

Looking Through Athena's Shield: The Case for the Missing Philosophy of Army Education.

CW5 Leonard S. Momeny, EdD, Dr. Christina Parker, and Kelly Matthews, BA

Editor's note: *The following paper was first presented as original research at the 2022 Army University Learning Symposium, in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas the paper has since been updated and revised to be inclusive of revised terminology, such as the move from Project Athena to simply Athena, and to be inclusive of changes in certain doctrines, specifically FM 6-22. The original paper can be read at the following location: <https://armyuniversity.edu/Organizations/LearningSymposium/OnlineContentFiles>.*

Introduction

The Army recently released Project Athena (adopting it to now simply Athena); a battery of tests that seeks to assess the current characteristics of a leader and ultimately allow for personal introspective analysis and leading to eventual self-development. In parallel with the initial release of this program was an article in *Military Review*, *Project Athena: Enabling Leader Self-Development* (Masaracchia, Saine, & Fallesen, 2021). In this article, the authors and then Project Athena program lead discuss a young Dwight D. Eisenhower, who at the time was about to attend the Command and General Staff College. During this period, the future Supreme Allied Commander was receiving mentorship from then BG Fox Conner. The future President of the United States considered Conner's mentorship so valuable that it, "rekindled Eisenhower's interest in studying history and the benefits of purposeful study," thus sending him into a period of deep self-development (Masaracchia et al., 2021, p. 7). It was about this point the authors make their case for the importance of individual learning and self-development.

Self-development is important and remains a fixture in the Field Manual (FM) 6-22, *Developing Leaders* (2022). FM 6-22 insists that leaders must develop themselves in preparation for continued career growth and reminds the reader that "you are responsible for directing personal self-development activities-not your supervisor or the Army" (FM 6-22, 2022, p. 3-1). The Army gives Soldiers many tools to accomplish this endeavor, providing professional military education, civilian education opportunities, Athena assessments, and even fellowships. However, something is missing that can truly aid all Army students, regardless of their level of experience and education. The introduction of this missing educational element could even enhance both Athena's goals and the greater generalized learning endeavor of Soldiers everywhere.

As with Eisenhower, a developing leader needs a vision with which to contextualize their yet unrealized future. Simply put, a person needs a mechanism that will allow them to make sense of received knowledge and its eventual application. Educators commonly refer to this mechanism as content relevance (Roberson, 2013). Conner provided that vision and relevance to Eisenhower through discussion of potential military actions as contextualized through the published works of historians and military philosophers, thus equipping Eisenhower with a philosophy to guide his development as a leader. Athena, like current Army education, appears to lack a BG Conner, or a philosophical lens with which to analyze its data and practical application. Without it, Athena, like current Army education, can appear to lack a discernable *why*.

Had Athena not come out, it would have been easy to continue missing the need for a guiding philosophy, or common foundation to build upon regarding the *why* of knowledge. It should surprise no one that the United States Marine Corps has an entire publication dedicated to Learning, *Marine Corps Doctrine Publication 7-0*, in which they describe the "learning philosophy and explain why learning is critically important to the profession of arms" (2020, foreword). Army education demands a similar complete and guiding philosophy, grounded in doctrine, that integrates relevant educational theory, provides pragmatic application, and addresses both individual motivation and development. To better understand the potential value of philosophy in Army education there is a need to analyze current education theory, student development, and an appropriate philosophical framework that could serve as a starting point for the Army.

The Current State of Army Education

The Army has many experts, both military and civilian, that spend every professional moment focused on the education and training of Soldiers. Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) is the nexus for all educational efforts stemming from the Army. For the members of TRADOC, force training, and production are the prime focus of their existence, and its efforts propagate throughout the force via avenues of doctrine, training, and education.

