

Practical Application: U.S. Army Noncommissioned Officer

Professional Writing Proficiency

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Scenario

Organization

This writer is employed as an Instructor, Curriculum Developer, and Course Facilitator for the United States Army Noncommissioned Officer Leadership Center of Excellence (NCOLCOE) and the Sergeants Major Academy's (SGM-A) Sergeant Major Course (SMC). The SMC serves as the pinnacle of the U.S. Army's Noncommissioned Officer Professional Development System (NCOPDS) and focuses on developing the knowledge, skills, and attitudes of the Army's most senior enlisted soldiers. With an annual enrollment of 720 students, the SMC delivers education to future Sergeants Major through a rigorous and challenging program of instruction. Upon completion, SMC graduates are expected to possess the elements and attributes required to lead large Army organizations, in peace and at war. The SMC is divided amongst five departments, delivering curriculum specific to various portions of Army functions, of which students rotate through during a 10-month academic year. SMC student's academic performance is assessed through various writing assignments, presentations, and examinations, which all require professional writing skills and competencies.

Current Project

Due to the high quantity of writing associated with the SMC and a current lack of professional writing development for enlisted soldiers, the SGM-A plans to establish a writing development program to meet the need of writing proficiency amongst enlisted soldiers. The ultimate goal of this project is to deliver professional writing development courses throughout the entire NCOPDS learning continuum to ensure enlisted soldiers are properly prepared when selected for attendance at the SMC. Currently, the SMC Department of Professional Studies is working towards the establishment of a professional writing course to serve as a prerequisite for attendance at the SMC. This project is to be designed, developed, implemented, and evaluated by current SGM-A faculty whom are recent graduates of Syracuse University's M.S. IDD&E program, of which, this writer is one.

Performance Issues

With a strong emphasis placed on writing assessments, it is imperative that SMC students understand, and are able to demonstrate, professional writing abilities. Currently, the majority of academic failures resulting in remediation or removal from the SMC stem from an inability to properly convey thoughts, ideas, and knowledge through professionally written products. Over 85% of all academic failures during assessment within the SMC are the result of poor writing, including composition, grammar, syntax, vocabulary, and formatting. Ultimately, deficient writing results in the removal of 5% of students from the SMC course per year.

Proposed Solutions

It is the opinion of this writer that a professional writing program must be established throughout the NCOPDS continuum. The NCOPDS continuum, displayed in Figure 1 below, begins with Basic Leader Course (BLC), where enlisted soldiers are educated on the proficiencies expected of junior Noncommissioned Officers (NCO), followed by Advanced Leader Course for junior NCOs, Senior Leader Course for mid-career NCOs, and Master Leader

Course (MLC) for senior NCOs. The NCOPDS continuum, as depicted below, culminates with the selection and attendance of fully qualified MLC graduates at the SMC (NCOLCOE, 2020). By designing and developing a progressive approach to writing proficiency for implementation within each stage of the NCOPDS, students selected for attendance at the SMC will be fully prepared for the demands of all writing assessments and requirements.

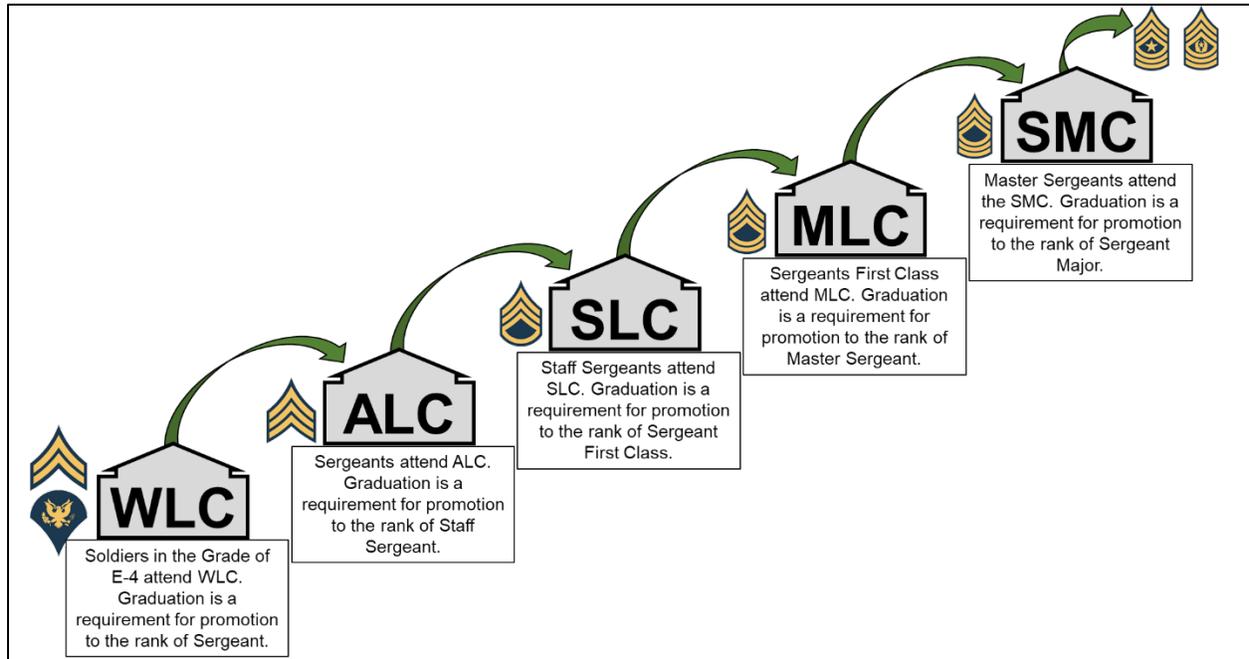


Fig 1. The NCOPDS Continuum

The average timeline of Army service prior to attendance at the SMC is 19 years, during which all other NCOPDS courses occur. The establishment of a writing proficiency program at all levels of the NCOPDS will not immediately affect success at the SMC. Therefore, it is critical to supplement this proposed program with remedial professional writing instruction for identified soldiers as a prerequisite course to be taken prior to attendance at each level of the NCOPDS. Soldiers with professional writing deficiencies will be identified through a writing assessment upon selection to attend any level of NCOPDS. Ultimately, this program will include the following three interventions.

