

Transforming Army Learning Through Communities of Practice

Major Peter Kilner, U.S. Army

THE ARMY TRAINING and Leader Development Panel's (ATLDP's) Officer Study Report identified numerous challenges that the Army is addressing as it transforms to the Objective Force. The report called on the Army to "establish new systems, models, and procedures from the best of existing programs to develop leaders for full spectrum operations."¹

As one of its responses, the Army is developing a digital Warrior Knowledge Network (WKN) to support leader development. The WKN will be a web-based knowledge system that provides Army leaders and soldiers with tailored, timely, and relevant knowledge and information. The dominant structure of the WKN will be online communities of practice (COPs) that provide a powerful new model for knowledge sharing and learning.

This article defines COPs and overviews their enormous potential for the Army, especially in the areas of leader development, doctrine, and culture.² It is not an overstatement to say that COPs have the potential to transform the way the Army does business, helping it to become a knowledge-based learning organization that is even more able to educate and train its leaders, develop its doctrine, and inspire commitment from its people.³

Theory and Practice

Although COPs have always existed, the Internet has enabled them to become exponentially more powerful. COPs are voluntary associations of people bound together by a shared passion for a particular practice.⁴ They are self-selected groups whose members come together to help each other by sharing professional knowledge, stories, ideas, and tools. Such communities seem to form naturally. For example, in antiquity, artisans formed corporations, and in the Middle Ages, tradesmen formed guilds.⁵ In the U.S. Army, recurring officers' calls and

lunchtime discussions often foster small COPs. COPs are not defined by how their members communicate, which may be through journals, conferences, informal meetings, list serves, bulletin

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boards, and any other forms of communication. Rather, COPs are defined by conversations, relationships, and a spirit of collaboration that develop via various means of communication.

The CompanyCommand.com website has become a functional COP for military company-level commanders.⁶ Visitors to the site are drawn by their shared passion for command. On the site, former and experienced company commanders share their command-related stories, ideas, and tools with current and future commanders. Commanders who have a question or problem can post it, inviting other members of the community—many of whom have helpful knowledge on the topic—to offer advice. Like an officers' call at the club, the website is a forum for leaders to informally share knowledge.⁷ Participants tell stories, offer and debate ideas, and look for guidance. There is no gatekeeper of knowledge. In this marketplace of ideas, everyone is free to speak, yet all are expected to use their own judgment to assess the quality of what they hear.

In some respects, online conversations can elicit more candor than face-to-face communications do. Speaking without attribution, participants are more likely to offer unconventional ideas and say what they really think at the moment. "I can ask

questions in this forum that are somewhat taboo within my own organization . . . [and] can get real-world answers from experienced officers who are not in my rating chain,” one captain wrote to CompanyCommand.com. Participants find themselves assessing their hidden assumptions and ways

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of thinking when they air their ideas and receive feedback that challenges their thinking. Anonymity forces participants to focus on the quality of the ideas presented rather than on distractions such as their contributor’s rank, position, or appearance.

Another important and unique advantage of online discussions is that they are not constrained by time and space. Participants can engage in asynchronous discussions with fellow practitioners around the world, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Informal conversations among professionals that in earlier times occurred regularly on Friday evenings at officers’ clubs are now possible anytime, anywhere. Leaders with Internet access and a passion for self-development can join a conversation wherever they are, whenever they want, which is helpful for a globally deployed Army.

Making Knowledge Useful

COPs can and should play a huge role in Army leaders’ professional development for several reasons. They save leaders from having to reinvent the wheel, they impart tacit knowledge to leaders through vicarious experiences, and they do not merely share and transfer knowledge; they actually help to create new knowledge. Finally, COPs facilitate the just-in-time learning that leaders require in the contemporary operating environment.

Army leaders have a bad habit of reinventing the wheel. Even though leaders rotate through many of the same jobs, the Army has no systematic way of capturing and building on its many lessons learned. Leaders consider themselves lucky if their predecessors left a continuity file and are largely on their own to develop from scratch their own systems and

products. This enormous disuse of institutional knowledge wastes time and money, and it frustrates leaders who value efficiency.

