Intercultural Training in the United States Military

LAUREN MACKENZIE
Center for Advanced Operational Culture Learning, Marine Corps University, USA

JOHN W. MILLER
Air Command and Staff College, USA

The importance of cultural awareness in the application of military science has been recognized for centuries. Scholars from Sun Tzu in the 6th century BCE to Clausewitz in the early 19th century acknowledged that a strong grasp of an adversary's values, beliefs, and behaviors was a crucial ingredient in the recipe for victory on the battlefield. Indeed, militaries throughout history have looked to their intelligence sectors for assistance while planning at the tactical, operational, and strategic levels. Although it is widely acknowledged today that military personnel represent a population whose missions are directly impacted by cultural complexity, the forms of intercultural training in which they participate are as varied as the definition of culture itself. This is due, in part, to the wide range of missions across the US military, the hierarchical rank structure, and the variety of military occupation specialties which mandate a broad, multidimensional approach to intercultural training. The major features and outcomes of this training are highlighted along with the historical context from which the current state emerged.

History lessons from World War I: T. E. Lawrence

During the latter half of the 19th century, the US Army had incorporated some informal sign language training for soldiers engaged in the pacification of Native Americans residing on the Great Plains of North America. However, this was conducted strictly on an ad hoc basis. The real origins of intercultural training in the US military are rooted in the armed forces of the United Kingdom and can be traced directly to the exploits of Lt. Col. Thomas Edward Lawrence, an intelligence officer in the British Army.

World War I had forced Britain's military establishment to recognize that effective intercultural communication with their non-European allies was an essential ingredient for victory. An archaeologist and Arabic speaker, Lawrence was embedded with an irregular Arab force fighting the Ottoman Turks during World War I. His success as an advisor represents an early example of how intercultural competence—not simply language proficiency—greatly enhances cooperation among allies. Lawrence achieved success not from his firm grasp of Turkish culture, but from the subtle understanding of his Arab allies. While not the commander of the Arab force with which he served, Lawrence used his intercultural communication skills to manipulate the decision-making of his

allies. Lawrence summarized his views regarding effective communication among his Arab allies. His list of 27 communication strategies appeared in the *Arab Bulletin,* a secret British intelligence journal (Lawrence, 1917). The British, US, and other militaries continue to incorporate these strategies into their intercultural training curricula for troops deploying to the Middle East.

Lawrence's strategies are the basis for five goal-oriented behaviors that continue to be sought by military organizations in their intercultural interactions: (1) subtly establish authority and control, (2) develop credibility, trust, and respect, (3) diminish the necessity for conflict, (4) enhance positioning for negotiations, and (5) influence the outcomes of decision-making without resorting to force or coercion (Hardison et al., 2009).

The principles that Lawrence espoused did not emerge in formal US military training until long after World War II. However, these principles are now an integral component in the intercultural training manuals and materials used by the US military of today.

World War II

On November 1, 1941—five weeks before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor—the US Army instituted its first formal instruction in language and culture by launching the Military Intelligence Service Language School in San Francisco. Establishment of the school was a well-guarded secret. The students were primarily *nisei*, second-generation Japanese Americans. While their ability to speak Japanese was limited, the students possessed an intimate understanding of Japanese values, beliefs, and communication practices. In 1946, the institute became the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center (DLI) and moved to Monterey, CA. The institute continues to provide intensive language instruction for military intelligence personnel with an aptitude for language learning and now teaches dozens of languages—many, such as Pashto and Hindi, that are not commonly taught elsewhere. Instruction aims at whole language proficiency and intercultural communication. In 2006, multiday offsite language immersion events with a strong cultural component were instituted.

The Cold War era and the Vietnam War

The Cold War era saw the United States emerge as a dominant super power in the West. US troops served long-term deployments in allied countries while US sailors docked in ports all around the world. This resulted in a variety of cultural misunderstandings between American militaries and the local communities. By the early to mid-1960s, the US military had responded with a series of programs funded by the Army Research Projects Agency (now known as DARPA) and the Office of Naval Research. These programs were designed to provide intercultural training to all military personnel, not only those engaged in intelligence-gathering or the training of allied forces. The following list is a sampling of intercultural training programs launched during that era (Brislin, 1970).

Area orientation/Overseamanship training (launched in 1961): Pre-shore leave performance/training for US Navy personnel on extended cruises. David Rosenberg, a

cultural expert and entertainer, through a three-hour performance/training introduced sailors to their own culture as well as the values and practices of nations visited on the cruise. Large-group role-playing promoted constructive cultural exploration activities for shore leave.

