Distance education and e-learning: The SANDF should get it right!

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Introduction

Education in South Africa is a controversial issue. In the military context, education is even more complex. The South African military struggled and is still struggling to develop an educational ethos at those Education, Training and Development (ETD) institutions primarily responsible for education. This specifically concerns the Military Academy and its Faculty of Military Science, the National War College and the National Defence College. Worldwide military education faces an era that is primarily information driven, in which electronic and other forms of communication has made distance almost irrelevant, and in which there is a growing demand for well-educated soldier-diplomats and soldier-scholars. These considerations necessitate the development and roll-out of a
distance education (DE) and e-learning system in the SANDF as a matter of urgency. This has indeed become the rule for militaries worldwide. Why has it not been done by the South African military as yet? The answer is rooted, to some extent, in the general educational problems in the South African military and its efforts to roll-out a system of DE and e-learning. The observations about the SANDF in this commentary should, however, be seen as tentative and exploratory in nature.

Educators, students and curriculums

From a general educational perspective there is little doubt that the directing staff at most ETD institutions work extremely hard. At the same time, one is often left with the impression that the work of the directing staff at most ETD institutions is – in Foster’s words – more consumptive than productive. More specifically, at the War and Defence Colleges, the work pace of the directing staff is more in line with the training culture of the military than the educational culture that is required to install a higher order holistic and cognitive understanding of policy, war and strategy that falls within the ambit of these ‘educational’ institutions. There are a number of reasons underpinning this particular problem. The most obvious is the general lack of (civilian) academic faculties that has become the rule at such institutions the world over. Of particular interest is the absence of postgraduate academic qualifications among the directing staff. Together with a shortage of any military experience of note in the South African military at present, these institutions face a certain amount of institutional paralysis – a willingness to educate and train, but an inability to do so.

Educational institutions, in general, are discriminatory by nature. The principle that not everybody has the aptitude for higher education and training is widely accepted. Militaries have a triangular and hierarchical system of command which implies that not all officers have the propensity for high command and that not all officers should be accepted, as a rule, at the most senior military courses. Militaries normally have a system in place whereby the most competent of their officers are accepted for attendance of the more senior academic programmes and, consequently, promotion to high command and staff positions. Militaries normally apply the principle of ‘up or out’. Yet, it is difficult to find the traces of such a merit-based system in the SANDF. This means that officers who do not have the aptitude for academic studies or high command often end up in the educational programmes of the senior ETD programmes in the SANDF – and they are promoted to high rank!

The curricula of ETD institutions often reflect more of a foundation in training than education. The approach is a mile wide and an inch deep, to be precise! The intensity of the programmes is very high. Students are overburdened with an extensive amount of information. At the same time, though, very little time is spent on rigorous debate,
reflection and, eventually, the internalisation of knowledge. As a result, not much learning is taking place, in spite of the overload of information students are exposed to. With the exception of the Military Academy, it is difficult to identify an SANDF ETD institution where information is processed into knowledge, and where the focus is on debate, reading and writing – the critical ingredients of any learning process. Like the military in the 1980s, the SANDF neither reads nor writes and is suffering from a certain amount of mental stagnation. In the 1980s, Heitman identified three possible reasons for this organisational culture: the bureaucratic process to obtain security clearance for anything that was written, the absence of suitable local military journals, and the absence of any professional, financial or other incentive. Not much has changed in this regard over the last twenty years.

**Cost and structural support**

Until now, the SANDF has not used DE and e-learning on a grand scale in the education of its cadres. A number of factors seem to stand out with regard to DE and e-learning in the SANDF. The SANDF, obviously, views DE as a means to save money. Yet, money needs to be spent to roll-out a proper DE system before money can be saved on the ETD budget. DE in the SANDF has never received the kind of budgetary support necessary for a full roll-out of a workable DE system. Instead, the SANDF is simultaneously trying to save money on the instrument that is supposed to be the money saver in the ETD environment.

Different ETD institutions in the SANDF have at different times tried to implement a system of DE. One of the reasons why DE does not proceed beyond the point of an experimental phase is the lack of structural support from the SANDF. There is no central structure in the SANDF that is principally responsible for the development of a DE system, that budgets for the implementation thereof and that is responsible for the organisation-wide roll-out or implementation of such a system. The lack of such structures leads to an inability to learn from the experimental phases of DE in some of the ETD institutions in the SANDF. Consequently, the SANDF does not seem to build up an institutional memory concerning DE. The South African State Information Technology Agency (SITA) is testing a learning management system designed for the SANDF, which will hopefully be distributed throughout the SANDF as a stepping-stone to a broader basis for DE and e-learning.

People in uniform are normally well-developed as ‘managers of violence’, to use the Huntingtonian phrase, and not as DE and e-learning specialists. Successful implementation of a DE system requires personnel with special expertise – people who are well qualified in the educational field in general and who have specialised in DE. Any DE-based university, such as the University of South Africa (Unisa), is proof of the need to build these special knowledge and skills. No educational institution can expect from its lecturing or directing staff to take care of the logistical and communication requirements that underpin a
successful DE system as well. Time is a scarce commodity and not much time will remain for quality research and teaching if directing staff also became responsible for logistical and other interactions with DE students. A total lack of knowledgeable personnel to implement DE and who understand the benefits of such a system is most probably the most important reason underpinning the inability to implement a DE system of education in the SANDF. In short, a proper DE system will have to be implemented by DE experts as DE is qualitatively different from ‘residential’ education. Most DE universities have dedicated DE units or structures just to monitor, evaluate and hone the own processes.