- Establishment of a professional writing proficiency program for implementation in all levels of NCOPDS
- Professional writing proficiency assessments prior to enrollment in all NCOPDS schools
- Creation of remedial professional writing proficiency NCOPDS school prerequisite courses

Application of IDD&E Principles

To combat professional writing deficiencies occurring throughout the NCOPDS, with a focus on the SMC, it is imperative to approach this problem with the principles of IDD&E at the forefront of the process. The Syracuse University IDD&E Standards of Practice (2020), derived from the International Board of Standards for Training, Performance, and Instruction (2012), is

an excellent guide and will serve as this writer's basis. Competency 1.6: *Practice evidence-based design decision making* will serve a critical role, as the analysis process for this project will include data collection and analysis focused on professional writing proficiencies amongst all NCOPDS-eligible soldiers, throughout the Army. This data will allow the project team to examine current proficiencies to design appropriate interventions. Through application of the ADDIE model, this writer will highlight the IDD&E competencies that are most critical to closing this performance gap. While all IDD&E competencies will be utilized during this process, some will be more critical than others will, thus requiring a higher level of expertise during application.

Analyze

- IDD&E Standards of Practice Competency 2.2: *Validate performance gaps through multiple analysis techniques.*

Validation of performance gaps is a critical step towards identifying and implementing the proper interventions. The previously identified interventions will require a comprehensive analysis of all eligible NCOPDS soldiers to ascertain the levels of professional writing proficiency amongst each NCOPDS school cohort. This competency will allow this writer to address the performance gaps, from varying perspectives, to create specific interventions at each level of the NCOPDS.

Design

- IDD&E Standards of Practice Competency 3.2: *Determine content, instructional goals, learning objectives, and assessments to close gaps.*

The importance of this competency must not be underestimated as it allows IDs to construct the requisite framework, upon which programs are built. This project will require multiple sets of content, varying in degrees of depth and breadth, with differing goals, objectives, and assessment functions. To properly design multiple interventions focused on the same overarching goal, to increase Army NCO professional writing proficiency, the initial framework must be resolute and reliable.

Develop

- IDD&E Standards of Practice Competency 3.8: *Develop learning assessment activities and instruments using appropriate techniques and technologies.*

The ability to properly assess the levels, and potential advancement, of NCOPDS school-bound soldier's professional writing proficiency is critical to the success of this program. Assessments will not only provide baselines to allow identification of deficient soldiers, but will allow the project team to better facilitate adaptations to instruction to meet the demands of educational goals. This competency will allow this writer to gain a thorough understanding of the needs of the individual soldiers, to meet the needs of the Army, regarding professional writing capabilities.

Implement

- IDD&E Standards of Practice Competency 4.1: *Implement and disseminate instructional and non-instructional interventions.*

Due to the dynamic nature of this program and its multifaceted approach to solving the writing proficiency problem amongst the NCO Corps, the implementation of such a program must be deliberate and purposeful. Implementation of a project of this size, serving nearly 50 NCOPDS schools around the world, will require standardized, efficient, and controlled implementation to ensure success. This writer believes that a faulty implementation and dissemination plan will result in negative consequences, and potentially a loss of Army support, for this program.

Evaluate

- IDD&E Standards of Practice Competency 4.3: *Collect, analyze, summarize, and report implementation and evaluation data.*

Consistent and effective evaluation practices are crucial to ensure the success of this program and the accomplishment of its goals. Evaluation data will serve to allow modification and adaptation of this program throughout its lifespan and will aid in identifying timelines for termination of remedial instruction efforts. Ultimately, this program will utilize robust evaluation methodologies to ensure the continued success of advancing professional writing abilities amongst the NCO Corps.

Knowledge Gains from Concentration

This writer has been serving in the U.S. Army for 20 years and as a NCO for a majority of that time, having progressed through the entire NCOPDS. Providing Soldiers with the proper resources to enable success is the goal of any Army leader, and the knowledge, skills, and attitudes gained as a result of the IDD&E program have enabled this writer to better work towards that goal. Ultimately, this project aims to close a performance gap occurring in this writer's field of work through the utilization of targeted instructional design practices. The knowledge gained by this writer regarding instructional design, educational technology, evaluation, human performance, and project management will serve to legitimize this project and will allow this writer to contribute meaningful, impactful, and effective instructional design practices for the U.S. Army and to the field of instructional design.

Reflections

This writer's initial ideas of what defines an instructional designer could not have been further from actuality. The IDD&E program of study proved to be extremely effective at removing these misconceptions, establishing a strong foundational understanding of instructional design, building upon that foundation, and allowed this writer to gain a deep and meaningful understanding of instructional design as a practice, function, art, asset, and in many cases, a requirement for producing quality educational and instructional interventions. As a professional soldier, this writer's identity and primary goal has long been one of instruction and education focused on developing junior soldiers. With the enlightenment gained from the IDD&E program, this writer is now capable of being far more effective at that goal.

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