

Education Support Cell (ESC)/TLDE Tips & Strategies

The Coaching Mindset: Enhancing Learning

Welcome to our final installment of the Coaching Mindset series. We are in the midst of discussing methodologies for **developing capabilities** in our students in order to cultivate an adaptive, professional SOF soldier. Our first three installments on this topic can be found at <http://www.soc.mil/swcs/esc.html>. This month we are going to look at how to enhance learning by using the traditional, educational strategy known as **metacognition**.

Metacognition: Thinking about one's own mental processes¹

Metacognition Enhances Learning

What we are exploring here is not a new idea. We learn when we have the opportunity to think about our experiences and are able to get feedback on that thinking. There is definite value in providing our students with opportunities to learn. But this learning can be enhanced—**GREATLY**—if we schedule in time for reflection and discussion to allow students to check and validate (or modify) their thinking.

There are two important points to address here (there are probably more, but these are the two that stand-out to me).

1. The instructor must facilitate the process, and
2. The reflection and discussion must be generated by the students.

Experiential versus Guided Experiential

Just the practice of going through the experience (Experiential) is not the same as being GUIDED through the experience (Guided Experiential). Instructors need to be fully involved in maximizing learning by keeping students on track through coaching, feedback, and/or modeling. Allowing students to make mistakes is fine; we learn some of our best lessons by experiencing what we **shouldn't** have done. However, allowing students to get “off track” for extended periods of time is not productive and results in lost learning time. Instructors add value when they guide the learning experience.

If students just go through the lesson/event without the experienced instructor/guide, then there is no real avenue for development. A student has to be given time to make sense of an experience--to create personal understanding—so that learning may take place. Some students may not take the time to do this if they feel they are rushing off to do the “next thing”. Additionally, if their perceived “understanding” isn't properly vetted, it could be erroneous. For these reasons, it is important that cadre be present to guide the learning through facilitated discussions after allowing time for student reflection (we'll get to this in a moment).

The ESC provides support for the uniform application of USAJFKSWCS educational processes across the Institution.

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1. Collins English Dictionary; <http://www.dictionary.com>

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As an example, I may go through a key leader engagement (KLE) exercise and nail it—even in the absence of an instructor. But if someone were to ask me what I did well, I may not be able to articulate it because I just reacted. Without an experienced person to guide me, I may just rely on my innate ability until I can't. An instructor can guide a discussion to assist me (and my teammates) to identify what I did well. This would also assist teammates who may be up next to perform better than what they may have without the instructor's interaction with the team. This **vicarious learning** is a good thing and assists in shortening the time needed to master objectives.

Let's say I don't do so well with my KLE. I walk away from the experience saying, "Geez, next time I need to do better with rapport." But I also walk away not knowing what I don't know. What do I *actually* need to do to build rapport? What about the three other things that happened that I nor my team were even aware of? If an instructor were facilitating this learning event, he/she would ask me to describe what happened and assist me in walking through how I could perform better next time.

There are numerous opportunities throughout our training courses for our students to grow and learn from their own experiences. We have multiple culmination events (think Operation Sluss-Tiller or Robin Sage) that are obvious places for learning. Even a class on tactical movement can be a place to use student reflection.

Self-Reflection

Making sense of an experience is important to learning. This "sense making" is most powerful if done by students themselves. Having an instructor tell you what you did wrong and how you can correct it is not the same as creating understanding. Students can accept what an instructor offers without internalizing it, or even understanding it. If we force students to do the dirty work of struggling with reflection (what happened and why) and thinking through to alternate solutions, then they will more fully learn from the experience and more likely retain the lesson.

Full disclosure: students will need to be encouraged to think critically about their own learning, and many won't know how to get started with all this thinking.

Instructor Techniques to Develop Student Metacognition

Metacognition leads to better critical thinking skills. Some ideas to develop thinking and reflective skills in your students follow:

- **Encourage questions:** have students think of 3 questions they should have asked prior to or during the class or activity. This will assist them in what they needed to consider and will, hopefully, consider next time.
- **Consider Assumptions:** have students analyze their own assumptions about the content or the skill; how did this influence their learning?



Best Practice: An instructor engaging two students in a **think-aloud** as one student walks the second through a tactical maneuver

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- **Encourage Think Alouds:** As students go through a new or difficult task, have them verbally explain/summarize what they are thinking and what/why they are doing what they are doing. The team or instructor can then question the student's thinking, leading to more self-awareness during learning. An alternative to this is to have the instructor demonstrate the skill and use a think aloud. Insert poor thinking or errors and have students make corrections as the explanation continues.
- **Use Reflective Writing:** After an exercise or event, have students pause and write down responses to some prompting questions. Writing is a by-product of thinking. If students are talking, you can't be sure of the level of thought put into the words. Additionally, not all students may share their thoughts. If students are first asked to write their reflections before participating in a discussion, they must take the time to compose their thoughts into written language, automatically creating a more thoughtful response.

ROTC Cadets use a self-reflection card after an event. The card requires them to 1) write a summary of what occurred, and 2) identify strengths and dimensions for improvement. They turn the cards in prior to formal counseling as additional documentation of performance/accountability.

Instructor Techniques to Encourage Reflection

These simple tips can assist an instructor in leading an effective discussion without doing the thinking for the students.

- **Use Open-Ended Questions:** Think TED [Tell—Explain—Describe]. Starting a sentence with one of these words will automatically lead to discussion and an open-ended statement.
 - *Tell me about the outcome.*
 - *Explain to me why you did that.*
 - *Describe what you were thinking.*
- **Listen Actively:** Be patient and willing to allow students to work through their thought process. Use good listening skills to encourage them to continue talking.
- **Hold back judgment:** Allow students to process the information in their own way. Don't just tell them the answer. Ask them to clarify their thinking and be clever with leading them to other potential avenues of thought (go back to the TED statements).
- **Provide feedback:** At the end of the experience, there needs to be some feedback. If students are wholly reflective, an instructor may not have much work to do. However, it is important that students understand what right looks like. If they didn't come to that picture on their own, the instructor should provide it. Just be open-minded and recognize that your picture of right may not be the only one, so flexibility is important here.

All in all it is the instructor's behaviors that will encourage or reduce a student's willingness and opportunity to use metacognition as a learning tool. First, the instructor must be actively facilitating exercises. Secondly, instructors must be empowered and encouraged to take the "tactical pauses" necessary to ensure students have the time to reflect and discuss their experiences. Finally, instructors must use guided discussion skills to facilitate students' thinking and set the stage for learning to take place.

As always, reach out to the ESC for assistance. If we can't help you, we'll find someone who can.