

Narrative Abstract

Responding Globally to the Online Learning Needs of Military Students

Prepared by

Suzane L. Bricker, M.A.

The purpose of my proposal is to present a comprehensive look at the specific needs of military students who are actively deployed globally, and who are entering the “virtual classroom” for the first time. Additionally, I have drawn upon my own experiences as an educator of more than 15 years, as well as someone who has developed course curriculum and provided related instruction in on-ground, hybridized, accelerated, and online formats to encourage vigorous discussion of how to best facilitate the learning needs of such a specialized group. Moreover, I am advising immediate investigation into both the quality and content of learning experiences for actively deployed military personnel who are enrolled in online undergraduate programs, since it appears that the data collected on this particular sub-set of learners is limited in focus. Thus, such studies would need to include direct input from the students themselves, as well as the participation of educational professionals who are guiding these virtual classroom experiences. Finally, my recommendation is that a commission be developed on a national scale to review and evaluate the outcome of data generated by such research efforts, and also, that this particular committee make recommendations regarding changes in curriculum or delivery methods, to better serve the needs of professional military students who are engaged in a virtual learning environment.

(Attached is an Appendix that includes a PowerPoint presentation delivered on November 13, 2012, at the 2012 Global Education Conference.)

Responding Globally to the Online Learning Needs Of Military Students

**Prepared for the
2012 Global Education Conference**

Online Presentation to a Virtual Audience

November 13, 2012

A comprehensive look at the specific needs of military students who are actively deployed globally, and who are entering the “virtual classroom” for the first time.

By

Suzane L. Bricker, M.A.
suzanelbricker@msn.com

*Practical advice on
how to effectively
guide military
learners toward
the successful
fulfillment of their
academic goals.*



While the multitudes of online learners are consistently being added to undergraduate admissions rosters, one particular group of students' needs and abilities to benefit from a virtual education experience remains to be studied in any apparent type of statistical detail. These individuals are members of the U.S. Armed Forces, who are actively deployed in disparate regions of the globe, and whose demographic profiles are as vast and varied, as their range of skills and comfort level with becoming introduced to a distance learning format.



What, therefore, constitutes the profile of a military student who seeks a college education via a learning platform which is operated by the touch of a keyboard or the movement of a mouse? Well, in fact, the military student actually has quite a few factors in common with his or her “civilian counterpart.” For instance, both sets of learners appreciate the opportunity to construct a schedule which enables them to achieve a successful balance between work and school commitments.



Similarly, military learners appear to be highly motivated and achievement oriented (van Asselt, Banks-Johnson, Duchac, and Coker, 2009). Thus, the ability to respond to constructive feedback seems to be a shared characteristic as well.

Yet, in spite of these apparent similarities between those students who are considered to be more “traditional” learners, and individual men and women who are actively deployed around the globe, certain glaring anomalies exist, which appear to impact the quality and capacity of a

virtual learning experience for the former sub-set of undergraduate students. Such critical conditions as length of deployment, level of isolationism due to a geographical “distancing” from family and friends, and/or the physical or emotional effects of engaging in war-time activities are all related factors which have the potential to affect the military learner’s performance in a virtual environment. Rochford and Wilmeth (n.d.) found that the military student who may be participating in an online classroom from such remote and embattled regions of the world as Iraq or Afghanistan, could also be experiencing ongoing stress related to his or her active and/or potential need to engage in armed combat.



Additionally, the uncertainty of not knowing if and when orders will be issued to deploy at any time is a factor which could then lead to disruptions in classroom participation, or even, an inability to continue studies at all.

Moreover, in regions of the world where governments restrict some, if not all access to the Internet, or impose restrictions on the free “outflow” of information which is transmitted electronically, the impact of such occurrences equally resonates in the military student’s ability to meet the responsibilities of an online learner.