Troop–community relations program (launched in 1964): In-country training for US Army troops stationed in Korea and Thailand. Trainees were introduced to host country food and learned basic greetings in the local language.

Personal response program (launched in 1965): Vietnam predeployment and in-country training for Marines and naval personnel. These trainings employed culture assimilators and role-playing to develop cultural awareness, hone intercultural communication skills, and provide Vietnam-specific cultural information.

Bafa-Bafa (launched in 1971): Pre-shore leave training for US Navy personnel on extended cruises. In 1971, the navy contracted with Shirts (1995) to develop Bafa-Bafa, a game-like simulation that replicated the ambiguity and anxiety associated with culture shock and dysfunctional intercultural communication. In this still popular simulation, trainees take on the values of Alpha and Beta, two divergent cultures, and interact. Discussions held immediately afterwards focus on the trainees' interpretation of behaviors they observed, a discussion of what it feels like to play a game without knowing the "rules," and how to apply the lessons learned.

Programs supporting cultural awareness, intercultural communication, and civilian–military relationships continued on into the post-Soviet era.

The Gulf War and 9/11

The first Gulf War, also known as "Desert Storm," required the rapid deployment of hundreds of thousands of American and allied troops to Iraq. Despite the US military's lack of preparedness for the demands presented by such massive deployments, the Department of Defense did not seek to implement intercultural training for the entire military until after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and the subsequent invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. Cultural awareness thus took on renewed interest for the US military after 9/11, when winning the "hearts and minds" of locals amplified the importance of the *inter*cultural component of cultural training—that is, the focus on interaction. With many military missions (previously the domain of only special forces) now devoted to peacekeeping, stability operations, humanitarian assistance, and disaster relief, among others, the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately across cultures became necessary regardless of military branch, rank, or military occupation specialty. In 2006, the emergence of the army field manual on counterinsurgency signified a new era for intercultural training by emphasizing that wartime tactics and strategies must adapt to the cultural context of the country in order to achieve mission success. Further, the call for military personnel to be flexible and adaptable in situations of cultural complexity—regardless of prior exposure to a region, group, or language—warranted a culture-*general* approach.

Present-day intercultural training in the US military: Features

Although there is little question that the military represents a crucial population for which intercultural training is directly applicable, it can be difficult to prescribe a "one size fits all" approach. The wide range of missions across the US military, the hierarchical rank structure, and the variety of military occupation specialties mandate a broad, multidimensional approach to intercultural training. These differences are often reflected in the features of intercultural training such as topics, modes of delivery, location, and duration. Examples include: culture-specific field guides (also referred to as "smart cards"); culture-specific video scenario training with branching; role-plays and simulations; electronic reading guides with both culture-general and culture-specific content; classroom presentations delivered by subject matter experts; as well as voluntary and required online training modules (culture-general and -specific). In a broad sense, the US military has featured the following content in its intercultural training: awareness (of self and cultural other), experiential (through role-plays and simulations), language (teaching region-specific communication), interaction (taught by those who have held a position where personnel are being trained to go), and attribution (personnel are exposed to examples of the thinking processes of locals).

Intercultural training events occur in a variety of settings ranging from the in-residence classroom, an online course, a predeployment training facility, or all of the above. California's Fort Irwin National Training Center is one example of a model training site where mock villages are staged to provide personnel with realistic intercultural experiences they will face while deployed. Although it is run by the US Army, members of other services also participate in the 18-day rotations to maximize the amount of lessons learned, shared, and role-played in a military context. An example of a cogent classroom experience devoted to intercultural training is offered several times throughout the year to members of all military branches (and some government civilians) at Hurlburt Field, FL. The intercultural competencies course is a four-day in-residence course with modules and exercises devoted to intercultural communication, gender dynamics, conflict management, cultural identity, and working with an interpreter, among others. Although it is taught from a culture-general perspective, it is consistently updated with military-relevant, culture-specific examples to support the foundational concepts and is one of the few intercultural training offerings in the military with a communication focus.