COPs enable practitioners to harness and build upon the knowledge each generation of leader gains. In a sense, COPs are Armywide continuity files that are living, current, and easily transferable. For example, members of the company commander community post products and tools on CompanyCommand.com, such as policy letters, operation order (OPORD) formats, and training management matrixes, so that incoming commanders can use them as time-saving templates. Captains at the armor and infantry captains’ career courses exploit this resource. Students download the site’s selection of OPORD formats and then experiment with them during orders process exercises. By the time they graduate and move to their command assignments, those captains have usually developed an OPORD format with which they are comfortable and rehearsed. By providing baseline products and tools for new commanders, the company commander COP frees those commanders to focus on leading their soldiers.

COPs also enable leaders to benefit from the experiences of their entire community. While it is great to learn from one’s own mistakes, it is even better—for the sake of unit effectiveness and one’s subordinates—to learn from someone else’s mistakes. The stories and lessons learned that are shared within COPs do just that. Such stories enable leaders to learn vicariously about situations they have not yet encountered in their own operational experiences.

COPs do not merely share and transfer knowledge; they actually help to create new knowledge that contributes to leaders’ professional development. COPs facilitate conversations among practitioners about their practices. Conversations among knowledgeable, engaged people tend to produce ideas. Very often, this interplay of ideas generates an entirely new idea, one that would not have occurred otherwise. This is how COPs generate new knowledge. With an online COP, that knowledge is captured in writing and is immediately and permanently available to the entire community.⁸

Just-in-Time Learning

The knowledge that COPs develop can help Army leaders adapt quickly to achieve competency across the full spectrum of operations. In today’s environment, it is nearly impossible for the formal Officer Education System (OES) to prepare lead-



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ers for every possible situation they will encounter in performing their duties. Army leaders simply have too many requirements. Twenty years ago, Army leaders were competent if they could fight the Army's role in mid- and high-intensity battles on linear battlefields. Today, Army leaders must be able to operate across the full spectrum of operations, from stability and support operations to high-intensity conflict in joint and combined organizations on contiguous and noncontiguous battlefields.⁹ They must also be able to employ both Legacy and Interim Force organizations using Active and Reserve component forces. Clearly, leaders' tasks have multiplied, yet the time available for them to learn those tasks has not.

COPs represent a model for professional self-development that can fill the gap between leaders' knowledge requirements and the institutional Army's resources. The current OES was designed during and for the Cold War, but times have changed faster than the Army educational model has.¹⁰ The OES still primarily provides "just-in-case" learning, offering all officers essentially the same generic education just in case they may one

day need the information. As officers' knowledge requirements have increased, however, the just-in-case system has not been able to keep pace. Officers' educational needs are too diverse. Consequently, the OES coursework has become increasingly irrelevant to officers' needs.¹¹ What officers want and need is a resource that enables them to succeed in the particular circumstances of their actual duty assignments.

Instead of relying solely on generic just-in-case education, the Army could also use the knowledge that COPs create and capture to provide tailored just-in-time learning. As these communities develop and mature, they will become repositories of knowledge on particular practices. As such, leaders en route to those practices can use the communities' resources to quickly learn about them. Consider, for example, a battalion motor officers' (BMOs') online COP. Over time, that community would assemble lessons learned, report formats, and other helpful tricks of the BMO trade. The community members could even rate the submissions so new BMOs could quickly identify the expert community's collective judgment of the most valuable

resources and ideas. The newcomer could also read through the COP archives to gain a sense of the issues he will face and learn from others' experiences. Moreover, the BMO could introduce himself to the community and begin to develop relationships. Just in time, the BMO would be prepared to assume his new duties.

