

Teaching Regional Studies with Case Studies in Asynchronous Online Officer PME: The Benefits and Challenges

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Regional Studies is a key component of Professional Military Education. Regional Studies Courses prepare officers for working in an unfamiliar part of the world and working in that part of the world with allies and partners from those regions. The United States Air Force Global College of Professional Military Education provides a suite of regional studies courses on a wide variety of regions that provide an introduction to the region, its people(s), and the challenges the region has faced, is facing and is likely to face.

Providing this specialized knowledge via asynchronous online education presents numerous challenges. The Global College has decided that case studies—often presented via a professionally produced in-house video—provide the best means of ensuring quality education that also serves the needs of our students.

This article drawing on the author's experience of developing and managing case studies in asynchronous online officer professional military explores how case studies are created and incorporated into the course and how students are assessed on the material presented in the case studies.

All United States Air Force (USAF) post-commissioning Professional Military Education (PME) is done through Air University, located at Maxwell Air Force Base, in Montgomery, Alabama. The USAF is unique in having all levels of post-commissioning PME at one location. This allows the USAF to have faculty supporting various PME programs simultaneously and thereby reduces the cost of faculty and facility by allowing dual use. Those officers not selected for in residence Squadron Officer School, Air Command and Staff College, or the Air War College—the majority of USAF officers—are required to complete these programs via their online equivalent which are administered by the Global College of Professional Military Education. Reflecting the Global College's provision of multiple levels of PME, it is part of the Curtis E. LeMay Center for Doctrine Development and Education. The Global College consists of four academic departments: Joint Airpower and Warfare, Leadership and Ethics, Research, Strategy and Security Studies which is responsible for developing and teaching Regional Studies courses.

In 2011, the then Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta declared:



Language, regional and cultural skills...are critical to mission readiness in today's dynamic global environment. Our forces must have the ability to effectively communicate with and understand the cultures of coalition forces, international partners, and local populations.¹

This is the guiding principle in the creation of Regional Studies. Further refinement in course structure is found in 2020, the Joint Chiefs of Staff *Visions and Guidance for Professional Military Education & Talent Management* requested PME:

Incorporate active and experiential learning to develop the practical and critical thinking skills our warfighters require. These methodologies include the use of case studies grounded in history to help students develop judgment, analysis, and problem-solving skills, which can then be applied to contemporary challenges, including war, deterrence, and measures short of armed conflict.²

Regional Studies are a key component of PME. They prepare officers and service members for working in an unfamiliar part of the world and working with allies and partners from those regions by ensuring a familiarity with their history and the challenges they are facing. The United States Air Force's Global College of PME's Department of Strategic and Security Studies provides a suite of regional studies courses on a wide variety of regions. These courses provide an introduction to the region's history, its people(s), and the challenges the region has faced, is currently facing, and is likely to face. These courses often provide our students with their only academic knowledge of a region where they will be serving or fighting. Warfighters must possess knowledge about the region where they are operating to minimize casualties and maximize the odds of American success.

The Global College's Department of Strategic and Security Studies uses case studies—often presented via a professionally produced in-house video or podcast—to provide the best means of ensuring quality education that also serves the needs of our students and stakeholders—the various commands the students will be assigned to once they graduate and the US military and government more broadly.

For Regional Studies courses this means developing and including case studies into the course that support assessments which help students develop analytical and problem solving skills. These skills are essential for the US Air Force and any military so that the students can outthink their adversaries in war amidst uncertainty and disruptive change. Furthermore, Regional Studies courses ensure officers can apply a holistic approach to the evolving and dynamic

¹ Department of Defense, *Strategic Plan for Language Skills, Regional Expertise, and Cultural Capabilities*, United States Government, Washington DC, 2011.

² Department of Defense, *Developing Today's Joint Officers for Tomorrow's Ways of War: The Joint Chiefs of Staff Vision and Guidance for Professional Military Education and Talent Manager*, United States Government, Washington DC, 2020.

security environment, which includes disruptive changes in the character and conduct of warfare. A warfighter's intellect is a key component of his personal armoury.

While most Officer Professional Military Education courses are aimed at a specific level: primary, intermediate, senior, or flag officer, Global College of PME regional studies courses are open to all levels. Students are divided into sections that reflect their respective level of PME. This is to ensure that the students feel free to openly share their opinions and to disagree with their classmates. However, the content of the course does not differ from one level to the next. It would be ideal to have courses specifically designed for each level of PME, but that would require too much in the way of resources. Furthermore, it would require students to take the course at each level which would not be respecting their time and students are often assigned to various unified combatant commands with different geographical responsibilities throughout their career.