To their credit, the Army, especially TRADOC, has made an earnest effort of late toward reforming educational processes and approaches to be more inclusive of popular theory from Adult Education (Department of Defense, 2017). Within the throws of this educational refinement, the greater organization wanted to break from the confines of traditional lectures and embrace a more learner-

centric approach, specifically the Army University (ArmyU) Experiential Learning Model (ELM); however, whether this change is taking hold remains in question (Pierson, 2017)². Despite any potential uncertainty regarding the effectiveness of the change effort, the goal remains to develop “agile, adaptive, and innovative Soldiers and Army civilians to thrive in chaos and ambiguity” (Wong, 2002; TRADOC, 2017, p. 8). For the Army to accomplish this goal, both teachers and students should share a comparable experience and lexicon with which to codify knowledge.

The authors have no reason to believe that current training does not adequately prepare tremendous Service Members across all lines of educational effort to perform admirably and effectively under the direst of consequences. Yet, as educational professionals, it is not adequacy in education we should pursue but instead excellence and efficiency. Adequacy in education implies an instance of stifling growth regarding the education of our current Soldiers and future leaders and allows the inference that the Army’s approach to education remains incomplete (Wong, 2002). The Army, and all other branches of service, proactively seek a refined approach to PME to produce an improved outcome from their greater education system (Department of Defense, 2020). However, the best way to improve upon something is to have a refined view of initial conditions.

The current education of the force is a herculean effort. However, it is evident, through the adoption of efforts that include a revised educational theory and self-development programs such as Athena, that the Army continues to seek out a more complete educational experience for all Soldiers. Senior leaders want critical thinkers, capable of in-depth metacognition, and this is something built over time through education, experience, and self-development (Khachadoorian, Steen, & Mackenzie, 2020). More specifically, the most senior leaders in the military hope to bring about changes in education that see joint officers “far better educated and more capable of directing and integrating the Nation’s military instrument” (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2020, p. 2).

The achievement of the lofty goals, as outlined by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, regarding the professional education and development of senior officers stretches far beyond only specific ranks (Department of Defense, 2020). Instead, the paradigm shift being pursued across military education, and in the specific case of this paper, Army education, has ventured into, until now, unexplored applications within learning theory, educational technology, and virtual learning domains (Parker, 2020). Doctrine and training are working to support this effort, but a guiding philosophy remains absent. A holistic philosophy with which to orient the professional instructor and the Army student could integrate with the current driving educational theories and models taking hold of the Army, especially ELM.

The Philosophy Ready Vehicle of ELM

ELM is the primary vehicle of choice in Army Education and is an instructional model specifically equipped to maximize learning through activation of the student’s affective domain. The inclusion of ELM in Army Education is an important augmentation of practical Adult Learning Theory, which primarily focuses on specific characteristics of the adult learner (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2015). Adult learning theory, or at least learning theory contextualized for the specific motivational needs of adults, is ideal for the Army and all branches of the military, as traditional pedagogy lacks the appropriate context with which to best instruct the adult student.

Adults, ever pragmatists, require something more learner-centric and with real-life application. Adults, above all else, must be able to see and understand the relevance of learned material, specifically how it relates to future job performance (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2015). However, it is important to note that the discernment of knowledge, its purpose, acquisition, and relevance belongs to the individual student, and the educator cannot determine relevance for them (Albrecht & Karabenick, 2018; Knight, 2006).

ELM can find many parallels with such concepts, as it relies upon a learner-centric approach. ELM specifically focuses on the motivation and insights already attributed to the common adult student using concrete experiences and individualized assessments of derived value (Pierson, 2017). In that sense, ELM is learner-centric and bears a close resemblance to the humanist educational perspective of pioneers in early psychology, such as Abram Maslow and Albert Bandura. The essence of the humanist education perspective and theory is based upon the motivation and learning experiences of the individual, not necessarily the instructor or facilitator. It is as if ELM was tailor-made for philosophy.