Technology as the key factor

The SANDF seems to display a certain aversion to technology, and specifically a reluctance to become web-connected. The use of a paper-based system for DE is without doubt a possibility. However, the ability to communicate with students via e-mail is the most basic technological requirement for successful DE. It would even be more critical in the training environment. At the Military Academy, for example, lecturers communicate with more ease with colleagues on the other side of the world than with their own students in the SANDF. One has some appreciation and sympathy for the concerns about operational security in the SANDF if it becomes web-connected. At the same time, though, for any organisation not to be web-connected in the present age is a scary thought. Certainly, there should be a system – such as WebCT – that could facilitate e-based DE without endangering organisational or operational security.

IT infrastructure and support in the SANDF in general are inflexible, time-consuming and reactive. Computers in the SANDF are not allowed to be connected to both internal networks and the Internet. The SANDF should consider decentralising the management of certain IT and software in the SANDF, investing in a larger IT infrastructure to facilitate broader access to the internet which will also improve capabilities for computer-based simulation and training, and provide good-quality and user-friendly Internet security and anti-virus software to the SANDF as a whole with automatic online updates. Armed forces the world over make use of Internet services. What underpins the SANDF’s reluctance to afford its members access to computer and web-based services?

Organisational considerations and attitudes

In spite of the high emphasis on student-based education at most higher education institutions in South Africa, many teachers and lecturers will testify to the growing need for more contact time between students and lecturers. The problems in our present school system are a definite factor to consider. Underlying this question is the general issue of whether we have a student body in the SANDF that is conducive for the
successful implementation of a DE system. This question has many dimensions of which some may be (politically) controversial. However, academics have a responsibility to place these issues on the table for debate in spite of their controversial nature. Consider, for example, the number of enlisted members in the SANDF who are not IT literate. IT is a threat to them. Or, consider the number of SANDF members of junior rank who have access, specifically after hours, to a web-connected computer.

What about the organisational attitude of the SANDF towards ETD in general? All people who have studied on a part-time basis will testify to the personal sacrifices part-time studies require – much more than in the case of full-time studies. This issue has two sides: the question of the willingness of DE candidates to persevere in order to be successful, and the question of organisational support and whether the organisation is willing to create the environment (in terms of time, for example) to facilitate successful pursuance of DE studies. The money saved by not attending residential learning opportunities must be critically compared against the cost of working time lost during participation in DE. The more senior the learner, the more significant this effect. ‘Cost’ must also be considered in terms of the reduced contribution of the learners to the operational readiness of the unit where they are working.

There is a huge difference between education and training. To what extent is DE an appropriate tool for training? DE is after all precisely what it says – distance education. Besides, education has always been a side-issue for the SANDF. Training is a group-oriented activity to developed practical skills. This raises questions about the suitability of DE in the military regimentalised training environment. Stated differently, DE may be very effective in those ETD institutions in the SANDF that are more educational in their orientation, such as the Military Academy and the National War and Defence Colleges. There is real doubt whether it can be effective at all at institutions that function on the tactical level and that are oriented towards the provision of skills-based development. One can imagine that it can be done; however, it will be techno-intensive.

On a more positive note, though, DE will make training opportunities more accessible for reserve force members. This will have positive spin-offs for the SANDF and the broader civil community. At present, a lot of lip serve is being paid to the importance of the reserve forces. In reality, the Defence Force has allowed the disintegration of the reserve forces to a point where there is real doubt whether the SANDF has the capacity to revive the reserve force system in South Africa.

**Concluding remark**

What should be done to develop an ETD system based on DE and e-learning? The SANDF will not be able to develop and implement DE and e-learning as long as it
remains an ‘over and above’ assignment for the directing staff at the ETD institutions. The SANDF needs to plan and resource the implementation of DE and e-learning in the organisation as a whole properly. Penny pinching when implementing DE and e-learning at ETD institutions is the surest path to failure. Proper resourcing implies inter alia the appointment of personnel with the appropriate DE and e-learning skills and knowledge, creation of the necessary structures to roll out DE and e-learning at organisational level and the willingness to provide both the electronic systems and the training that is needed to empower people to use these systems to their own benefit. Only if the SANDF follows such a holistic approach will DE and e-learning grow into the powerful tool that it could be for the development of people.

Notes

1 Based on a paper read at the Defence Academies and Colleges International e-Learning Conference with the theme ‘Network Centric Learning: Towards Authentic ePractices’ presented at Stellenbosch University in cooperation with the University of New South Wales and Cranfield University, 25–27 March 2009. Stellenbosch, South Africa.
3 The SANDF: Midwifes of peace in Africa: an evaluation of the SANDF involvement in peace support operations, Paper presented by Dr Thomas Mandrup at SA Army Seminar 21, 26–28 February 2009, provides a more detailed exposition of the lack of a meritocratic system in the South African military.
4 A well-educated SA Army member noted that there is a tendency to overload students at training institutions without focusing on the quality of learning. Many theoretical DE assignments are short answers straight from the textbooks. Such assignments often do not involve effective learning. Tactical courses increasingly contain learning objectives that should be addressed in educational institutions rather than in training courses (civil education, etc). He noted that the SANDF ‘is trying to nurse the symptoms of a poor educational system in the country and unscientific recruitment in the SANDF’ (e-mail correspondence, 16 February 2009).
6 Interview with an SA Army colonel, Saldanha, 29 January 2009.
7 E-mail correspondence with an SA Army major, 16 February 2009.
9 E-mail correspondence with a senior SA Army colonel, 18 February 2008.
10 Remarks by Professor Renfrew Christie, Dean of Research, University of the Western Cape, at the 3rd Sea Power for Africa Symposium, Cape Town, 12 March 2009.
11 E-mail correspondence with a senior SA Army colonel, 18 February 2008.
12 Ibid.
13 Interview with an SA Army colonel, Saldanha, 29 January 2009.