Providing specialized regional knowledge through asynchronous online education presents numerous challenges for faculty and students. The limited guidance I received about case studies was that they had to be "short" and "portable." It was openly acknowledged by my then Department Chair that if the case studies were simply readings most of our students would not read them. Indeed, the data available from our courses shows that written case studies are consulted by students by less than ten percent of students while videos are watched by over three quarters of students.³

Therefore, most Strategy and Security Studies regional studies case studies are presented through custom made videos and/or podcasts that the students can download and watch or listen to on their own device at their convenience. One of the most common requests of students is that their time be respected. We attempt to do this in all our classes, the sometimes-heard statement "Students don't care how long an assignment is if it is a good or interesting assignment" is simply not true. The vast majority of PME students are taking mandated courses that they have minimal interest in and/or intellectual curiosity about and which they did not choose to take and often do not relate to their career field, and for which dedicated time is not provided by the Air Force. Our case studies are typically 10-15 minutes in length meaning it is easy for students to include them in their busy schedule. Indeed, when the first case studies for the European Union course were created, students were encouraged to listen to the case studies on their flight to Europe, and student feedback indicates they did.

Despite their importance, our regional studies courses are self-paced courses, thus a means has to be found that keeps the students engaged while maintaining the necessary academic rigor in a course for over a year without any major updates. Maintaining academic rigor is particularly challenging in PME as it is necessary for maintaining academic accreditation. Academic rigor is often considered an unnecessary hurdle by military students and their superior officers who believe PME is merely a box that must be checked. The course must therefore be

³ The Learning Management System allows instructors to see which links are clicked on and how long a student is on the new window.

timely and also timeless, engaging, and challenging, but not merely a purely academic exercise. For example, the Falklands case study draws out the military and political legacy of the Malvinas conflict in contemporary Argentine society and within the various branches of the Argentine military.

Each Regional Studies Course is the responsibility of a course director who is usually an expert on the region. The course director drafts the narrative, chooses the topics for case studies and crafts all the assessments in close collaboration with the assigned learning architect. These are approved by the Department Chair and then the Dean of the Global College of PME. The course director meets regularly with learning architects who must translate the ideas of the course director into the learning management system. This can take a year and a half, and the production of case studies must meet learning architect time lines or the course's launch may be delayed as these courses are only launched every six months.

Timely and timelessness is a particular challenge for courses in regions such as the Middle East or the Russian sphere where current events can and do greatly alter the region often with little advance notice. Most recently this was an issue in our Middle East and North Africa Course after the fall of the Assad regime in Syria. This challenge is minimized by the component structure of regional studies courses allowing various case studies to be removed and replaced while the bulk of the course remains unchanged, for example the fall of the Asad the regime did not negate the relevance of the existing Egyptian and Algerian case studies.

Our regional studies courses follow the same general template, three lessons each expected to take the student approximately five hours to complete. Lesson 1 focuses on the region's history, Lesson 2 the people(s), societies, and states of the region, and Lesson 3 the challenges of the region. It is also assumed that students will need one hour for the various administrative requirements such as enrolment and completion surveys.

Lesson 1 is focused on the history of the region and has lesson objectives at the understanding level. The students read a very concise general narrative of the history of the region with a selection of case studies to deepen their understanding and to be able to relate the history of the region to its current security challenge(s). The narrative is usually 5-7 pages of content, with an introduction and conclusion. Each page of the narrative has approximately two hundred words of text and one or two images, usually maps. For example, in the *European Union*, case studies explain the creation of the ECSC, its expansion into the EEC and culminate with an explanation of the European Union today and how its history influences its policies and vision of the future.

For the *Latin American and Caribbean* course most case studies in the history module are country specific, for example Chile has case studies on the Allende and Pinochet governments while Argentina has case studies on the Falklands, Peronism, and the Argentine economy. The assumption is that the student will choose those case studies that best relate to the country where they are going or will be focused on in their next assignment. Careful attention is required

to ensure that case studies about controversial periods in history are treated with care and both sides of the issue are presented in as neutral a way as possible.

While students are more likely to watch a film or listen to a podcast than read a case study, the demands of creating a video or podcast case studies are considerable. We are incredibly lucky to have a fully equipped television studio and a trained cinematographer at Air University, this ensures the production of a professional-grade product which holds the students attention.

