

Foster Professional Growth Opportunities

Marine Corps PME should recognize and encourage the value of day-to-day, informal on-the-job learning

by LtGen Brian D. Beaudreault & Col Eric L. Chase, USMCR(Ret)

In 1989, then-Commandant Gen Alfred M. Gray, Jr., presided over the launch of the Marine Corps University (MCU) as the Service's primary educational institution. His interest in PME never waned. Twenty-six years later, at the 2015 CornerStone Conference at MCU—speaking to a roomful of active and Reserve commanders and sergeants major about his formidable PME legacy—a long-retired Gen Gray quipped, “It doesn’t cost anything to think.”¹

In a published reach-out to all Marines, current MCU President, BGen William J. Bowers, delivered an invitation for ideas about PME—stating,

Our PME System is in a constant state of review and refinement, and *we need recommendations from the force* to help us develop and deliver the most professional, current, relevant, and challenging curriculum possible in order to prevent stagnancy.²

With a proposal that will add immense and enduring value to PME, and thereby to Marines’ daily professional lives and to the Corps, we embrace Gen Bowers’ encouragement to try to identify where and how PME can be refined and improved. Something important is categorically absent from today’s system, something that can be incorporated without at all diminishing the existing and developing indispensable components of PME.

Marine Corps Order (MCO) 1553.4B describes what PME now entails:

The Marine Corps PME philosophy is that PME is a career long study of the foundations of the military profession.

>LtGen Beaudreault is the Deputy Commandant, Plans, Policies, and Operations, HQMC.

>>Col Chase is an Attorney in private practice who served as a Platoon Commander in Vietnam and retired in 1998 after more than 30 years of active and Reserve service.

PME is designed to equip Marines with the analytical skills necessary to exercise sound military judgment in contemporary operations. The Marine Corps PME program is a progressive learning system designed to educate Marines by-grade throughout their careers. It specifies required knowledge, by area, at each career level, and provides guidelines to PME institutions in structuring their curricula. Participation in this program is an institutional expectation. *The program consists of resident instruction, distance education, professional self-study, and the Marine Corps Professional Reading Program.* Commanders at every echelon will ensure Marines are afforded the opportunity to participate in their respective PME courses established within this Order (emphasis added).³

This MCO powerfully confirms the Corps’ investment in, and reliance upon, the continuing education of Marines “throughout their careers.” PME is a noteworthy and crucial enterprise that solidifies learning as a cornerstone of professional excellence, intellectual growth, and strategic thinking. A canvassing of dozens of PME-related articles in the *Marine Corps Gazette* and other publications over the past 60 years yields a trove of exceptional

thoughts, insights, and ideas, but nearly all adopt as a given the current scope of the MCO’s coverage—often with creative recommendations for adjustments of what is in the present system. One *Gazette* article from 1966 encourages an on-the-job program to “within reason, meet the standards of technical proficiency attained at the parallel service school.” That piece from a half-century ago defined its specific focus (using unit training as a substitute for formal training in fields involving technology) but did not visit the breadth advocated here.⁴

In practice, the current system generates inestimable rewards for the Corps and generations of Marines. Positive study and feedback prove the enduring quality of career-long PME to all ranks and MOSs. The treasure trove of ideas to improve the relevance of formal schools to the art of warfighting grows every year, and we applaud that trend. MCU has been especially proactive in the field,⁵ and is in the forefront of academic development of and preparation for the future of war, as demonstrated by the “Gray Scholar Program.”

As anyone who has worn a uniform knows, some of the most profound educational development comes with hands-on experience, collegial dis-

cussions among peers, and “lessons learned.” Indeed, where better “to equip Marines with the analytical skills to exercise sound military judgment” than during the performance of regular duties within a command structure? Importantly, where better to practice and emulate qualities of leadership? These on-the-job practices are essential for the Corps, and it is time to afford them explicit standing within the PME system.