This model of just-in-time learning would complement the learning that occurs in the Army's schoolhouses. Leaders will always need what the schoolhouses excel at providing—a foundation of

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professional knowledge, personal relationships, and Army acculturation. Moreover, the schoolhouses would remain the brain trusts of expertise. In the BMO COP example, then, the faculties of the Army's maintenance courses would moderate the online community, sharing their knowledge and resources with BMOs in the field. In this way, the COP model bridges the gap between the schoolhouse and the field. Retired Brigadier General David L. Grange spoke to West Point cadets and highlighted that a key component of the Army's professional learning model is self-development. He stated: "You have to keep one foot in the street and one foot in the library in order to keep learning while you go through the experience." COPs enable leaders to have the best of both worlds by bringing the schoolhouses' subject matter experts into the same conversation space as leaders in the field.

This model is also very agile. When a new policy or procedure is established, the entire community of practitioners could quickly hear about it, discuss its implementation, and provide feedback to the command.¹²

Distance Learning Gives Adult Learners What They Want

To maximize leaders' experiential learning and to reduce turbulence and expenses, the Army plans to rely increasingly on distance learning. The Army recognizes that its "distance learning courseware must address the diverse needs of adult learners [which] include: a need to know why learning is required, a need to direct their learning, a need to

contribute their experiences to the learning situation, a need to apply what they have learned to solve real world problems, and a need to feel competent and experience success throughout the learning program."¹³

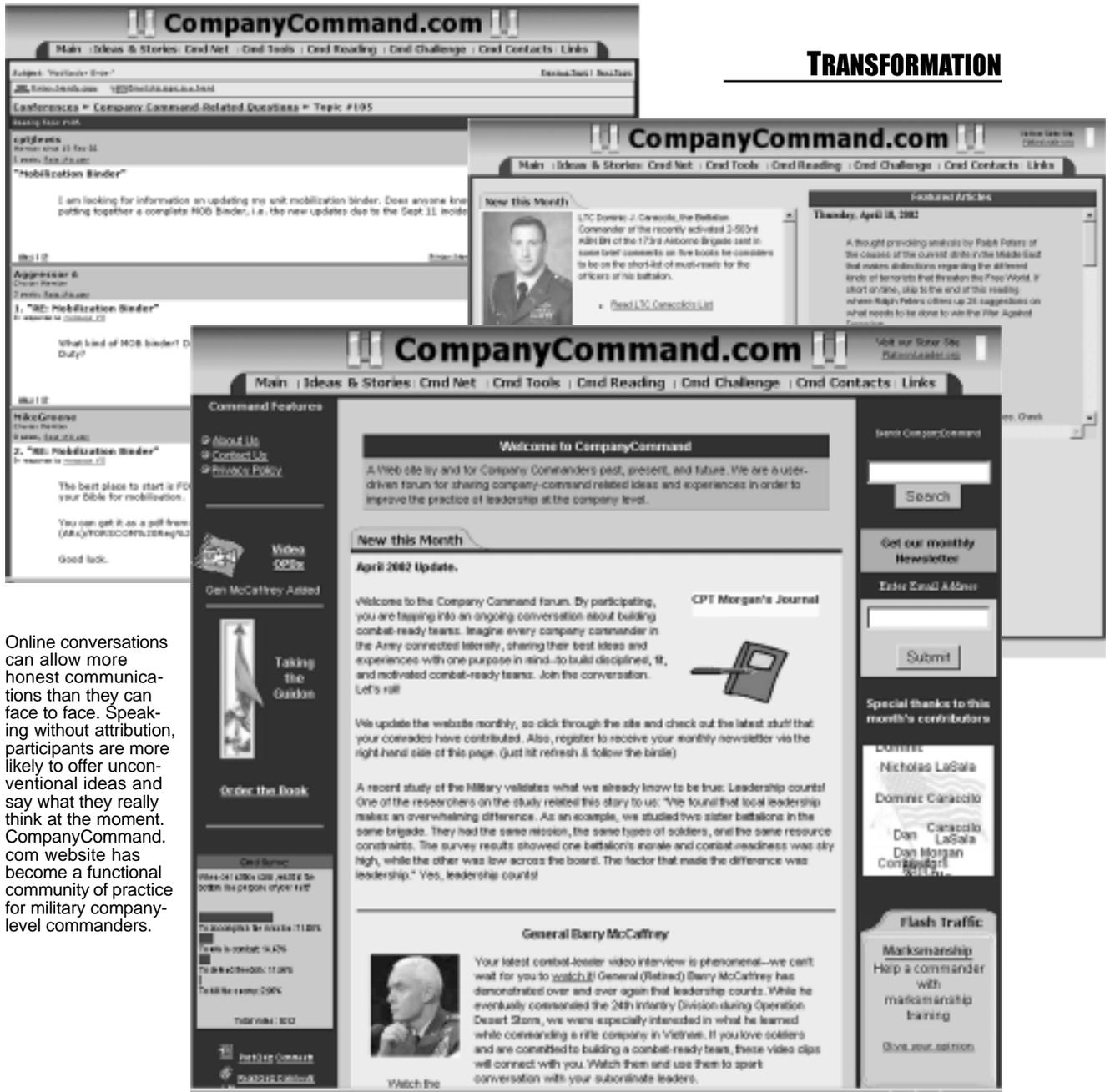
COPs are effective means for distance learning because, by their very nature, they address adult learners' needs. COP participants are there precisely because they want to learn. COPs also enable their members to direct their own learning, and COPs rely on their members' willingness to contribute their experiences so that all members of the community are better able to perform their real-world duties. COPs provide the kind of learning that the Army recognizes is essential to effective distance education.

