in four weeks. Having to 'un-learn' our own warrior culture to turn it into a COIN mentality was a lot more time-consuming and difficult, frankly, than learning that the Shia and Sunni don't like each other." (Respondent #1881).

There are three other problems with the instruction that were identified, and while limited in terms of frequency, they are worth noting: poor instructors, bad delivery method, and training offering nothing new. Eleven Marines discussed the quality of instructors. Comments ranged from "The training was not as effective as actually seeing first hand. It was not provided by an individual from the culture/area we were working in. The Marine providing the information could not explain why certain things were the way they were." (Respondent #1383) to "It was politically biased in a manner which was not accurate. It leaned toward the politically correct version of the truth to a level which was absurd. The 'expert' who gave the brief was more interested in defending a blanket group of foreigners than honestly and accurately representing reality with an emphasis on the diversity of any given large group of people." (Respondent #999).

Ten Marines raised issue with the delivery methods used to convey cultural learning. Marines were concerned with class size, and PowerPoint and laminated cards did not sit well with these Marines. One Marine (Respondent #1677) commented, "It was crappy training. Sitting in a large auditorium with a couple of hundred other Marines getting a PowerPoint read to you is not effective. Like most predeployment training not MOS related, it was a check in the box." Another (Respondent #1712) noted that "My cultural training involved a laminated brochure handout and a brief from the chaplain on the religious history of the people. It was a waste of my time and our resources."

Seven Marines noted that the training did not teach them anything new. Several had deployed previously and explained, for example, that "Because it was the same information that I had received on previous operations. There was nothing new to take from it." (Respondent #1085). Others mentioned that they "learned nothing new." (Respondent #1937) and "it was the same. A brief overview." (Respondent #2423).

Conclusions

The majority of Marines who indicated they had received predeployment cultural training considered that training effective. For those who did not, lack of need for cultural capabilities and problems with instruction were the most significant causes. What does this reveal? When examining the reasons behind not needing cultural capabilities, two related factors must be considered. First and most important is that the predeployment cultural training delivered during the four years prior to the survey launch primarily focused on understanding the cultures of the local population. Second, there are certain jobs in theater that do not require local contact or understanding of the local people. Therefore,

for those Marines who did not interface with the locals or whose jobs did not require local contact or understanding, it would make sense for them not to see operational benefits from the cultural training they received. These results indicate that there may be some benefit in revisiting the process for selecting attendees for cultural training that is focused on the local population, although it is important to remember that this concern is only for a small subset (9.4%) of Marines who received cultural training and may not warrant expending limited resources to address.

However, as Marine Corps missions expand and become more joint in nature, the Marine Corps may want to consider broadening the focus of its cultural curriculum to ensure Marines are equipped with the knowledge and skills needed to be effective warfighters in their future culturally complex, joint operating environments. Respondent #509, while not having contact with locals, did have contact with other U.S. services and coalition partners, each representing different cultural orientations. He notes, "Most of my deployment was spent on the air base, not interacting with locals. Since I didn't have much interaction with people other than US/Coalition service members, the training was not of much use." Future training may want to incorporate more or different facets of culture to ensure operational readiness. If this occurs, careful consideration of which Marines require what types of cultural training will need to happen.

The problems with instruction mentioned by the respondents reveal the inherent challenges of trying to teach "culture," especially in a short period of time. Balancing what to include with available time to maximize impact is not easy. It almost demands a wave top, superficial discussion, one that could reveal more stereotypes than explain the cultural nuances at play, apply broad generalizations to very diverse peoples, and be reduced to a checklist of do's and don'ts. What is clear, however, is that almost 50% of those Marines who indicated their training was not effective because of problems with instruction identified this as one of the reasons. They recognize that people are messy and do not fit into standardized constructions and that cultural concepts are complex, and they are asking for more depth through comments like "It was a generic class that said the same old thing over and over again. It did not cover how their culture works and how they interact with each other." (Respondent #154), and "It [was] nothing. We received a booklet on what not to do and that was about it. It was done as a 'you have to do this' but then ended with nothing. There should be an option like if you would like to learn more we can set something up with your command or on you free time we can set this up . . . you know an option." (Respondent #2377).