Educators cannot overlook the shared interconnectedness of self-development to the learner-centric educational experience, as this builds to the more generalized concept of learning as an individual effort (Weimer, 2002). Simply put, an educator cannot learn for a student, especially an adult student. Instead, students experience and contextualize learning via independent factors. Self-development coupled with learner-centric education remains a hallmark of the highly coveted life-long learner.

The idea of the life-long learner is a key aspect of doctrinal leader development and education. However, Army educators must inquire regarding development toward *what*. Sadly, the greater Army education enterprise seldom searches out a definitive *what* and *why*

² The ArmyU Experiential Learning Model is the recommended educational strategy for all Army institutions. Every Center of Excellence teaches the model via the Common Faculty Development Instructor Course. While new instructors get this training, it still takes all instructors coming back through training (at least every three years) for the model to fully proliferate throughout the ranks of TRADOC cadre.

of learning. Instead, there seems to be a degree of “mindlessness” associated with the industrialized nature of most military education, whether self-initiated or prompted via a collective, where the focus remains on *how* and the *why*, and *what* remains absent (Silberman, 1970, p. 11). If this assertion were incorrect, then logically we would not see senior leaders declaring a need for more critical thought and metacognition in the up-and-coming generation of leaders (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2020, p. 2). What this implies is that Soldier students must depart from the constant *how* of education and instead engage in aspects of *why*. If military education can transition to better emphasize the *why*, rather than the *how* or *what*, then the Army might better educate future leaders in a way that contextualizes both individual and collective development.

The importance of self-development has been further emphasized through the recent release of Athena, which requires more introspective analysis by Soldiers. The authors reason that Soldiers lack this introspective nature or else it would not be a center-stage need. Athena focuses on self-development, providing the survey participant with specific feedback following the completion of the assessment, but a gap remains, as the effort appears almost incomplete. Instead, the Athena assessments continue as something the student fills out, and the information remitted upon completion remains a key element of development that is to be actioned, hopefully informing individual development plans (IDP). As such, in Athena, the learner-centric theory and experience reign supreme. So, what is missing that can help the student, regardless of their current level of development?

For the answer to, “what is missing,” just think back to the earlier example with Eisenhower, as Athena is missing the BG Fox Conner to contextualize the information into the lens of pragmatic military-centric philosophy. Instead, the survey participants are simply supposed to take the provided information and contextualize it themselves, that is unless their organization requires the potential IDP to be shared. Is this the desired end state of Athena for the Army, an organization dependent upon the success and retention of members being able to internalize a moment of non-contextualized individual development? Also, for the IDP to be developed and applied appropriately it is assumed that the leader utilizing the IDP for the Athena respondent has both the necessary understanding and education to ensure the information is put to best use. It is important to question where and how someone is educated effectively enough to best synthesize and apply this data for the benefit of the developed Soldier.

Rhetoric aside, it is assumed that many will see that an organizationally contextualized pragmatic and military-centric philosophy should be developed and adopted to better equip the Soldier student in receiving information and the instructor in delivering the information. If done correctly, the Soldier and their leaders will always know where they are in their professional education and development. Additionally, the Army can then contextualize education within the confines of this governing philosophy of professional development.

Without a philosophical framework, the military educational experience is heading in multiple directions at once. The instructor, thanks to robust ArmyU-based Instructor Training, already sees the information and the student to be educated within a certain capacity. After all, the instructor is taught basic education and psychology theories, all of which aim at the action of learning and the process of assessing student development. There is now only one thing missing. The authors summarize that Army education is missing a guiding developmental philosophy specifically structured toward the student. Therefore, the authors recommend the Army adopt or create such a philosophy, one that allows the student to see themselves, specifically their development and the application of education toward professional growth.

Philosophy as a Guide

Philosophy literally means “love of wisdom,” but can be “thought of in three aspects: an activity, a set of attitudes, and a body of content” (Knight, 2006, p. 5). Philosophy is like a roadway, and while there are many types of philosophies, as with roadways, all seek to afford the learner and educator “perspectives of what is presumed to be the same territory” (Weber, 1960, p.3). In the case of the individual, this could come in the form of personal philosophy. A personal philosophy guides an individual’s worldview development, allowing for interpretation of their surrounding environment, and ultimately even influencing the perceived relevance of information. There is no better example of this than the allegory of Plato’s Cave.

