

Armor Basic Officer Leader's Course Redesign: Applying Adaptive Soldier/Leader Training and Education

by LTC Oscar Diano and retired LTC Kevin McEnery

The Armor Branch in the operational force has undergone dramatic experiential and organizational changes. To prepare new Armor lieutenants for 21st Century professional responsibilities as combined-arms leaders, the Armor Basic Officer Leader's Course (ABOLC) has changed how new professionals develop their foundation in branch military/technical expertise.

New Army operating concepts, new organizational structures, new mission and threat assumptions, and a shift in Army leader focus from rotational deployments to a culture of preparedness drive adaptability to the forefront of Army training and leader-development expectations. With that in mind, Armor Branch leaders find themselves in much the same situation as GEN Donn Starry in the mid-1970s, defining new assumptions and expectations for an Army experienced in a specific set of operational practices.¹ Just as GEN Starry had to analyze the practical expectations for Armor leaders from the perspectives of lessons-learned in Vietnam about mounted combat against the implications of the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, today's mounted-warfare professionals must balance experiences hard-earned in Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom with the implications of other contemporary operations in Mali, Gaza and Korea. Just as new perspectives on the evolving character of tactical problems are redefining expectations for mobile, protected, precision firepower and reconnaissance expertise, they are also driving the pursuit for new perspectives on professional leader-development methods and institutional-learning practices.²

The redesigned ABOLC program applies U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command's (TRADOC) Adaptive Soldier/Leader Training and Education (ASLTE) principles to practical changes in the ways the Armor School courses and practices deliver value to new members of the Armor Branch. Leading institutional change is an imperative Armor School leaders have embraced. The ABOLC redesign involves much more than administratively rewriting course lesson plans and program of instruction (PoI) documentation. This article provides leaders in the operating force an explanation of the linkage of an outcomes-based approach to Armor-officer leader development within the Army Learning Model (ALM).

ABOLC serves as the single point of entry for officers who aspire to be a mounted warfare "expert and a professional."³ Armor junior officers must confidently adapt standardized practices and behaviors through judgment grounded in technical proficiency. They must develop professional habits that mark them as competent in how mounted forces organize, train, maintain and fight, especially when conditions are uncertain and dynamic. ABOLC course design and outcomes reflect Army importance placed on developing leader military/technical expertise and professional identity unique to the contributions of Armor Branch professionals.

Expertise develops through understanding and physical practice. All skills, even the most abstract, begin as physical practice.⁴ The ABOLC redesign addresses imperatives of the Army's profession-of-arms campaign, the Army operating concept and the unique expertise Armor professionals contribute to the combined-arms team through their proficiency and training practices. Outcomes-based training principles underpin the ABOLC organizational design and assessment metrics. Creating a productive and relevant student learning environment is central to instructor development and practices.

Making changes to Army Officer Education System (OES) courses is profoundly challenging, given established practices based on hierarchical control, a short-term orientation and biases formed by local practices.⁵ The institution optimizes its staff processes and personnel-manning criteria to maintain organizational predictability and uniformity. Indeed, some Army stakeholders can appear to value predictability more than increasing relevance to a changing profession, creating leadership challenges for senior Armor leaders inspiring the need for professionally necessary OES changes. ABOLC is a model for addressing that professional challenge from the bottom up.

Profession of arms and ABOLC outcomes

Army Doctrinal Reference Publication (ADRP) 1 and TRADOC Pamphlet 525-8-2 describe Army-wide intent for change, but the challenges to implementation in specific institutional programs are more practical than philosophical. ASLTE is TRADOC's methodology for practical application of change in institutional course and leader-development practices. Instructors working within an ASLTE-based approach learn to teach their students how to learn through practice and how such practice develops greater ability, judgment and confidence to adapt under conditions of uncertainty. Relevance requires experts to adapt broad intent and concepts to specific Armor Branch expectations. Armor School leaders are also defining new institutional metrics for leader development that better correlate instructor expertise and student professional performance with new Army operational and training outcome expectations.⁶

All newly commissioned Armor officers believe they have entered into a branch that not only reflects the Army's Warrior Ethos but one that is unique in its value to the larger profession of arms. New Armor lieutenants expect ABOLC to be physically demanding and mentally challenging as well as highly relevant in terms of what they will learn, how they will learn and who will teach them.