Such identifiable factors do have recognized consequences. Murray noted that the attrition rate of military learners is higher than among the general student populations (2007, as cited in van Asselt, K.W., Banks-Johnson, A., Duchac, N., & Coker, J. K., 2009, p. 8). And yet, the direct

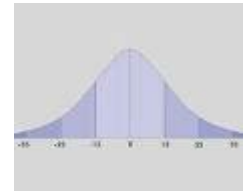
impacts of participating in an online learning classroom while fighting wars, dealing with related combat injuries, or worrying about the conditions of one's loved ones back home are not really known at present time (van Asselt, Banks-Johnson, Duchac, and Coker 2009). And so, the need exists to, "research the intricacies of military student life in order to more fully meet the needs of this unique group of learners" (van Asselt, Banks-Johnson, Duchac, and Coker (2009).



Profile of a Typical Online Learner

A virtual classroom offers challenges for any individual who has not participated in such a learning platform previously. Thus, the need to be adaptable to software programs that are geared specifically toward the curriculum of the academic institution is essential. So, too, is the ability to "budget one's time" in order to make sure that the electronic deadlines which are firm and fixed are met on regular occasion. Therefore, among the more generalized skills required to

participate in a virtual learning environment are “effective time management,” the ability to be “self-disciplined” and goal-oriented,” and a relative degree of aptitude, with respect to computer applications that are considered essential to the core curriculum. Similarly, the challenge in adapting to the rigors of a technologically oriented framework for learning, also define the demands of a learning structure that requires remote written exchanges between student and student, as well as between student and instructor. Thus, the “bell-shaped curve” that effectively defines how well any distance learner can fulfill these basic obligations is as varied as the respective abilities of each individual student.



Unique Qualities of a Military Student



Consequently, even in a perfect world, such a balance can be extremely difficult for many students to achieve. And yet, add to the equation, the heterogeneous mix of gender, age, educational and economic factors, as well as level of skills and “maturity,” which are common

among military students, and the complexities of online learning appear to present a whole new unique set of challenges (van Asselt, Banks-Johnson, Duchac, and Coker 2009). For example, a military student's wide-ranging competencies in computer software and hardware applications may or may not extend to previous training in distance learning techniques (van Asselt, Banks-Johnson, Duchac, and Coker 2009). Moreover, military learners may face restrictions about communicating specific information relative to their duties and/or mission to their instructors, which can generate "trust" issues, in terms of demonstrating the required ability to meet course requirements in a timely manner (van Asselt, Banks-Johnson, Duchac, and Coker 2009).

Additionally, the concept of an "asynchronous" learning environment, where the channel of communication may not be simultaneously opened by instructor and student appear to affect the military learner's ability to gauge his or her level of responsiveness to comments with either classmates and/or instructor. In this regard, the style and tone of writing that is common to more technically oriented communications may contribute to certain internal pressures about the student's ability to effectively respond in open discussion forums, where opinions are also being expressed by civilian counterparts. Moreover, when the student seeks responses to specific questions regarding how to follow assignment instructions, the anticipated delay in receiving corresponding information can result in a certain degree of stress and frustration as well.

And, in the case of assignment activities which require simultaneous, or "synchronous" participation from the military learner, the student who is deployed may not be able to contribute, if the region where he or she is located is either too remote to provide adequate satellite signals, or is in a time zone that places his or her participation in the middle of the night. Thus, such activities as webinars can become restrictive if the student's hours of dedicated

classroom time are restricted, and his or her access to a computer is limited to certain times of the day or by weather conditions as well. Additionally, the geographic region where the individual has been deployed can impact any online seminar or assignment activity that requires a stated time for attendance and instantaneous deadlines for submission of related discussion responses (2007, as cited in van Asselt et al., 2009, p. 39-40).

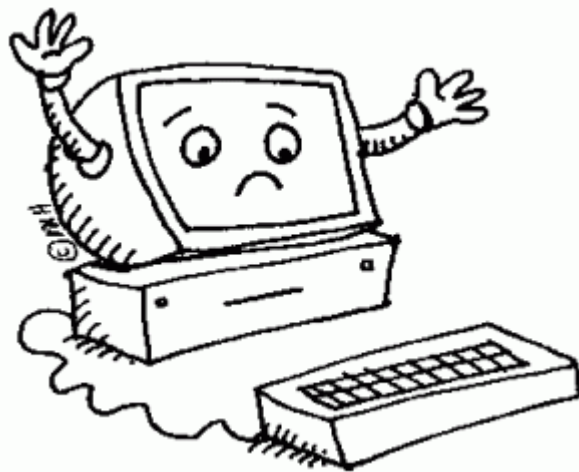


Do Military Students Benefit From Taking Online Classes?