Philosophy can and does provide context to received information that ultimately comprises a tangible reality and certitude to the veracity and applicability of all knowledge. All require context, and while some receive it via specialized training, e.g., trainers and instructors, others have no guiding philosophy and are expected to develop within the greater setting of their environment despite this gap. As mentioned earlier, education without a guiding philosophy of self and purpose, or the appreciable *why*, leads to a degree of mindlessness in education. Some find their way, despite the lack of a guiding philosophy, but that is because they were typically lucky enough to gain a mentor or an experience and allow the “educative ingredients” of “action and reflection” to color their future thought (Weber, 1960).

A Suggested Philosophy and Framework

Considering the needs of the Army, specifically the desired outcome of critical-thinking leaders that are capable of meaningful self-development, the authors feel it best to recommend a philosophy that can meet organizational needs. The philosophy of choice must integrate well with the governing educational theory, which was already discussed as prime for philosophical integration, be developmentally focused, and wed well with the more humanist needs of such a diverse formation. After all, Army leaders and educators have daily encounters with diversity in all its forms, whether ethnic, culturally based, or even generational. Army leaders uniformly recognize diversity as a source of strength, and so the proposed philosophy and framework must prove flexible, generalizable, and applicable to all (Albrecht & Karabenick, 2018). Since diversity is so important to the Army's organizational success, an eventual philosophy should be flexible enough to honor that diversity while still maintaining theoretical efficacy in application.

If the Army is truly adopting a "people first" mentality, that means the organization is attempting to see the value and worth of all, both as individuals and as a meaningful whole. The educator and leaders of the Army must see the value of the individual and their development, but more important than that, the individual must see their development and worth as contextualized toward the needs of the greater whole. With the Army's "people first" mentality, coupled with the favored Kolb educational theory (ELM), the Army is already pursuing a humanist framework. However, it is the no-nonsense day-to-day mission and attitude of the military, coupled with the needs and motivations of the learner that dictate the obvious utility of adopting a pragmatic philosophy of education.

The Pragmatist Philosopher

William James, the early American philosopher, initially outlined the pragmatist position. John Dewey would later explore and elevate both pragmatism and education philosophy to new heights (Knight, 2006). Pragmatism is "the attitude of looking away from first things, principles, 'categories,' supposed necessities; and of looking towards last things, fruits, consequences, facts" (James, 1907, pp. 54-55). The idea of pragmatism was to avoid wasting time regarding the perceived value of the static traditional philosophies and instead interpret the world as presented in its current state (Knight, 2006, p. 66). The entire movement was results oriented.

The philosophical position of the pragmatist is one of an experiential reality. This means the reception and interpretation of information, whether sensed or educational, is one based upon personal experience and its perceived value to that experiential reality. The pragmatist does not have time to waste and focuses on the detail and value of the human experience. Instead, the pragmatist defines truth and knowledge as what works, and not existential trivialities (Knight, 2006, pp. 65-68). The Army and its education system, whether knowingly or unknowingly, align with the pragmatist's position, as it focuses on learning theory and motivations that seek real-world application of knowledge. To both the pragmatist and the Soldier, all information requires a sense of relevance to the value of time and the functional application of their individual development, and this aligns well with both Knowles and Kolb.

The idea is to not be guilty of overindulgence in pragmatist philosophy, as on the occasion when the Army educational approach is to focus only on the details of a task rather than encourage learning. Instead, the correct amount of pragmatist view would encourage the Soldier's development through experiential learning. Examples of experiential learning include utilizing autonomy, goal orientation, relevant and practical hands-on performance contextualized for application in a mission or job setting. Especially valuable is the educational event that applies to a specific mission or job setting, as this is a valued strategy for self-directed relevance (Roberson, 2013). It would be at that moment the student Soldier, regardless of rank or position, develops applied pragmatic philosophical contextualization of their education. The Soldier's contextualization of their education, or sense of educational relevance, would also include how experience connects to development and learning thus integrating with the experiential application.