Many Army doctrinal principles and practices are profoundly abstract to novice professionals who lack practical experience. No basic course can substitute for, let alone produce, experience-based leadership ability to perform at a high level. Replicating complex combined-arms dynamics in initial training for new officers who lack fundamental proficiency is simply chaotic for them. Judgment and confidence do not spring from observing an expert's presentation, by compliance with perplexing rules or exposure to chaos. Novices want to learn, through practice directly relevant to them, how professional Soldiers progressively develop the expertise central to Army expectations. As new leaders in the Armor Branch, second lieutenants expect their initial individual learning experience to also contribute to organizational goals for building expertise at the fundamentals of reconnaissance and security, precision direct fires, mounted mobility and leader development.

ABOLC learning outcomes must be relevant to the practical context in which Armor officers apply their skills to resolve mission-relevant requirements. Outcomes must also be feasible given the institutional context and resource limitations of a 100-day course for new officers. To link course-learning activities and Armor School resources to create relevant professional-learning outcomes, 2/16 Cavalry senior cadre first used ASLTE design principles to "map" practical relationships among instruction, practice and intent prior to creating a PoI. This mapping process helps create a logical correlation between student-learning activities and organizational resources unhindered by rationalized traditional metrics or past practices.

Long-standing local practice had been for course developers to start by listing doctrinal tasks, turning tasks into topics and topics into lessons. In topic-based courses, developers divide course time by topic and deliver each topic as a discrete lesson in isolation from its practical utility. Topic-based courses are often criticized as reflecting a "check-the-block" approach.⁷ Applying the ALM 2015 intent for transition to an outcomes-based course design approach requires developers to temporarily set aside the doctrinal task list as their start point.

Armor Branch leader-development practices must distinguish between doctrinal task knowledge and compliant performance under known conditions with the professional skills required to perform such tasks effectively under stress and uncertain conditions. ABOLC outcomes describe the professional expertise Armor officers must develop through physical practice and contextual performance improvement. Performance measures reflect skill as the observed human ability to do something particularly well.

Course outcomes are not a simple relisting of published doctrinal tasks or ideal behavioral attributes. Armor School doctrinal inventories list 480 critical tasks for a 19A lieutenant, a professional with less than two years of experience. The TRADOC Common Core Task List exceeds 40 tasks and describes general aspirations for all new Army officers, requiring adaptation to branch-specific application. Doctrinal tasks serve many specific purposes, but their utility as the start point for a productive PoI is limited. Such extensive task lists invite temporal or arbitrary prioritization when time, resources or cadre are constrained.

To address operational and resource imperatives, Armor School leaders must apply their professional expertise and vision to drive better instructional designs relevant to a new mission-command environment.⁸ Instead of copying from previously approved lessons, 2/16 Cav ABOLC senior instructors did original work analysis and development. Research and frank discussion about what makes an Armor officer unique in terms of understanding

and skills drove a common vision for logical progression from newly commissioned to ready for operational experience. Though done freehand on whiteboards during a week of structured discussion sessions, Figure 1 is an example of this analytical work.

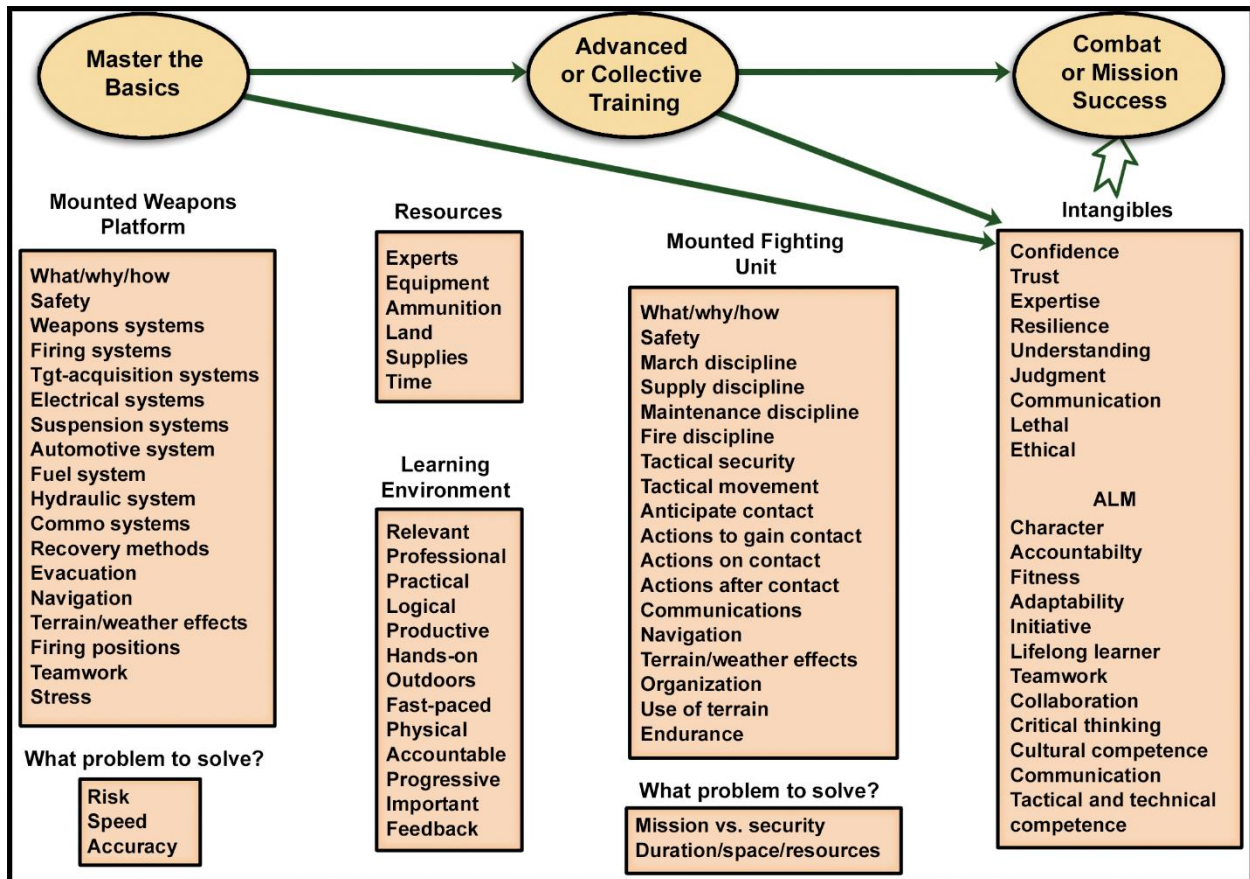


Figure 1. Creating a model for learning.

In ABOLC, professional understanding and skill builds incrementally across the entire PoI. Content establishes student ownership for their previous instruction, incorporation of new knowledge, guided physical practice, expert feedback and, finally, practical application to solve mission-relevant problems. To develop professional confidence, accountability and adaptability, students must experience a direct practical relationship between what they are taught, who teaches them and, critically, why they are taught specific skills and topics in context.

ABOLC is divided into distinct phases with four unifying themes and lasts 19 weeks. Each phase serves as the foundation and prerequisite for the subsequent phase. Each phase includes a “gate event” in which students must demonstrate their readiness for progress to the next phase. To provide unity of effort, the four themes are ground mobility, precision direct fires, troop-leading procedures and fighting tactics. Figure 2 illustrates the basic course map.

A successful ABOLC graduate has physically demonstrated foundational proficiency and confidence in fundamental professional skills through contextual understanding and repetitive application assessed in a structured experience. ABOLC outcomes reflect the special abilities and professional attributes that gaining commanders, noncommissioned officers, Soldiers – and indeed the new lieutenants themselves – should see in an ABOLC graduate upon arrival in his first unit of assignment. Professionally still a novice, the officer is prepared to learn from operational experience. This course map guides outcome-based development of logical course content, adaptive-learning activities and performance measures, and organizational resource management.

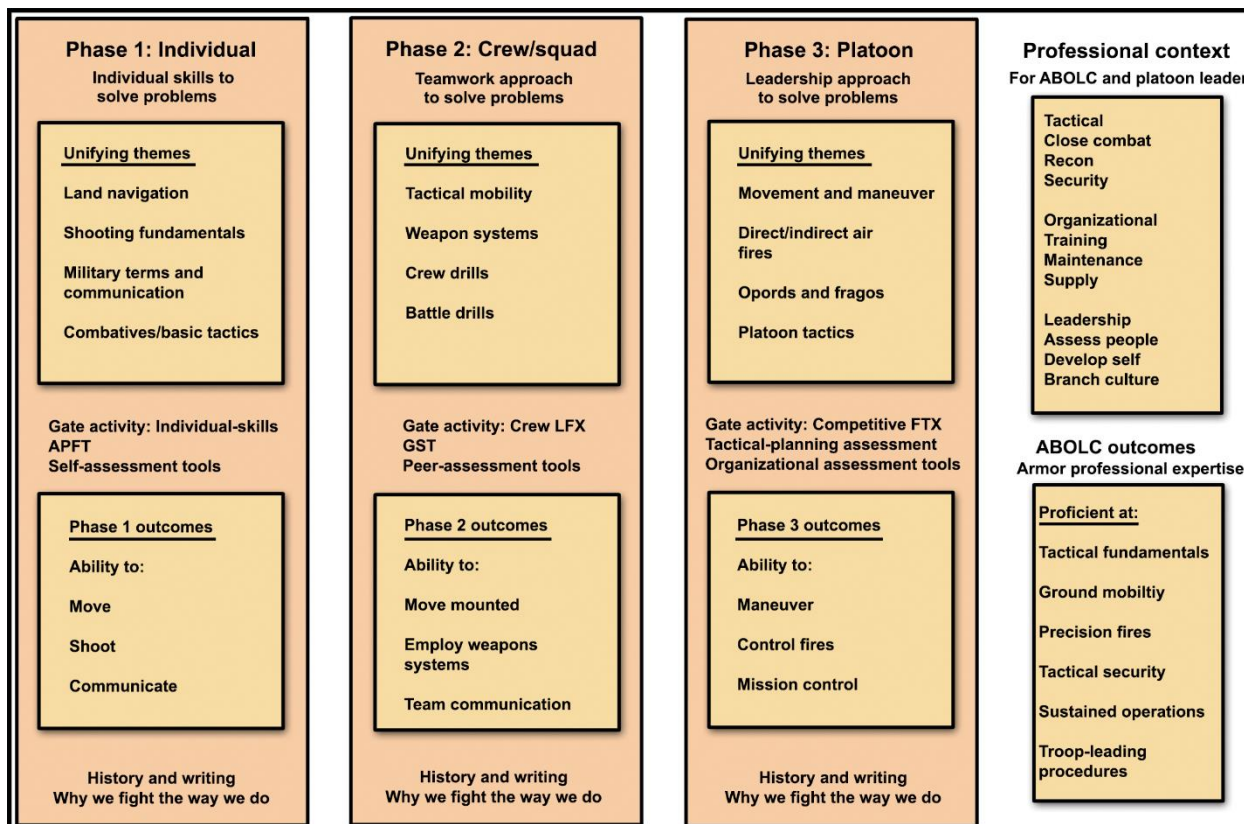


Figure 2. Pilot course map for ABOLC. Building-block approach: phase outcomes reflect readiness for next phase. Course outcomes reflect readiness for unit experience and training.

Conclusion

The Armor School currently leads TRADOC in practical experience at organizational level application of ASLTE principles. It is not an easy road. Sustaining organizational change and new practices over time, personnel turbulence, leader transitions and localized conditions is always difficult. For those cadre and commanders assigned to lead the process during iterative transitions – as opposed to those present at the initiation, understanding of the vision and intent for new approaches – the responsibility they inherit for implementing is critical to maintaining institutional momentum.

Redesigning ABOLC to be more relevant to Army 21st Century operational needs and professional expectations requires leaders to balance two complementary and interrelated perspectives on military training and education. The first perspective is professional, focusing on how senior members of the profession (instructors) develop new members of their professional specialty (students) for their operational responsibilities. The second perspective is organizational, emphasizing accountability for critical resources allocated to the Armor School specifically to deliver measurable force capability and mission readiness.

In balance, they can achieve both efficiency and effectiveness. Left in conflict, they reduce the perceived value and relevance of schools by Army professionals and the operating force.

Change is often hardest for those who have the most experience and who were “raised” according to the Army’s then-prevailing assumptions about training.⁹ The Army certainly will always train critical tasks to high standards in context. However, as a learning organization, the Armor Branch requires new assumptions by its leaders about the ways in which Armor leaders will develop fundamental skills relevant to 21st Century warfare in the newest members of the profession. There is rich debate. Today’s Armor leaders with deep operational experience are critically questioning and effectively redefining TRADOC institutional assumptions that have inhibited adaptive professional development through Army courses.¹⁰

The ABOLC redesign is modeling for TRADOC the practical implementation of Army intent to change how institutional training contributes to the profession of arms and new operational expectations.

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Notes

¹ GEN Donn A. Starry, presentation on FM 100-5, **Operations**, Inter-University Seminar, Fort Leavenworth, KS, March 30, 1978.

² ADRP-1, **The Army Profession**, June 2013; TRADOC Pamphlet 525-3-1, **The U.S. Army Operating Concept, 2016-2028**, Aug. 19, 2010; TRADOC Pamphlet 525-8-2, **Army Learning Concept for 2015**, June 6, 2011.

³ "The Profession of Arms: An Army White Paper," TRADOC, Dec. 8, 2010.

⁴ Richard Sennett, **The Craftsman**, Yale University Press, New Haven & London, 2008; also, K. Anders Ericsson, Ralf Krampe and Clemens Tesch-Römer, "The Role of Deliberate Practice in the Acquisition of Expert Performance," **Psychological Review**, 1993, Vol. 100, No. 3: "Expert performance reflects mastery of the available knowledge or current performance standards and relates to skills that master teachers and coaches know how to train."

⁵ Paraphrasing MG Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr., the Marine Corps representative to the Quadrennial Defense Review, 2013 West Conference, Jan. 30, 2013.

⁶ TRADOC Quality Assurance Office methods are designed to measure whether subordinate organizations follow established TRADOC rules and regulations but cannot measure whether following the rules is actually producing or hurting desired professional outcomes in course graduates or adaptive capabilities in operating-force units.

⁷ 2012 Center for Army Leadership Annual Survey of Army Leadership main findings.

⁸ Armor School Critical Task List, 19A officer lieutenant, approval date Nov. 2, 2012; "Adapting the Army's Training and Leader Development Programs for Future Challenges," J.C. Crowley et al, RAND Report prepared for the U.S. Army, 2013; 2010 Army operating concept.

⁹ Hierarchical organizations largely require its most experienced people to define requirements and measurement criteria. However, those most knowledgeable and experienced with conventional wisdom and practices are typically very uncomfortable absorbing new information and creating new criteria for new expectations.

¹⁰ TRADOC Pamphlet 525-8-2, ALM 2015, Chapter 1.