

Teaching Learners ‘How to Think’ not ‘What to Think:’ The MA in Leadership, Management and Defence Studies, the Command and Staff School and Professional Military Education in the Irish Defence Forces.

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Education should implant a will and facility for learning. It should produce not learned but learning people. In times of change, learners inherit the earth while the learned are equipped to deal with a world that no longer exists.

Eric Hoffer (1973:32)

The Command and Staff School, located in the Military College at the Defence Forces Training Centre, is the senior school of the Irish Defence Forces (DF). It supports the professional development of DF senior officers through the provision of tailored educational courses. The flagship course of the School is the Joint Command and Staff Course (JCSC); a nine-month residential staff course designed to prepare mid-career officers for higher level appointments. Internationally, staff courses such as the JCSC represent a significant milestone in the continuum of officers’ Professional Military Education (PME). This is when, for most militaries, the theoretical underpinnings of military operations are honed, and students begin to learn the art of strategy. It is also when the practices of critical analysis and reflection, which PME strives to cultivate, garners greater emphasis owing to its criticality in achieving success on operations.

Accordingly, at the heart of PME for DF senior officers is masters-level postgraduate education; which is intended not only to enrich the educational experience of individual students, but to help generate better – and more critical – strategic thinkers and leaders. To this end, the Command and Staff School has been at the forefront in developing a strategic partnership with Maynooth University, which provides general academic support to the DF including the provision of an MA programme as part of the JCSC. The MA in Leadership, Management and Defence Studies (LMDS), a masters-level postgraduate qualification embedded in the JCSC, is now jointly delivered by Maynooth University’s Centre for Military History and Strategic Studies and the Command and Staff School.



The MA LMDS programme is central to how the DF tests, hones and refines the ability of its officers to think critically, interrogate existing biases and assumptions, embrace new concepts, ideas and theories, and to be self-reflective in how they learn. It cultivates and engenders an ability to synthesise and evaluate diverse and often competing views and perspectives, and helps students develop the ability to arrive at balanced and informed judgements. It also encourages students to challenge conventional thinking and to take some intellectual risk. Whether by exposing students to the different theoretical lenses that help make sense of the complex world around us, or to the lessons and insights of history that give perspective to contemporary thinking (Hallams & Ackland, 2020).

The bedrock of the MA programme is the production of a research thesis. This provides students with an opportunity to undertake an original, independent research project, with an emphasis on research methodologies, self-guided research and critical engagement with the literature, the culmination of which is a 15,000 word thesis. This process develops students' understanding of the theoretical underpinnings of qualitative and quantitative research, and also provides them with an opportunity to gain specialist knowledge and understanding of their chosen research subject.

The topics selected by students for their research thesis often focus on the past, and the lessons that lie therein, but the subjects chosen are also a good indicator of the contemporary strategic themes and trends that students wish to develop their knowledge and expertise in. Many of these topics refer to issues that are placing significant pressures on existing international and regional institutions. For example, the rules-based 'liberal' order is being challenged – from within and without – and states are finding themselves grappling with rising waves of nationalism and populism, as well as the opportunities and threats afforded by new and emerging technologies. The implications of the growing power and assertiveness of Russia and China in the international system, the future of Europe, and indeed the US as the leading hegemonic power feature prominently. Climate change, cyber power and terrorism pose very real threats to international stability, while the Middle East and parts of Africa remain volatile and unstable regions, generating security challenges that ripple far and wide. These challenges are reflected in student thinking and are themes that resonate throughout the syllabus and core modules of the JCSC.

The evolution in topics being discussed and explored also speaks to the fact that as the context in which defence sits changes, so too must PME. But we must also ward against becoming overly distracted by the latest themes and trends. While these have very real implications for defence that students must indeed wrestle with, PME is also about giving students firm intellectual, conceptual and theoretical tools and foundations that should form part of a through-life learning journey, irrespective of the continually shifting sands of the wider strategic environment. The challenge then going forward is to continue to strive for new and fresh approaches to learning and education – including online and digital content – while retaining the enduring and fundamental building blocks that are tried and tested and continue to serve students well, such as the MA research thesis.

The thesis process promotes greater self-directed learning amongst students, a central pillar of the theory of andragogy,¹ where the learner is in control of the learning process and

¹ Andragogy, advanced by Malcolm Knowles in the 1970s, is a well-known approach to address the distinct needs of adult learners. Knowles' concept of andragogy has been widely adopted by educators from various disciplines around the world.

is supported in diagnosing their own learning needs (Chan, 2010). This support is provided in the form of academic and military supervisors, who are assigned to each student in a partnership arrangement, with each other and the student, for the duration of the thesis process. What follows is a process of dialogue between educator and learner; what Paulo Freire referred to as problem-posing education, where the student is supported in posing questions about the world and then moving towards answers (Giroux, 2010).

Considering those questions and the potential answers will require both critical and creative thinking; two aspects of cognition that are complementary, but not the same. Critical thinking is analytical, evaluative and logical in nature, while creative thinking is more generative, original and divergent in nature (Lowther et al, 2020). Defence requires leaders who can apply both modes of thinking to solve complex problems. In many respects, PME is about preparing our leaders for problems that do not yet exist which is why the emphasis is not to teach students what to think, but rather how to think.

Indeed, the ability to think has never been so important. The contemporary operating environment is a confusingly 'grey', multi-dimensional space where actions can occur at lightning speed, and effects are almost instant. Information is often unreliable and quickly out of date and distinguishing friend from foe is increasingly difficult. The ability to reassess, adapt and iterate through critical analysis and reflection has therefore never been so important, whether this be in a high intensity conflict, or a lower intensity peacekeeping deployment with the United Nations. In this way, the JCSC seeks not simply to expand a student's factual knowledge, but to deliver genuine attitudinal change of lasting quality through the inculcation and development of effective intellect, supported by the necessary analytical, decision-making and communication skills. The MA research thesis supports this process. Students are practiced in taking evidenced-based research, using it, and communicating the findings in a way that is convincing and can be clearly understood (McGuire, 2017).

By way of conclusion, it can often be hard to discern in the midst of rapid change what is really changing, and what the broader consequences are. While much has clearly changed in recent years, as a result of COVID-19 for example, exactly what, and to what extent, will only become clear in the fullness of time. In response to such uncertainty, the foundational elements of PME must remain. The MA thesis process is fundamental to developing officers who are open, enquiring, and confident of critically analysing information, and conceptualising and effectively applying professional knowledge. This in turn fosters an enduring capacity to make sound, logical decisions within a military context. This is one of the primary reasons why the DF values its educational partnership with Maynooth University. The relationship brings some balance to Irish PME, dissuading commanders and their staff from being seduced into thinking that the military has all the answers. Ultimately, it enables the DF's ability to achieve an intellectual edge, which takes on added significance for a country of Ireland's size and modest defence capabilities.

The contributions in this edition of the *Journal of Military History and Defence Studies* reflect the range of topics examined by students taking the JCSC and also the level of attainment in developing their critical thinking and in posing and answering questions of relevance to anyone with an interest in defence. In this respect, they suggest that, in partnership, the

Andragogy is based on six assumptions: (a) self-directedness, (b) need to know, (c) use of experience in learning, (d) readiness to learn, (e) orientation to learning, and (f) internal motivation.

Command and Staff School and Maynooth University are meeting the needs of the students, and of the Defence Forces in terms of PME.

Please note that the views expressed above represent those of the author alone and should not be taken to represent the views of the Department of Defence, the Irish Defence Forces or any other group or organisation.

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