COPs employ a model of education that is radically different than the Army's current distance learning model. The Army Distance Learning Program (TADLP) is designed around information transfer, from the schoolhouse to the soldier. The institution teaches, and the student is expected to learn. The TADLP's challenge is expressed by the adage, "You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink." COPs, on the other hand, are designed to support knowledge sharing, primarily among peers. The community shares knowledge—information in meaningful context—and the community learns. With COPs, the proverbial horse has gone to the water on its own because it wants to drink with other horses that share its thirst.

How Army distance learning can use COPs remains to be seen. Renowned education researcher Andrew Lippman contends that "learning takes root when you do it yourself and when there is an emotional reason to be attached to the knowledge," conditions that characterize COPs.¹⁴ It makes sense, then, that the Army Distance Learning Program should leverage COPs to facilitate and guide learning.

Integrating Doctrine Development

Online COPs also have great potential for helping Army leaders develop and maintain up-to-date doctrine. The ATLDP determined that over the past decade, "The Operating Environment has changed faster than the Army has adapted its training and leader development programs."¹⁵ Army Transformation—a necessary and wholly appropriate movement—is creating new challenges for doctrine writers as "the force is evolving faster than the institutional training base can provide up-to-date training and educational products."¹⁶ Consequently, units



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face missions for which there is no doctrine, hampering both their operational performance and their leaders' development.¹⁷

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doctrine developers in the schoolhouses.

An integrative approach to knowledge operates in the middle ground between a completely hierarchical approach and a completely emergent approach. Conceptually, all organizations tend to adopt one of these two perspectives toward knowledge management. Knowledge is treated hierarchically if the organization assumes that knowledge of best

practices resides with the organization's leaders at the top. Those leaders then pass the knowledge down to the organization's subordinate workers. This is how the Army currently treats knowledge—hierarchically. An emergent model of knowledge, on the other hand, assumes that the actual practitioners of the organization—in this case, soldiers in the field—know what the best practices are. In such

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an organization, senior leaders' primary role would be to support those who work at the touch-points of the enterprise. Many businesses adopt this model to keep pace with their fast-moving environment.

Each model, taken alone, has its limitations. A hierarchical model is less able to use knowledge to keep pace with a fluid environment. Too often, its knowledge is stale and does not reflect the best practices available. For example, after the first U.S. Army rotational units returned from Somalia, it was nearly 18 months before the White Paper on peace enforcement operations was published. The Army took too long to harness and usefully share its knowledge. A purely emergent model, likewise, has its limitations. Its decentralized processes make it more difficult for an organization to pursue strategic goals, to forecast resources, and to maintain a shared set of values.