Advantages of distance learning

Yet, if all of these apparent challenges exist for the military professional who is actively deployed, why are the numbers of students enrolling in online courses of undergraduate studies constantly on the rise? Carnevale (2006) suggested that technology increases

accessibility for military personnel and under-served populations. This observation appears to coincide with the theory that, “Computer literacy is now considered an essential battlefield skill” (Stapp, 2001, p. 26). Consequently, for many deployed military personnel who are stationed in remote and isolated regions of the world, an online format offers the advantages of virtual access, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Also, the feedback generated by classmates and instructors is well integrated into the core curriculum and occurs in regular intervals, as does the posting of electronic grades which allow the student to chart his or her progress on an ongoing basis. Thus, the emerging structure of online curriculum, which is both fluid and modifiable in response to continual student feedback, includes a level of technological applications that appear consistent with the background and training of military personnel.



Disadvantages of distance learning

The experience of being an online student requires a certain amount of self-discipline that is dependent upon each learner’s ability to actively participate in virtual discussion forums, and to also adhere to proscribed deadlines for related course assignment activities. However, the ability to “confer” or “collaborate” with other class members is not as common to the distance learning

environment as it is to a more traditional “brick-and mortar” platform. Therefore, due to this lack of “face-to-face” interaction, the student can experience a feeling of being isolated from his or her classmates and instructor. Similarly, he or she may also experience frustration when interpreting instructional elements that appear to provide vague or confusing messages, or face significant challenges, if unable express ideas clearly in writing (van Asselt, Banks-Johnson, Duchac, and Coker, 2009). Additionally, since the online grading process does not allow for direct interactions between student and instructor, the process to request clarification about the outcome of a particular assignment is not immediate. Thus, the student can find that the ability to quickly implement related comments or suggestions becomes a difficult obstacle as well (2000, as cited in van Asselt, K.W., Banks-Johnson, A., Duchac, N., & Coker, J. K., 2009, p. 17).

Moreover, in the case of online curriculum, sometimes the role of “course developer” is not assigned to the instructor; therefore, the instructional elements may be devised by an individual whose background and knowledge are not directly correlated to the subject matter being taught (van Asselt, Banks-Johnson, Duchac, and Coker, 2009). As a consequence, the instructor can be unable to modify key instructional elements, and so, the student may experience a corresponding difficulty in being able to interpret specific assignment requirements.

Additionally, a student’s level of participation in a virtual platform is reliant upon the dependability of computer equipment which he or she is utilizing. Consequently, a military student who has been deployed to remote regions of the globe, where accessibility to computers or online capabilities is restricted, may not be able to participate as actively as his or her civilian

counterparts. Thus, when “access” becomes an obstacle, the student may begin to doubt his or her ability to maintain a performance standard that is consistent with the rest of the class.



Guide to Facilitating the Needs of Military Learners

Each student brings to the virtual classroom a unique set of experiences that are based upon a particular “skills set” and aptitude for interpreting related course elements. However, when the military professional enters an online learning platform, his or her “electronic footprint” is almost immediately recognizable. For instance, the “style” of communicating written messages in a military construct is oftentimes more oriented toward technical documentation, and so, the need to employ techniques of academic writing can appear challenging to many students. Thus,

the instructor has to make a concerted effort to expand the scope of such discussion forums, so that the student feels his or her contributions are equally warranted and valued.

Even so, if the instructor has never been a member of the U.S. Armed Forces, or is new to the technological applications of providing online instruction, the task of welcoming the military student to the online platform can prove to be quite difficult. Yet, regardless of the instructor's background and range of experiences, among the most important skills required to facilitate the needs of a military learner, is an ability to serve in a supportive role (van Asselt, Banks Johnson, Duchac, and Coker (2009). Consequently, the capacity to be patient and provide consistent feedback is critical to the learning process. Additionally, the instructor needs to recognize when the military learner is expressing doubts about performing at the same level as his or her civilian counterparts. Therefore, the instructor has to adopt a transformative role, which successfully integrates the more traditional components of transmitting core academic concepts, with the demonstration of an equally sensitive and compassionate nature.