The concerns about instructors and methods are informative, and the discussion around the lack of new information is a helpful reminder to curriculum developers to consider building refresher courses, or more in-depth or different courses, as units deploy numerous times to the same operating environment.

These Marines' experiences with cultural training identify key areas that require more attention. How should the Marine Corps teach culture? On what should it focus and to what level of detail? What types of cultural training are most impactful in the battlespace? Who should get the training and how much? Is the Marine Corps willing to invest the necessary time and resources? Further qualitative and quantitative studies that address these issues could perhaps help provide data to guide policy makers as they continue to refine the Marine Corps' cultural learning policies and practices.

Appendix A: Analysis of the reasons provided that cultural training was not effective

Population: 234
File: LangCult Questions Analysis.tas
Data Source File: CAOCLSurvey_Recode Scale Oct 26.sav
Method: Forced Pull, Inductive Coding
Open-Ended Question in Survey: *Please tell us why you think it was not effective*. "It" refers to their cultural training.

Rules:
1) Category "Not worth time" means the specific training was not worth the time.
2) Category "No Need" included responses that said "didn't have to use it" or "limited opportunity to use", statements that imply "no need" versus just "no use".
3) If a situation caused no use, then apply the category "No need".
4) Category "Not my job" includes responses that address "inside the wire," "inside the FOB," "never left the FOB" and the like.
5) To use category "Not My Job" with category "no contact with locals", there must be a specific mention of work, e.g. MOS, billet, operation, deployment, etc.
6) Sustainment is not the same thing as retention. Responses that addressed sustainment were coded with "Problem with Training".
7) "Language Related" are those where the answer suggests the respondent was referring to language versus cultural training. In these cases, the answers were still placed in other categories, when relevant; however, they were also placed in "language related".

Total Responses	234
Categories are:	
No Need Cluster*	131
No Contact with Locals	96
Not My Job	85
No Need	17
Problem with Instruction	77
Retention	1
Check in the box	8
Computer based training	2
No Use	13
No Value	11
Not worth time	4
Good Training - but did not increase operational effectiveness	13
Learn from Locals/Interpreters	2
Use Interpreter	6
Language vs Culture	1
Language Related	21
Previous experience, education	4
Not enough information	7

* No Need Cluster is a combination of the following categories: No Need, No Contact with Locals, and Not My Job.