The Humanist Framework

The humanist framework has already been identified as valuable for approaching the necessity of natural diversity, whatever the type, within the Army's formation. It remains critical to identify and understand student diversity in both education and the realm of self-development. There are two key points to consider regarding the value of the humanist framework. First, a humanist educational theory has been around for quite some time, though educators remain mixed in their reception of the entirety of the work (Yount, 2010, pp. 311-316). Second, the humanist framework, especially that of Maslow's theory of human motivation, has been able to endure critique as motivation remains one of the most discussed and prominent aspects driving education and developmental effort (Yount, 2010; Ambrose, Bridges, DiPietro, Lovett, & Norman, 2010).

Another secondary consideration of the effectiveness and value of the humanist framework concerning personal development is the fact that the researchers actively employ Maslow-based models in current theoretical discussions (Momeny & Gourgues, 2019). The utility of the model is based upon its undying flexibility and generalizability, as the variable of focus is one of common and shared humanity. The importance of self-regulated learning, coupled with the idea of "priority upon affective outcomes," aligns well with the ELM strategy

which seeks to highlight the individual student's prior experience and the dynamic key of the concrete experience to connect with the affective domain (Yount, 2010, p. 317; TRADOC, 2017).

A marriage between the current utilized or emphasized educational theory, both Kolb and Knowles, with Maslow's perspective on human motivation and development could create the ultimate version of pragmatist philosophy. The main advantage of this approach is that both students and the Army can extract the most out of the learner-centric learning environment. This is because it gives the life-long learner and the educator a common foundational reference point or foci, that of the student's development, and specifically how that development relates to motivation and even productivity. See Figure 1, *The Communication Process Theory*, for a current theory making use of Maslow (Momeny & Gourgues, 2019).

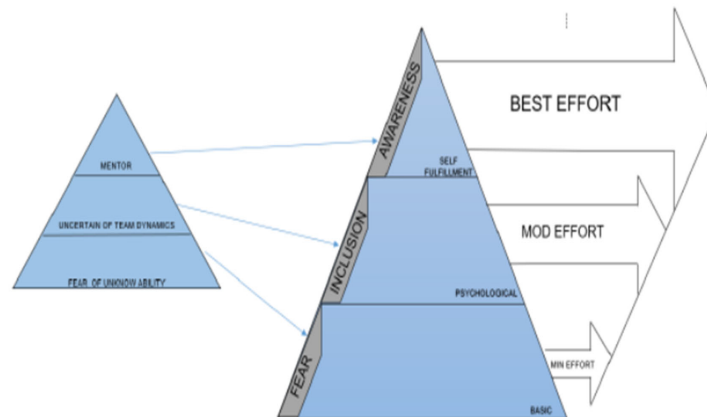


Figure 1: The Communication Process Theory

Communication process theory addresses individual development through a series of leader and follower communication exchanges, utilizing Maslow's hierarchy of needs as a humanist framework (Momeny & Gourgues, 2019). However, elements of productivity and output are also sketched out with respect to the progress of an individual's development. A parallel model could be realized for both individual and professional development specific to the needs of the military student. Such a model would allow both the educator and student to frame the pragmatist philosophy alongside a pictorial reference of individual development as contextualized toward the critical educational point of motivation, see Figure 2, *Army Education Philosophy and Individual Development*.