The quality of the product matters greatly, attempts at making the videos with our laptop cameras produced a sub-standard product that was unusable. Students prefer videos of professional quality and the audio is clearer and easier to understand. We avoid using subtitles whenever possible since some students will download the video and listen to it without the ability to watch the video. The podcast versions are in the MP3 format and require much less space on the learning management system and can be downloaded much faster making them far more attractive for students in locations with less than ideal internet access.

Technical support is key in an asynchronous online course. If the Learning Management System is not user friendly and intuitive the students are much less likely to click on videos or any other part of the course. Admittedly, some students will simply click through the course in the hope of meeting the minimum requirements without studying. Quality content and a user friendly learning management system interface reduces the risk of a click through student.

Given the generalist approach required by regional studies the course director is often unable to research and write all of the necessary case studies. Therefore, those faculty with the required subject matter expertise within the department and Strategy and Security Studies and other academic departments often draft and record some of the required case studies. The academic responsible for the case study has to draft the script and find the best possible non-copyrighted images, as a rule of thumb you need a new image every 20-30 seconds, simply giving a lecture with PowerPoint slides on the screen will not hold the student's attention. PowerPoint slides grow stale after approximately 30 seconds and do not translate well onto the screen. The text is often difficult to read and the students are unable to provide feedback on substandard slides until the end of the course and changes can often not be made for several months, thus videos must be watched several times by various members of the faculty to ensure that the video will hold the attention of the students and is clear.

The script also has to be written in a different style than a lecture. It needs to be as concise and clear as possible, best practice is that the script is rehearsed several times, preferably to an audience who can give feedback as to what parts of the script are difficult to follow. Care should be taken to ensure that the paragraphs are not overly long and do not cover multiple topics. Unlike a lecture where the lecturer can seamlessly go from one topic to another or jump back and forth, in a video script a clear transition is needed.

The amount of time required to produce a quality video case study for our courses, up to three months depending on studio post-production constraints means that we need to ensure

that the case study is important enough to be of value to the students for at least a year and preferably at least three years.

In the case of a standalone podcast the academic must paint a picture with words, a demanding feat, especially since the students will not be directly engaging with you and the academic will not be getting any cues from the audience as we would when giving an in person lecture.

Creating podcasts and videos is relatively easy for the History module and for People, Societies and States, after all the key states and societies of a region are unlikely to change. Module three, Challenges is in many ways the most important module to the students and the most difficult for the faculty to create. Challenges are frequently evolving and changing. Therefore, this is the module that is updated the most frequently. Case studies for this module are often more theoretical and ask our students to analyse, for example in the EU course the video is about the challenge posed by populism and is supported by short news articles which can be quickly added or removed. Other possible readings for this module include a scenario where the student is asked to respond to the events in the scenario as if they were the civilian or military leader in the nation in the scenario or what advice they would give their superior if serving on their staff. The last option is especially popular with intermediate and senior level PME students.

While we would all like for our students to be interested in our courses, the nature of PME means most of our students are required to take our courses and therefore some are merely ticking a box. Assessment is thus an essential means of keeping the students “honest” and providing us with feedback on what the students are actually learning in the course.

As asynchronous self-paced courses, the means of assessment are limited. In our Regional Studies courses there are multiple choice quizzes after modules 1 and 2. Data shows that over 80% of students pass the quiz on the first attempt. Our videos also incorporate knowledge checks in the form of questions on the screen over a frozen image and the students have 30 seconds to think about and answer the prompt. Quizzes however only evaluate what the student has retained and do not require much critical thinking, thus the course ends with a 1000-word essay requiring the student to assess the “most significant security challenge facing the region or a specific country in the region under study.” We have considered altering the courses so that if the student does not reach the minimum score on the automated quiz they are locked out of the course for 24-72 hours and could not retake the quiz until after the lock out expires. However, this has not been implemented due to fears that it would anger the students, lead to an increase in cheating, and place undue pressure on students who have waited until the last minute to do the required PME to be eligible for promotion.

Although, the students are ungraded on the essay in the Regional Studies course they must submit it to gain credit, and it is required for the follow on facilitated course. The students are aware of this requirement and have an incentive to produce a quality draft to avoid an increased workload in the facilitated course.

Regional studies and case studies are a crucial part of PME ensuring well prepared officers and servicemembers have the needed knowledge about the region of the world where they will be operating and from where their allies and partners will come. They will remain a key component of PME. We are currently expanding our use of case studies and incorporating them into more courses as even in our Master's Program students are more likely to watch a movie or listen to a podcast than read.

The views expressed in this paper are the personal views of the author and do not reflect those of the Global College of PME, Air University, the US Air Force, the Department of Defense, or the United States Government.