The existing official PME regimen “to educate Marines by-grade, at each career level” divides curricula between two kinds of overarching learning: schools (resident and online) and self-study—to include professional reading. The sources of human learning, however, are vast—more expansive than the enumerated list in the PME MCO, which is silent on on-the-job education. Yet, most Marines devote the majority of their active duty to service in the Fleet or at duty stations. This everyday military routine forms the heart and soul of the profession, and it underscores the “P” in PME. Marines learn much of their art, leadership skills, and practices of war outside the parameters of the PME program as presently defined by the MCO. These applications should be ratified in the MCO as valuable professional educational tools so their observance in every Marine’s “real world” is consistent, constant, and never overlooked.

Over a few days together (interestingly, while at a formal school program on a college campus in 2018), we reasoned that a third leg to create a PME “triad” will fully embrace where and how Marines should all learn across a full spectrum. That addition will buttress the system as now formulated and effectively embrace every Marine’s continuous access to education. If added, this third category will recognize the inestimable value of on-the-job growth and education to individual Marines, their units, and the Corps. In specific terms, we amend the defining sentence of *MCO 1553.4B* to read as follows, with proposed new language in italics:

The [PME] Program consists of resident instruction, distance education, professional self-study, the Marine Corps Professional Reading Pro-

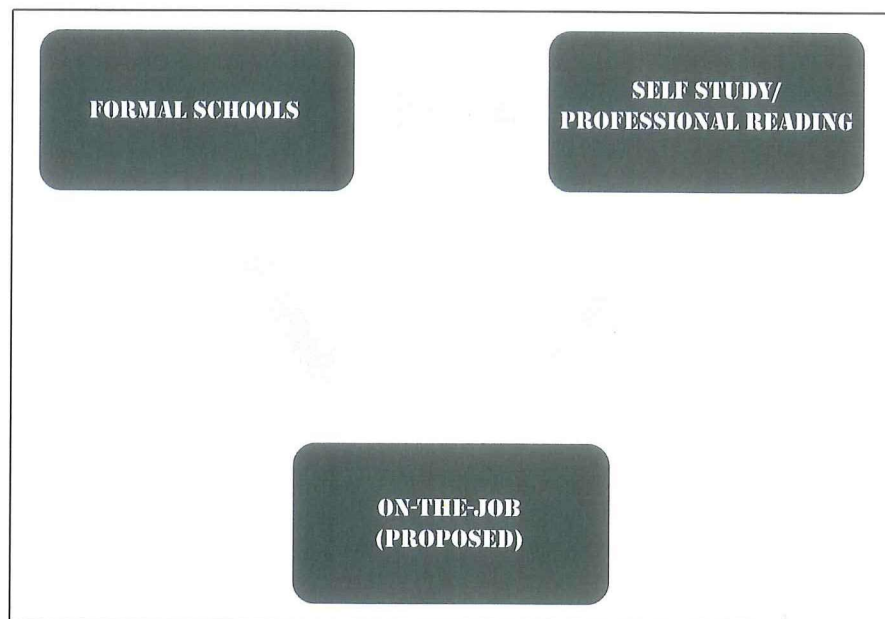


Figure 1.

gram, and on-the-job learning events, opportunities, and processes, such as (but without limitation) informal scheduled meetings, lessons learned, reviews, critiques, training exercises, after-action analyses, commanders’ time discussions, mentoring and other exchanges among Marines about topics relevant to the military profession. (emphasis added)

As we see today’s formulation, the PME MCO includes all manner of learning—*except* for the “live” education that flows from what Marines do every day in performing and evaluating regular duties. Of course, “regular duties” comprise the lion’s share of every Marine’s professional life and learning. This kind of learning is fundamental, foundational, and constant. It is also consistent with and complementary to today’s PME MCO, as well as training standards and principles such as those set forth in *MCRP 3-OA, Unit Training Management Guide* and *MCRP 3-OB, How to Conduct Training*.⁶

An obvious question is whether, as a practical matter, there is anything to gain in adding to PME directives what Marines already do every day, without institutionalization. Put another way, performing regular duties—including learning about them and exchanging ideas—is inherently already part of the job and needs no connection with of-

ficially sanctioned PME. Right? Emphatically, we say no. For a number of reasons, we argue that this proposed new PME category is a vital one for official embodiment in the MCO that will reap myriad benefits with no detriment or appreciable cost. Here are just some of those benefits:

- Official recognition in the MCO of the educational value of what Marines do and say with each other in honing knowledge and skills in a regular duty environment underscores the importance of PME, not just at school or during self-study, but all the time. The reality of service life (and in civilian endeavors as well) is that people teach, learn, and mentor as they go. The PME system should acknowledge these realities and place on-the-job PME into a logical PME triad (see Figure 1).
- The three legs of the proposed PME vision are interrelated, interactive, and mutually reinforcing. There is no “either-or” conundrum in this proposal. Every Marine must access all three legs of PME. As Figure 1 suggests, on-the-job learning is a place for testing and applying the lessons of formal schools and self-study. Moreover, Marines will be better equipped to bring their on-the-job ideas to their schools and reading experience if they have frequently



The proposed new category will reap benefits with no appreciable cost. (Photo by Sgt Justin Smith.)

discussed them with fellow Marines in their units. Put another way, the third leg of the triad will nurture the other two and vice versa.

- Lessons learned in the field, including while serving in combat zones, increase the likelihood of incorporating best practices into a regular routine—reducing mistakes and correcting them.

of feedback among Marines serving together.

- By its nature, on-the-job education is interactive, distinct from mostly passive classroom attendance or reading. Many studies confirm that interactivity promotes better retention, understanding, and implementation.
- The knowledge that superiors may reflect this kind of learning in fitness

Thinking and sharing thoughts are activities for all Marines, all the time, wherever their assignments may take them.

- The proposed PME triad accommodates a realistic confirmation (or rejection) of what Marines learn at formal schools and in their professional reading. It also better equips them to challenge or accept concepts studied in those schools or during off-hours devoted to the Professional Reading Program.

- Discussions or roundtables during an occasional PME lunch, commander's time, or off-hours encourage participants to conceive and adopt best practices and test them with fellow Marines. There is a continuous loop

reports and other evaluations incentivizes healthy learning attitudes.

- Although some might object to the proposal on the ground that, arguably, there is no meaningful way to objectively measure—much less specify—what exactly Marines must learn on the job, we see this kind of flexibility as a clear benefit. It will give commanders, junior officers, and both senior and junior enlisted personnel flexibility and discretion to explore questions and discoveries as they arise in the course of their duties. The consequent give-and-take of informal communica-

tive sessions is already commonplace for Marines, and a clear emphasis in the PME MCO would encourage more of it. Thus, for us, any lack of “measurability” or “grading” will be a plus, not a minus.

- In a school or reading environment, there is minimal true hands-on or real-world testing of classroom work. That is the nature of these kinds of PME. With the proposed addition to PME, lessons learned can be both realistic and contemporaneous, not just theoretical or hypothetical.

This article encourages the expansion of PME to honor the entirety of Marines' professional lives as learning experiences. Gen Gray's counsel that “it doesn't cost anything to think” applies especially when Marines carry out their missions, whether during hostilities or peacetime. Thinking and sharing thoughts are activities for all Marines, all the time, wherever their assignments may take them.

Notes

1. John J. Keenan, “Staying Focused on PME,” *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Quantico, VA: June 2015).

2. William J. Bowers, “The MCU President responds,” *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Quantico, VA: June 2018).

3. Headquarters Marine Corps, *Marine Corps Order 1553.4B, Professional Military Education (PME)*, (Washington, DC: January 2008).

4. Aden D. Windham, “On the Job Training,” *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Washington, DC: July 1966).

5. For example, see Benjamin Jensen, “Diverging From the Arbitrary: The Gray Scholars and Innovation in the U.S. Marine Corps,” *War on the Rocks*, (Online: August 2018), available at <https://warontherocks.com>.

6. *MCRP 3-0A* and *MCRP 3-0B* were published by HQMC, November 1996 and August 2015, respectively.

>Editor's Note: The authors attended the 2018 Harvard Kennedy School program for Senior Executives in National and International Security.