The Army could benefit greatly from processes that use an integrative model of knowledge, one that operates on the middle ground between a completely hierarchical perspective and a completely emergent perspective. For example, COPs could foster online discussions that bring together doctrine developers in the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) and doctrine practitioners in the field. Those writing doctrine could then learn in real time as the field is learning, and at the same time, they could moderate the conversation to ensure it stays on course with strategic initiatives and values.

Such an integrative approach to learning would create communities of stakeholders who collaborate to their mutual benefit. Consider this scenario of how online COPs would contribute to more timely, relevant, and practiced doctrine. Periodically, TRADOC would assess the relevancy of its doctrine

by monitoring and reviewing COPs' discussions. If it found that the practitioners' discussions of tactics, techniques, and procedures were consistent with doctrine, there would be no need for TRADOC to expend resources to revise the doctrine. If, however, TRADOC were to find that professional discussions in COPs indicated that doctrine needed to be revised, TRADOC could review COPs and search their common database to gather and analyze input from the field. This input would include the expertise of observer/controllers at the combat training centers and the Battle Command Training Program, schoolhouse instructors, and leaders in field units, all of whom would be active participants in their relevant communities. Then, once TRADOC's writers drafted proposed revisions, they could post the drafts on the relevant COP forums and solicit immediate feedback through online conversations. In this way, the schoolhouse and the field would share ownership of the doctrine. Doctrine developed through this integrative approach would be written more quickly, be understood more widely, and be practiced more faithfully than is currently the case.¹⁸

Fostering Excellence Through Professional Relationships

The rise of online COPs would also transform Army culture in a positive way, as they are already doing at the grass-roots level. Army leaders want to work efficiently, be competent at every duty position, keep improving their units, and be inspired and supported by a community that shares their dedication to soldiers and mission accomplishment. Robust COPs that harness and exploit the power of professional relationships can assist these leaders. To the extent that these dedicated leaders have the means to accomplish their dreams, the gap between Army beliefs and practices, a gap cited by the ATLDP, will narrow.¹⁹

COPs would address Army leaders' desire for increased mentoring. The ATLDP reported that "officers would like to see an increased emphasis on mentoring but do not want formal, directed programs."²⁰ COPs seem custom-made to meet that need. Consider one junior officer's feedback to CompanyCommand.com: "The sharing of personal knowledge from one's peers is something the Army has been unable to duplicate in its 'mentorship' program. The quality advice, guidance, and sense of belonging to a community or family of professionals has been sorely lacking from my Army life, and I for one am glad to see that personal initiative has been taken to remedy this."

COPs can also positively impact retention by exposing leaders to professional peers who share their commitment. Junior leaders' operational experi-

ences may be very narrow, limited perhaps to their first assignment's company or battalion. They may generalize their unit's culture to that of the entire Army, which is a problem if their unit's leadership is substandard. Online COPs, however, can bring together leaders from units around the world, providing a broader perspective of the Army profession.

Consider how a COP helped one lieutenant: "CompanyCommand.com has helped me to make a major decision in my life. My last assignment as a LT [lieutenant] was Fort Carson, where I became convinced that the officers were more concerned with their OERs [Officer Efficiency Reports] and with outdoing each other than they were with caring for soldiers and preparing for combat. I put maximum effort into being a PL [platoon leader], but I was still convinced that the best place for me was the civilian world. As time for promotion to captain and career course drew near, I began visiting CompanyCommand.com and I realized that there are A LOT of officers in the Army who really do care about combat readiness. I found that there really are capable leaders who are leading our soldiers and doing great things. I completed the FA [field artillery] Captains Career Course in July, and I have recently reported to the 1st ID in Germany. Thanks for helping me to see the truth."