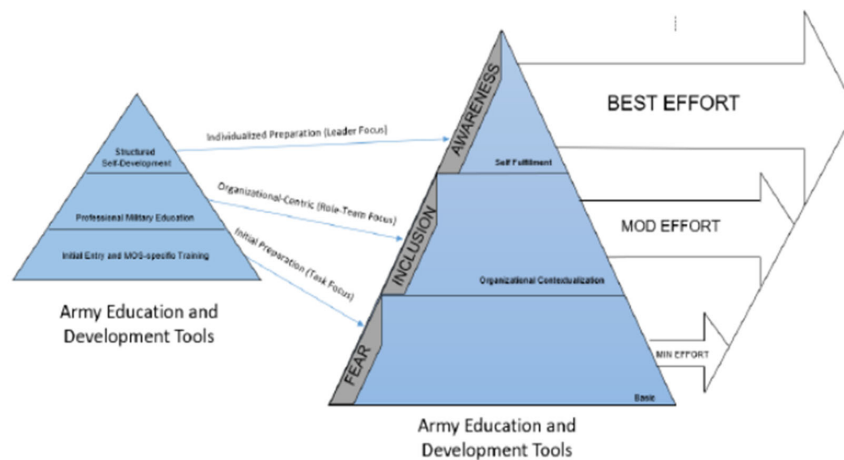


Figure 2: Army Education Philosophy and Individual Development

The point of Figure 2 is to allow the student, instructor, and leader a better view of individual development. With this renewed perspective on knowledge exchange, it becomes possible to enhance empathy and better comprehend individual growth as contextualized through moments of educational development. Finally, both the instructor and student would know how knowledge is to be categorized and applied within the evolution of the Soldier student. No matter the type of knowledge, it all plays a role in a Soldier's growth as both an individual and teammate within the greater Army organization.

Vehicles to Integrate Philosophy

Knowledge, whether philosophical or not, without application or means of integration, is utterly useless. However, the Army, and more specifically TRADOC, is not without its tools. Ready means of integration can and should be found within the introduction of the philosophy and visual framework within the following three areas: 1) Insert into all Initial Training and Professionally Military Education, 2) Insert the basic philosophical framework into both the Doctrine Primer and Leader Development focused doctrine, e.g., FM 6-22³ and ADP 6-22, and finally 3) Athena assessments.

Initial Entry Training (IET), no matter the associated rank structure, and Professional Military Education courses are the ideal time to introduce a functional and visual philosophy of education and development. A Soldier must learn how to see both themselves and the *why* of knowledge, specifically how it contributes to their progression as a professional and team member, as early as possible. The earlier a student is allowed to integrate with an educational-centric why the more likely they are to develop critical thinking skills desired at higher levels of responsibility.

To guide the perspective in IET, it will be necessary to enter the philosophical framework within the guiding components of doctrine. Specifically, this information is ideally suited for Army doctrine that focuses on leader development and leadership. This is especially ideal because Soldiers of all ranks consistently read leadership doctrine. Finally, the information should preface the Athena self-development assessments. This is because the produced assessment data requires a contextual lens for proper knowledge acceptance and application. If strategically cascaded across these three critical areas, integration of this philosophical framework can be seamless.

Conclusion

Project Athena allowed the authors to note the missing Army educational philosophy and consider its overall importance and impact on the development and even self-development of Soldiers everywhere. This is unique as Athena gave her shield to Perseus to better engage Medusa. Perseus was able to peer through Athena's shield and have both protection and clarity of vision against an enemy he could not see or even strike without the defensive tool (Deacy, 2008). In a sense, the shield allowed Perseus to contextualize the information of his environment, and better negotiate real and appreciable experiential-based challenges. Well, Athena has returned, and both the Army and its educators must have the courage to look through her shield to better contextualize necessary knowledge and its application for Army students everywhere. With a reasonable pragmatist philosophy, specifically aligned across a flexible humanist framework, the Army can better allow its Soldiers to see themselves, the value of greater education, the importance of all professional education, and how it affects self-development.