Moreover, when issues are discussed in class which could reflect the sensitive nature of these individuals' service in duty to this country, the instructor must take such factors into consideration as well. For instance, if questions are posed which reflect a viewpoint of a present commanding officer, or even a past military leader, the learner may be quite reluctant to respond for reasons related to professional duties, or an allegiance to obey certain military rules and policies. So, the instructor has to effectively assess and respond to the needs of students whose challenges are singularly unique, and whose consequent adaptations to the rigors of an online learning environment require a certain level of both calibration and monitoring.



Recommendations

Learning is a uniquely personal experience. Thus, no one but the individual who enters the classroom can actively gauge how much he or she will be able to obtain from participation in any type of an academic setting. And, since the evolution of the online learning experience is an ongoing process, it is still difficult to determine adequate measurement standards of comparison between a virtual learning platform and a traditional on-ground learning experience.

However, when President Bill Clinton issued Executive Order 13111 on January 12, 1999, which established the President's Task Force on Federal Training Technology to "...provide leadership regarding the effective use of technology in training and education...", he was releasing a mandate to develop guidelines for launching large-scale distance learning options within the various branches of the Armed Forces (The White House, 1999). Thus, the challenge is incumbent upon instructors who facilitate online classrooms, to acknowledge that military professionals are seeking the same goals of self-improvement and employability as their civilian counterparts. And, it also becomes incumbent upon the educational institutions that accept these students onto their admission rosters to develop ongoing measurement tools which gauge the

quality of learning experiences for this particular sub-set of learners. Finally, in responding to the feedback which such surveys provide, the institutions, as well as the instructors, have a dual responsibility to utilize related feedback in the modification of core curriculum, in order to better respond to the unique needs of military students who are actively deployed.

References

- Carnevale, D. (2006). Be all you can be. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 52, 432. Retrieved from <http://chronicle.com/article/BeAllYouCanBe/9176/>
- Wilmeth, K. (n.d.) *Profile of a Military Student* (Lecture at the University of Maryland University College EDCP 101 online orientation for adjunct faculty). Web. pdf.
- Stapp, Katherine M. (2001, June). *Benefits and costs of Distance Learning: A Perspective from the Distance Learning Literature Since 1995 – Annotated Bibliography*. White Sands Missile Range, NM: Department of the Army. Retrieved from <http://www.dtic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?AD=ADA396197&Location=U2&doc=GetTRDoc.pdf>
- The White House. (1999). Executive Order 13111. Using Technology for Federal Government Employees. Retrieved from <http://www.opm.gov/pressrel/1999/eo.htm>
- van Asselt, K.W., Banks-Johnson, A., Duchac, N., & Coker, J. K. (2009). The Role of Counselor Educators in Preparing Active Duty Military Students Utilizing Online Courses: An Initial Primer. *Journal for International Counselor Education*. 1, 32-45. Retrieved from <http://digitalcommons.library.unlv.edu/jice/>

RESPONDING GLOBALLY TO THE ONLINE LEARNING NEEDS OF MILITARY STUDENTS

Presented by
Suzane L. Bricker, M.A.
suzanebricker@yahoo.com



2012 Global Education
Conference



- **The virtual education experience of “military learners” remains to be studied in any apparent type of statistical detail.**
- **Yet, members of the U.S. Armed Forces are actively deployed in disparate regions of the globe, and their demographic profiles are as vast and varied as their range of academic skills, and comfort level with participating in an online learning environment.**



- **The military student has quite a few factors in common with his or her “civilian counterpart.”**
- **Both sets of learners want to achieve a successful balance between work and school commitments.**

Similarly, military learners appear to be highly motivated and achievement-oriented. Thus, they tend to respond well to constructive feedback.