The Way Ahead

In one sense, COPs are nothing new. They are groups of dedicated professionals who come together to learn, share, and support one another as they pursue excellence in their chosen practice. In another sense, however, online COPs are transforming. They reduce the stovepipes that inhibit commu-

nication among leaders, among organizations, and among leaders and their organizations by enabling and promoting knowledge sharing and integrative learning.

Robust online COPs can help the Army transform, but only an already transforming Army will be able to implement them properly. COPs are powerful because they are of the soldiers, by the soldiers, for the soldiers. They cannot be mandated; each community must be built by the community itself. The "If we build it, they will come" mantra does not apply to COPs. Instead, the Army must recognize that "If they build it, they will come, and we will support them" is the attitude that will lead to organizational success.

If the Army can trust its leaders at all levels by supporting their efforts to become connected through online COPs without micromanaging those efforts, the result will be an Army that is more competent, agile, and adaptive. If senior leaders are willing to lose control tactically, they will gain more control strategically. They will have fostered a knowledge-based, network-centric Army that is able to maintain knowledge dominance in the contemporary operating environment.

One of the WKN's roles will be to support and enhance Army COPs by acting as the COP for the COPs. Its potential to assist and accelerate Army Transformation is enormous because it capitalizes on soldiers' untapped stores of energy and knowledge. Implemented properly, the WKN and its COPs will become powerful tools in developing adaptive leaders, relevant doctrine, and soldiers who are doctrinally smart and committed to the Army service ethic. **MR**

NOTES

1. The Army Training and Leader Development Panel (ATLDP) Officer Report to the Army at <<http://www.army.mil/features/ATLD/report.pdf>>, paragraph OS-14.
2. The ideas expressed in this essay emerged from the author's conversations with the CompanyCommand.com team, especially Majors Nate Allen, Tony Burgess, and Steve Schweitzer.
3. These are three of the seven leader development imperatives the Army has identified as being key to its success in achieving Transformation.
4. For an excellent discussion of COPs, see Etienne C. Wenger, Richard McDermott, and William M. Snyder, *Cultivating Communities of Practice: A Guide to Managing Knowledge* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2002).
5. Etienne C. Wenger and William M. Snyder, "Communities of Practice: The Organizational Frontier," *Harvard Business Review* (January-February 2000), 140.
6. To see how the CompanyCommand.com COP is meeting junior officers' needs, read the website's feedback from the field at <<http://www.companycommand.com/comments/jan2002.htm>>.
7. In March 2002, the CompanyCommand.com website served more than 28,000 visitors who viewed more than 320,000 pages, logged more than 1.5 million hits, and downloaded 12.6 gigabytes of data.
8. The WKN will use a single database with multiple entry points and an object-based architecture. Consequently, information captured on any COP will be permanently available to all COPs.

9. ATLDP, paragraph OS-17.
10. ATLDP, paragraphs OS-17 and OS-79.
11. ATLDP, paragraph OS-39.
12. ATLDP, paragraph OS-13. The ATLDP recommends that the Army "develop a web-based feedback system from Army OES schools to units to maintain relevancy with the field." While existing Army feedback systems tend to be linear—allowing only one-to-one communication between the field and the schoolhouse—COPs can provide networked feedback discussions that involve the entire community and are much more effective.
13. Millie Abell, "Soldiers as Distance Learners: What Army Trainers Need to Know" (Fort Monroe, VA: U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command), available at <<http://www.tadlp.monroe.army.mil/abell%20paper.htm>>.
14. Andrew Lippman, "Lippman on Learning: Fundamental Changes," *Syllabus* (February 2002), 12-13. Lippman is the founding associate director of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Media Laboratory.
15. ATLDP, paragraph OS-14.
16. ATLDP, paragraph OS-69.
17. ATLDP, paragraph OS-14.
18. The online discussions of the doctrine's development could even be archived so that future users could understand how and why it developed as it did.
19. ATLDP, paragraph OS-19.
20. ATLDP, paragraph OS-29.

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