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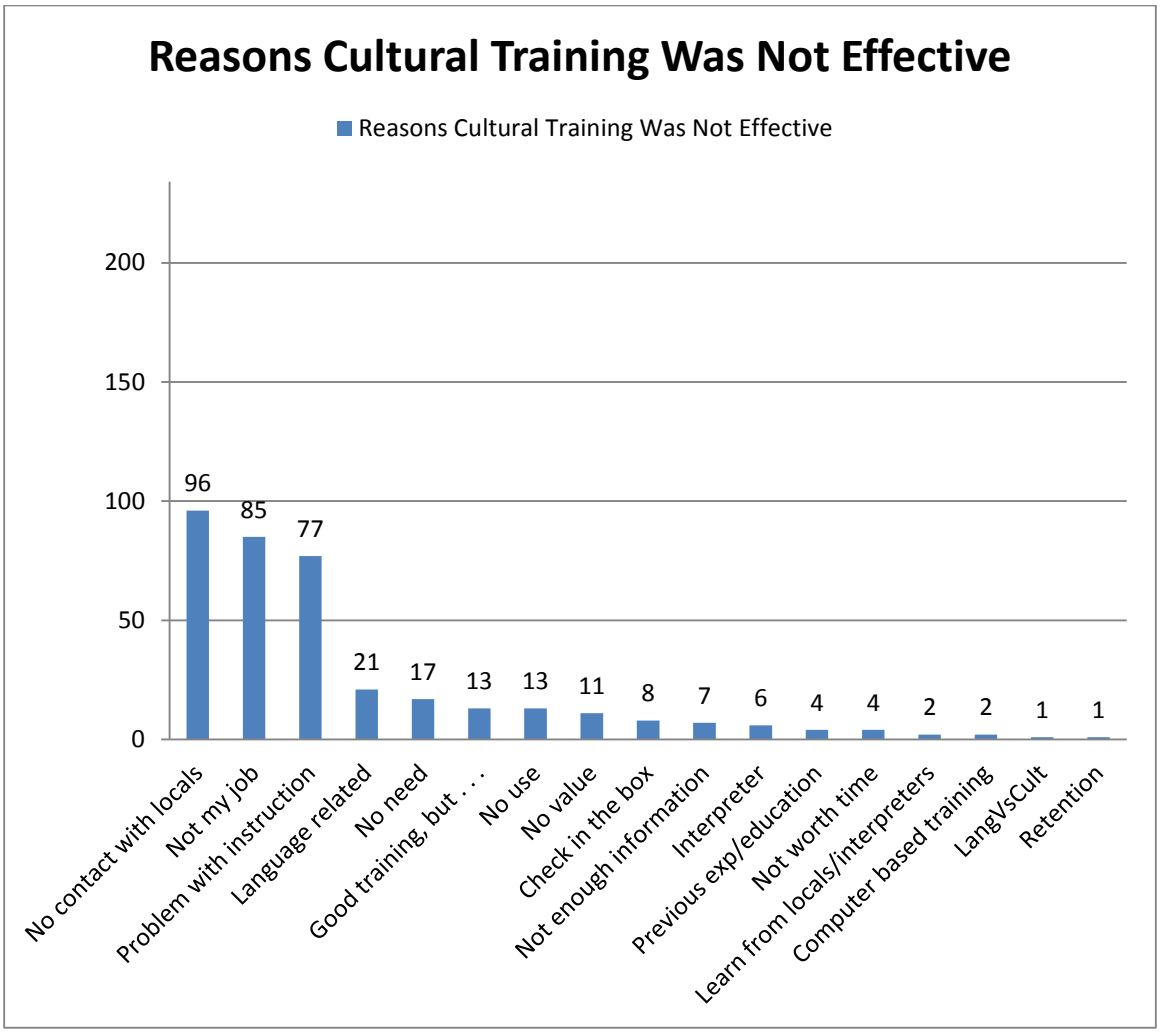
Graphic representation of the population responding to the question, “Do you find yourself more operationally effective because you received cultural training for your deployment location?”

Culture Question: Categories



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Appendix B: Analysis of the Cultural Training Category: Problems with Instruction

Population: 77
File: CQ Problem with Instruction 2406 Final.tas
Category Source File: LangCult Questions Analysis.tas; category transferred to CQ Problems with Instruction August 2011 Excel.xlsx
Data Source File: CAOCLSurvey_Recode Scale Oct 26.sav
Method: Forced Pull, Inductive Coding

Rules:

1) The category "not enough training/training time" includes both those that discussed the class time as well as those that discussed there was not enough time, but not tied to the predeployment schedule.
2) The "answered language" category contains those responses that address language instead of culture. Responses in this category are not coded with any other categories.
3) The category "content was incorrect" contains those responses that mention something was inaccurate in the materials; "content off target" contains those responses that mention the content was the wrong material, emphasized the wrong thing, was too broad, etc.

Total Population	234
Total Responses:	77
Categories are:	
Content Problem Cluster*	35
Too basic, superficial	17
Content off target	9
Content was incorrect	6
Characterization of studied population	8
Not enough training/training time	22
Limited time within PTP cycle	8
Bad Instructor	11
Bad delivery method	10
Answered language	10
Nothing additive	7
Positive feedback embedded	5
No sustainment	2
Too little information to ID problem	2
Problem outside control of instructor	1

* Content Problem Cluster is a combination of the following categories: too basic, superficial; content off target; characterization of studied population; and content was incorrect.