Source: *Journal for International Counselor Education*; van Asselt, Banks-Johnson, Duchac, and Coker, 2009

Still, the individual who is deployed faces certain unique challenges that affect his or her ability to succeed in a virtual learning environment. Among the most significant factors include:

- **Length of deployment;**
- **Level of isolationism due to a geographical “distancing” from family and friends, and;**
- **The physical or emotional effects of engaging in war-time activities.**



A military student does not always know when deployment will occur, or if such orders will interfere with the educational process.

Also, the act of engaging in combat situations can create stressors that impact the ability to meet the demands of an online classroom.

Similarly, in countries where Internet access is restricted, the student may not be able to participate freely in online discussions.

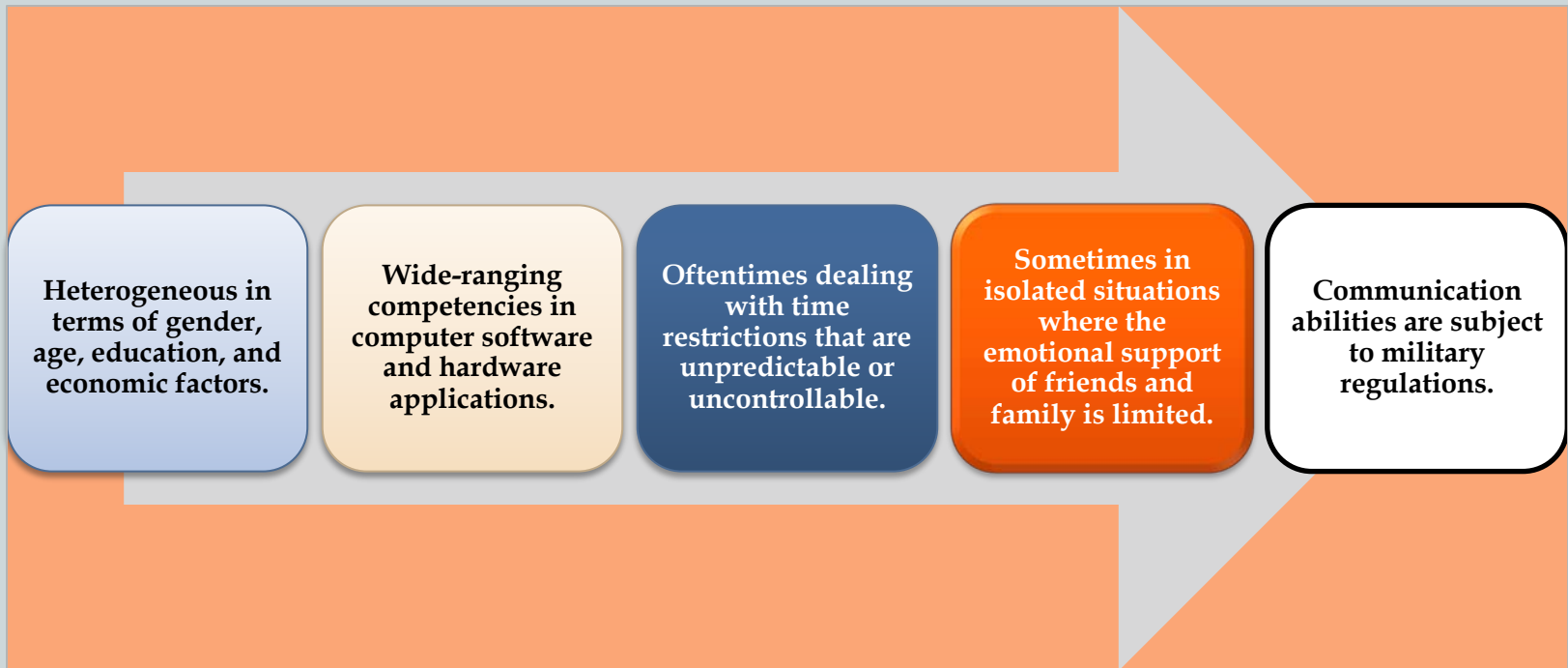


Source: University of Maryland University College; S Rochford et al.