Military communities often refer to training as preparation for the known and education as preparation for the unknown. Accordingly, training is often intended for short-term, immediate goals that typically strive for knowledge as an end state. This outcome does not always align with intercultural education programs which often seek behavioral and affective change as a learning goal. This military training focus has led curriculum developers to "package" culture training into frameworks (e.g., the US Air Force "12 domains of culture" or the US Marine Corps "5 dimensions of operational culture"). It should be emphasized that there is not a single framework or mode of training that can sufficiently capture the importance of cultural awareness to

the military, and the efforts of academics to translate cultural knowledge into training has been problematic (Albro & Ivey, 2014).

While there are certainly commonalities in the kinds of intercultural competence training offered (e.g., culture-specific field guides; self-paced, online training modules), the ways in which culture is understood and applied in training materials is quite different. One way to make sense of this complexity is to examine patterns that have been found in military training efforts and to organize them by branch. The service culture centers (the army's TRADOC Culture Center, the navy's Center for Language, Regional Expertise & Culture, the Air Force Culture & Language Center, and the Marine Corps Center for Advanced Operational Culture Learning) are supported by the Defense Language and National Security Education Office which manages a Web site listing links to them all: Culture Ready (n.d.).

Since the emergence of the service culture centers over a decade ago, each branch has placed emphasis on different aspects of intercultural training, in line with its mission and requirements. For example, the navy's program focuses heavily on language and offers very little in the way of culture education aside from "just in time" culture-specific presentations. The Marine Corps's program is mainly focused on "operational culture" (those aspects of culture that influence the outcome of a military operation; and, conversely, how military operations influence the culture of a geographic area) while the Air Force places the greatest emphasis on culture-general educational offerings.

Several notable branch-specific highlights regarding culture include:

- *Education*: US Air Force culture training and education efforts are centralized at Air University in Montgomery, AL. Semester-length culture education courses (to include "Introduction to culture" and "Introduction to cross-cultural communication") are free and accessible to any enlisted member via the Community College of the Air Force; cross-cultural competence education is infused throughout professional military education at all levels of education as a result of its 2009–2014 Quality Enhancement Plan.
- *Research*: The US Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences, located at Ft. Belvoir, VA, has conducted extensive research devoted to developing and measuring intercultural competence among soldiers. Such research has resulted in dozens of reports and academic publications ranging from culture theory and cross-cultural competence models to assessment and competencies.
- *Institutionalization*: US Marine Corps culture training and education efforts are centralized at Quantico, VA. Its region, culture, and language familiarization (RCLF) career-long education program consists of approximately 12 hours of culture training and 80 hours of language instruction. Marines are assigned a region of the world and required to complete the program as part of their professional military education continuum, thereby institutionalizing culture education.

Despite the fact that some culture training does still center on "just in time" culture-specific PowerPoint slides or presentations, the different service branches have acknowledged the need for personnel to learn "how to learn" about culture, how to observe cultural difference, and how to interact appropriately and effectively no matter

where personnel find themselves in the world. These outcomes serve as the impetus for culture-general training and education, since the unpredictable nature and location of military operations require a set of transferable culture concepts and skills that personnel can employ wherever they go.

Outcomes of and recommendations for intercultural training

Intercultural competence has been a key outcome of intercultural training for the Department of Defense (DoD) for over ten years (Gallus et al., 2014). A commonly used working definition of military intercultural competence is: culture-general knowledge, skills, abilities, and attributes developed through education, training, and experience that provide the ability to operate effectively within a culturally complex environment. However, each branch approaches the definition slightly differently. Sands and Greene-Sands (2014) review each military branch's definition as well as the research, policy, learning, and application considerations for military contexts, to include the historical development of intercultural competence in professional military education and training. Along with intercultural competence, DoD uses the terms "cross-cultural competence," "cultural capabilities," and "culture-general competencies" (Rasmussen & Sieck, 2015) to characterize the skills and knowledge that are universally important and applicable in any culture.

Since intercultural competence is no longer recognized as solely the domain of foreign area officers or special forces, the DoD has taken steps to create a culture policy for the general purpose force. A baseline has been put forth to guide culture instruction and includes such skills as acquiring cultural knowledge, demonstrating cultural self-awareness, cultural perspective-taking, and cultural observation. A "living" anno-tated bibliography, *Cross-Cultural Competence in the Department of Defense* (Gallus et al., 2014), surveys the hundreds of articles, reports, and book chapters that have emerged from a wide variety of academic disciplines and military branches in the past decade. Most military culture training and education efforts acknowledge the variety of facilitators of intercultural competence, to include: knowledge (e.g., of culture-general concepts such as holism), skills (e.g., decoding nonverbal cues), and characteristics (e.g., curiosity). Of the various components of intercultural competence, however, most military intercultural training programs emphasize the behavioral outcomes (e.g., ability to conduct cross-cultural negotiations).

The fact that intercultural competence is so often assessed by self-report has made it difficult to measure effectively, however there is evidence of modest success. For example, the cross-cultural assessment tool was developed for soldiers in 2010 and has been recognized for its multimethod approach to assessing culture-general performance skills—combining self-report measures, situational judgment tests, and scenarios (McCloskey, Behymer, Papautsky, & Grandjean, 2012). The tool measures mission-centered, task-oriented skills in cross-cultural environments and can be used longitudinally at the individual or unit level over time. Further, in professional military education courses, situational judgment tests have been shown to support the efficacy of developing and assessing intercultural competence. In distance-

learning contexts, scenarios are derived from military student experiences to create communication-centered, culture-specific, and military-relevant situational judgment tests that both assess intercultural competence and enable the students to directly apply the course content (Mackenzie & Wallace, 2015).

The US Army Human Dimension Capabilities Development Task Force (2015) has recently published recommendations for intercultural training in the military. One recommendation involves compiling an inventory of available intercultural training programs to avoid unnecessary duplication and increase transparency across the army and other services. The report also recommends adopting an integrated language and culture hybrid (online and residential) course, such as one that was piloted at Joint Base Lewis–McChord, WA. The offering is highlighted for its intensive (7–10 week), multimethod approach incorporating critical realistic techniques based on experiential learning theory.

More specifically, a prescriptive framework for culture training has been put forth which examines several parallels between the Vietnam era and today. Recommendations include: focusing on interaction between members of cultures rather than on the cultures themselves; devising techniques to transfer the intercultural skills learned during training to the real world; and comparing optimal with ineffective performances to give trainees a basis for evaluating their own behavior in similar circumstances (Abbe & Gouge, 2012). It remains to be seen whether such best practices for intercultural training in the military will evolve from the exception to the norm.

Future challenges

An understanding of the impact of culture on communication behavior and the ability to communicate across cultural divides persists as a strategic leadership characteristic critical for mission and career success in the US military. Intercultural training provides skills and strategies for anticipating misunderstanding and making sense of the complexity inherent to intercultural interaction. As the military continues in its attempt to optimize performance through intercultural training, the main challenges will likely center on assessment and collaboration.

The US military has sought to meet the increased demands for intercultural training over the past decade but struggles both to assess its effectiveness and to sustain it. The pervasive tendency to quantify the qualitative nature of culture and communication will continue to be problematic. The interconnectedness of assessment and training requires behaviors with observable outcomes that can be trained, whereas many predictors of intercultural competence are affective (such as openness and curiosity). The military has experimented with several academic and private sector assessment tools (e.g., the intercultural development inventory and the cultural intelligence scale) but challenges related to predictive validity and self-report measure have persisted. Further, ecological validity should be prioritized and sufficient time devoted to allow such affective characteristics to develop. Intercultural training in the US military has taken advantage of advances in technology to provide personnel with a variety of cultural simulators (e.g., avatars,

virtual negotiation exercises, etc.) to appeal to the younger force and put a modern face on cultural understanding. The most technologically advanced resources are not always the most effective, however, and it is unclear how such technological products will be assessed and maintained with the advent of increased budget constraints. The need for increased intercultural training in the military has been characterized, post 9/11, as the "buyers" (e.g., the human terrain system—a program which allows the DoD to purchase outside experts to assist military commanders) and the "becomers" (professional development opportunities which allow military personnel to develop intercultural competence within the force). Unfortunately, years of effort to institutionalize intercultural competence into professional military education has not led to the "becomer" outcome many had hoped for (Fosher, 2014). Instead, culture is still often thought of as an enhancement rather than a core competency.

Collaboration between the different branches of service and service culture centers has been strained by a host of factors, not the least of which are varying missions, operations tempo, and regular personnel turnover. The cultures of the US Navy, Army, Marines, and Air Force themselves are quite different, which can contribute to the tendency toward a stovepipe approach to intercultural training. Buy-in from each service culture center on a consortium for listing available training, assessment techniques, and lessons learned would be of great value. Advances have been made in this effort and are ongoing as culture training and education centers attempt to synergize, exchange best practices, and maximize the impact of intercultural training. It is in collaboration and open dialogue among military academics and their civilian counterparts that the potential for addressing the challenges inherent to intercultural training has begun to emerge.

SEE ALSO: Cross-Cultural Competence; Culture-Specific and Culture-General Training; Intercultural Communication Competence; Intercultural Communication Training, Overview

References

Abbe, A., & Gouge, M. (2012). Cultural training for military personnel. *Military Review*, *92*(4), 9–17.

Albro, R., & Ivey, B. (2014). *Cultural awareness in the military: Developments and implications for future humanitarian cooperation*. London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Brislin, R. W. (1970). *The content and evaluation of cross-cultural training programs (Paper P-671)*. Arlington, VA: Advanced Research Projects Agency and Institute for Defense Analyses Science and Technology Division.

Culture Ready (n.d.) Home page. Retrieved from http://www.cultureready.org/

Fosher, K. B. (2014). Cautionary tales from the US Department of Defense's pursuit of cultural expertise. In R. Albro & B. Ivey (Eds.) *Cultural awareness in the military: Developments and implications for future humanitarian cooperation* (pp. 15–29). London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Gallus, J., Gouge, M., Fosher, K., Jasparro, V., Coleman, S., Selmeski, B., & Klafehn, J. (2014). *Cross-cultural competence in the Department of Defense: An annotated bibliography. Special*

Report 71. Ft. Belvoir, VA: United States Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences.

Hardison, C. M., Sims, C. S., Ali, F., Villamizar, A., Mundell, B., and Howe, P. (2009). *Cross-cultural skills for deployed air force personnel: Defining cross-cultural performance.* Santa Monica, CA: Rand.

Lawrence, T. E. (1917). 27 articles. *Arab Bulletin*, *59*, 126–133.

Mackenzie, L., & Wallace, M. (2015). Intentional design: Using iterative modification to enhance online learning for professional cohorts. In T. Milburn (Ed.), *Communicating user experience: Applying local strategies research to digital media design* (pp. 155–182). Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

McCloskey, M. J., Behymer, K. J., Papautsky, E. L., & Grandjean, A. (2012). *Measuring learning and development in cross-cultural competence. Technical Report 1317.* Ft. Belvoir, VA: United States Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences.

Rasmussen, L. J., & Sieck, W. R. (2015). Culture-general competence: Evidence from a cognitive field study of professionals who work in many cultures. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, *48*, 75–90. doi:10.1016/j.ijintrel.2015.03.014

Sands, R. G., & Greene-Sands, A. (2014). *Cross-cultural competence for a 21st century military.* Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

Shirts, R. G. (1995). Beyond ethnocentrism: Promoting cross-cultural understanding with Bafa-Bafa. In S. M. Fowler and M. G. Mumford (Eds.), *Intercultural sourcebook: Cross-cultural training methods* (Vol. 1, pp. 93–100) Boston, MA: Intercultural Press.

US Army Human Dimension Capabilities Development Task Force (2015). *Cross-cultural competence: Overview of cross-cultural training theory and practice for the army*. Capabilities Development Integration Directorate Mission Command Center of Excellence, Ft. Leavenworth, KS.

Further reading

Selmeski, B. R. (2007). *Military cross-cultural competence: Core concepts and individual development. Centre for Security, Armed Forces & Society occasional paper series, 1.* Kingston, Ontario: Royal Military College of Canada.

Lauren Mackenzie is professor of military cross-cultural competence at the Center for Advanced Operational Culture Learning, Marine Corps University. From 2009 to 2014, Dr. Mackenzie served as associate professor of cross-cultural communication at the US Air Force Culture and Language Center. She earned two graduate degrees in communication from the University of Massachusetts and has taught intercultural competence courses throughout the Department of Defense over the past eight years. She has recently published chapters in the books *Cross-Cultural Competence for a Twenty-First-Century Military* and *Communicating User Experience* as well as in the *Journal of Culture, Language & International Security*.

John W. Miller recently retired from the faculty of Air Command and Staff College. Previously, he was a Korean School academic specialist at the Defense Language Institute in Monterey, CA. Prior to his work for the US military, he taught at Ohio University

and administered an affiliate program in Japan. In the mid-1990s, he served as an associate peace corps director in Ukraine. He also taught English at a Korean university during the mid-1980s. A former juvenile probation officer and a Peace Corps Liberia volunteer in the early 1980s, Dr. Miller holds an MA in TESOL from SIT and a PhD in communication studies from Ohio University.