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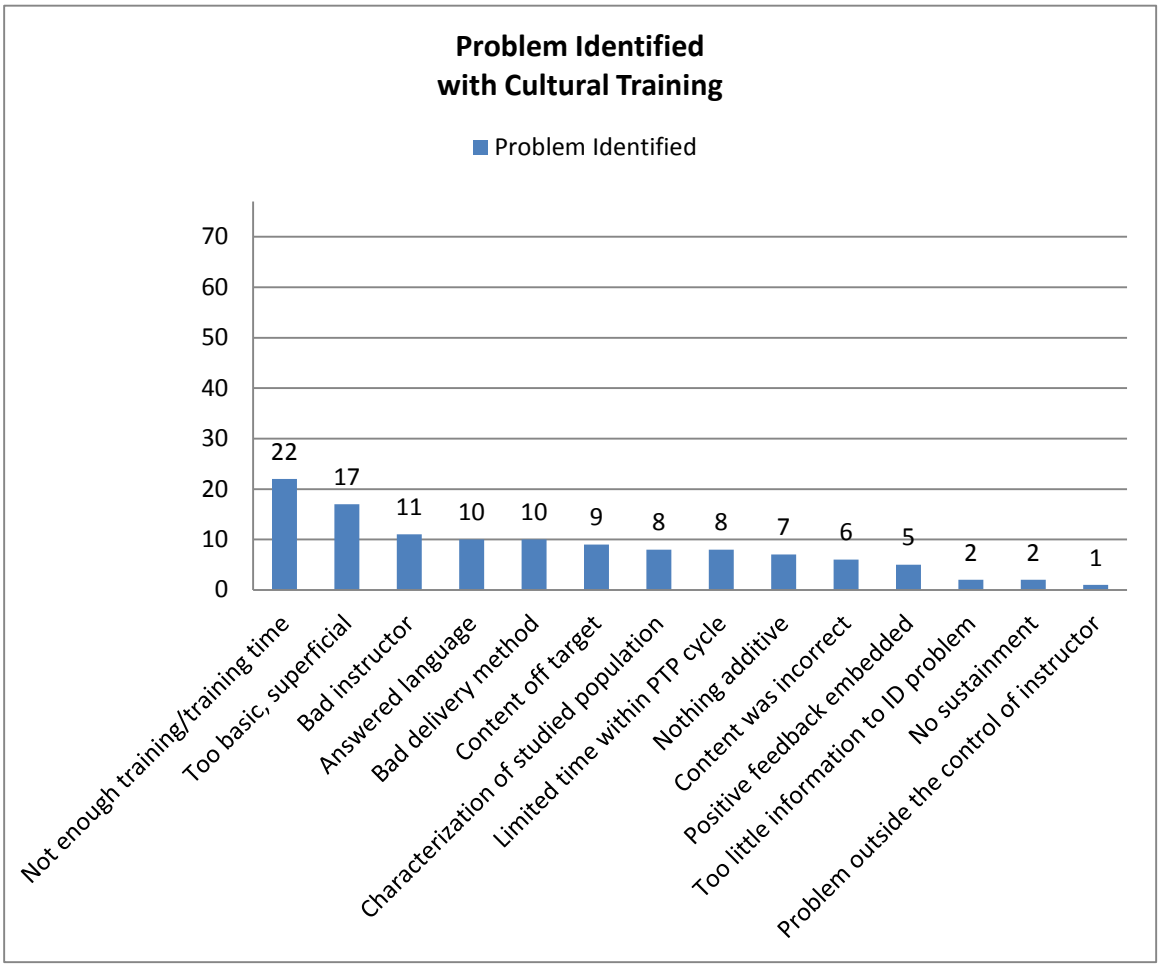
Culture Question: Problem with Instruction Categories



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