PROFILE OF A TYPICAL ONLINE LEARNER



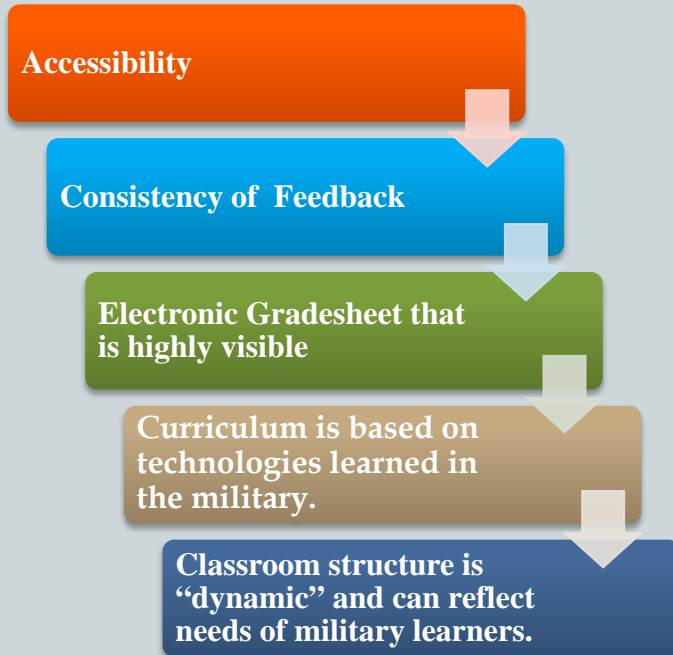
UNIQUE QUALITIES OF A MILITARY STUDENT



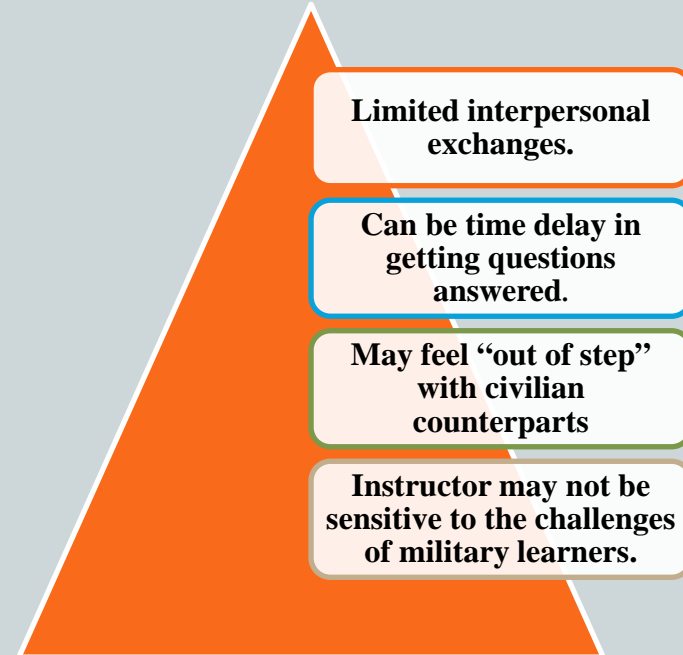
Source: *Journal for International Counselor Education*; K.W. van Asselt et al

ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF ONLINE LEARNING FOR THE MILITARY STUDENT

ADVANTAGES



DISADVANTAGES



GUIDE TO FACILITATING THE NEEDS OF MILITARY LEARNERS

Recognize that the writing skills of the military learner may not be consistent with academic standards.

Motivate the student by generating discussion topics that are inclusive and reflect the responsibilities of all participants.

Play a supportive role that includes the capacity to be patient and provide consistent feedback.

Observe signs that may signal the military learner may feel left out or be struggling with doubts about his or her performance.

Consider deadline extensions, if such issues as sudden deployment, limited computer access, or equipment failures affect participation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Learning is a uniquely personal experience.

Develop adequate measurement standards to assess the learning experiences of military students.

Respect the level of commitment that deployed personnel must make to their country, as well as to their classroom experiences.

Request ongoing feedback to ensure that teaching techniques are inclusive of the student who is actively deployed.

Learn from the experiences of students who are presently on admission rolls, how to enhance the quality of learning for all military personnel.

OPEN FOR DISCUSSION: