

Webisode Narrative Themes

Reinforcing the Lessons of Local Nation Training Missions

“To its credit, the institutional Army learned these hard lessons, from successes and failures, during and after each of the cases examined in this study. However, they were often forgotten as the Army prepared for the next major conventional conflict. These lessons are still important and relevant today.”¹

In large organizations, lessons are often lost because they never inculcated across and between levels of the organization. The lessons are documented at the higher echelons of the Army and archived in repositories mostly frequented by academics. The lessons learned are typically not effectively pushed down to the operator in the form of context, relevant stories and practice. By sharing information across and between levels, the Army, as an institution, would not only learn lessons but also establish a tradition of diffusing those lessons across echelons and cohorts.

The quintessential human means for diffusing lessons is through a tradition of storytelling. Representations of experiences, as in cave paintings and storytelling, are the oldest traditions of recounting events, imparting lessons, and projecting affect. These formats structure information in part-whole relations affording the listener or reader schematic frameworks to interpret past, present, or future analogous events. The diffusion of lessons through stories, using technology-mediated means diffuses lessons in a rapid and salient manner that is resistant to forgetting. *Webisodes* are the technology-mediated means for rapid diffusion of lessons. Webisodes are 5 to 10 minute online vignettes, playable on mobile devices and whose lessons are easily promulgated through social media.

Since all permutations of experiences in the deployed environment cannot be known in advance, proscribed intentional memorization of facts or scripted sequences are likely to be of limited value. Thus, a narrative approach is taken to orient the observer to recurrent themes. Examples of themes are the “clash of cultures,” “struggle with moral dilemmas,” or “tempering of frustration.” The latter as in tempering of frustration of individual achievement motivation in deference to slower, systematic change of a nation developing to provide security to its citizens.

Advising missions in Iraq, Afghanistan, Africa, South America, and other volatile locations have been and continue to be strategically important to the United States. They establish headwaters of stability and security for the purpose of cultivating peace and prosperity and for isolating and containing destabilizing violent and criminal elements. There is nothing more reinforcing to a people than relieving pain and suffering, whether through improving security, medical care, or logistical infrastructure. At the crux of these missions is an overarching operational plan that meets and advances the limit of the local nationals’ competence to build, sustain and advance societal systems.

At the tactical level, training involves technically proficient individuals teaching those who are less proficient in how to perform tasks. The result is teaching the local national how to perform a task as proscribed by the trainer, thus the trainer and not the local national does

¹ One of numerous articles pointing to the issue of “forgetting” in the institutional Army. http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/army/csi_op18_ramsey_advisors1.pdf

the thinking.² This type of training establishes fundamental content knowledge from which the local nationals can deliberate to advance their own ideas. However, building headwaters means seeding functional systems of which local nationals take ownership. Thus, not only do local nationals need to know how, but they also need to know why. The later advances training to the stage of local nationals thinking for themselves and developing creative solutions to their situations. In this way, the training mission not only involves “how to” task oriented training but also involves training that promotes local nationals to think for themselves about solutions to their situations.

At the tactical level, direct daily contact with the local national culture often brings about friction. That friction can be classified into themes as expressed above. Bringing those themes to the forefront and discerning them will help those assigned to teach and train missions to be more self-aware. That self-awareness is shown to promote self-control, perspective taking, creative achievement, and self-esteem.³

As an example of pursuing a narrative style drawing on themes rather than specific facts, the following story is offered to highlight the clash of culture’s theme. The conflict in this theme can arise through naiveté and can manifest itself when there are fundamental, sub-conscious beliefs that conflict with those of another culture. Naiveté and a clash of belief may not be readily reconciled because of the centrality of the ethic held by each culture. For example, western medicine (i.e., U.S. culture) holds the value of the patient as the highest concern (e.g. privacy issues, contraception policy for teenagers, saving a pregnant women with toxemia over the fetus if necessary, etc). Other cultures, including some regions of U.S. have very different core ethics. For example, as part of a wellness assessment for admitting Afghan women into the Afghan Military Academy a Pap smear exam was performed. The U.S. health-care advisors performed the exam because that is best practice for well-women exams in the U.S. Protecting the patient from cervical cancer is of utmost importance and the procedure is routine. However, for the Afghan culture, a young women’s virginity brings honor to the family. Any indication of a loss of that virginity brings shame and the potential of an honor killing, even if that indication was a result of an exam and not infidelity. After the procedure the Afghan women were distraught and complained vociferously. Deliberating the theme of “clash of culture” will bring to the forefront how core ethics will clash. With that clash, advisors will have to work through anger and a tendency affront under the guise of “doing the right thing.” The webisodes in this case would have an empathic component to temper feelings of anger toward how women are treated and promote discussions of ways to creatively resolve the impasse between western concern for the patient and in this case, Afghan culture of the value placed on a woman’s purity. The larger lesson is self-awareness of one’s core ethic and how others may not share that ethic.

The webisodes are designed to diffuse lessons learned and promote a self-awareness of the complexities of advising missions enabling a learning process that accelerates experiences. The lessons from the webisodes will be imparted through the story of a protagonist (e.g., Army doctor) and buttressed by expert commentary. The webisodes will be easily accessed and downloadable for viewing on mobile devices. The download site will include a blog site and other resources to promote diffusion of lessons learned.

² Essenhigh, R. (2000). A few thoughts on the difference between education and training. National Forum: The Phi Kappa Phi Journal, Spring, p. 46.

³ Duval, T.S. & Wicklund, R.A. (1972). A theory of objective self-awareness. New York: Academic.

Through the mediation of technology, a tradition of diffusing lessons across echelons and cohorts will be established.