References

- Albrecht, J. R. & Karabenick, S. A. (2018). Relevance for learning and motivation in education. *The Journal of Experimental Education*, 86 (1), pp. 1-10.
- Ambrose, S. A., Bridges, M. W., DiPietro, M., Lovett, M. C., & Norman, M. K. (2010). *How learning works: Seven research-based principles for smart teaching*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Deacy, S. (2008). *Athena*. London. Routledge.
- Department of Army (2022). FM 6-22: Developing Leaders. Headquarters, Department of the Army: Washington, D.C.
- Goleman, D. (1995). *Emotional intelligence*. New York: Bantam.
- James, W. (1907). *Pragmatism*. New York, NY: Longmans, Green, and Co.
- Khachadorian, A. A., Steen, S. L., & Mackenzie, L. B. (2020). Metacognition and the military student: Pedagogical considerations for teaching senior officers in professional military education. *Journal of Military Learning*.
- Knight, G. R. (2006). *Philosophy of education: An introduction in Christian perspective*. Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press.
- Knowles, M., Holton, E. F., & Swanson, R. (2015). *The adult learner: The definitive classic in adult education and human resource development* (8th ed.). Routledge.
- Kotter, J. P. (1996). *Leading change*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.

³ It is exciting to note that the Army, through the latest edition of FM 6-22, *Developing Leaders* has already started sharing more information on how individual development occurs. Additionally, there is even discussion on the nature of learning, thereby empowering the reader in their ultimate effort to better themselves.

- Masaracchia, C., Saine, S., & Fallesen, J. (2021). Project Athena: Enabling leader self-development. *Military Review*-AUG, 6-15.
- Maslow, A. H. (1943). *A theory of human motivation*. *Psychological Review*, 50(4), 370–396.
- Momeny, L. S., & Gourgues, M. (2019). Communication that develops: Clarity of process on transformational leadership through study of effective communication of emotional intelligence. *Christian Education Journal*, 16 (2), pp. 226-240.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0739891319829484>.
- Northouse, P. (2019). *Leadership: Theory and practice*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Parker, C. (2020). Instructional design perception and practice in United States Army training organizations: A case study [Doctoral Dissertation, Indiana University]. IUScholarWorks. <http://hdl.handle.net/2022/25601>.
- Pierson, D. (2017). Reengineering Army education for adult learners. *Journal of Military Learning*. October 2017, pp. 31-43.
- Roberson, R. (2013). American Psychological Association. *Helping students find relevance: Teaching the relevance of course content can help students develop into engaged, motivated, and self-regulated learners*. Retrieved from:
<https://www.apa.org/ed/precollege/ptn/2013/09/students-relevance>.
- Silberman, C. E. (1970). *Crisis in the classroom: The remaking of American education*. New York, NY: Vintage Books.
- United States of America, Department of Defense, Joint Chiefs of Staff. (2020, May 1). *Developing Today's Joint Officers for Tomorrow's Ways of War: The Joint Chief of Staff Vision and Guidance for Professional Military Education & Talent Management*. Retrieved September 28, 2020, from https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/education/jcs_pme_tm_vision.pdf?ver=2020-05-15-102429-817
- U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command. (April 2017). *The U.S. ARMY Learning Concept for Training and Education*. Retrieved from <https://adminpubs.tradoc.army.mil/pamphlets/TP525-8-2.pdf>
- Weber, C. O. (1960). *Basic philosophies of education*. New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.
- Weimer, M. (2002). *Learner-centered teaching: Five key changes to practice*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Wong, L. (2002). *Stifled innovation? Developing tomorrow's leaders today*. (Monograph). Retrieved September 13, 2021, from Stifled Innovation? Developing Tomorrow's Leaders Today (globalsecurity.org)
- Young, M. (2014). Leadership that develops other people: An empirical study into the effect of humanist principles and therapeutic common factors on subordinate development. *Journal of General Management*, 39(3), 59–76.
- Yount, W. R. (2010). *Created to Learn*. Nashville, TN: B & H Academic