Professional military education in the context of disruption

Paul Davidson and Jane Tsakissiris


Published online: 25 June 2020

ADC Publications
Centre for Defence Research
Australian Defence College
PO Box 7917
CANBERRA BC ACT 2610
P: + 61 02 6266 0352
E: cdr.publications@defence.gov.au

Disclaimer
The views expressed in this publication are the authors’ own and do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Australian Government or the Department of Defence. While reasonable care has been taken in preparing this publication, the Commonwealth of Australia and the authors—to the extent permitted by law—disclaim all liability howsoever caused (including as a result of negligence) arising from the use of, or reliance on, this publication. By accessing this publication users are deemed to have consented to this condition and agree that this publication is used entirely at their own risk.

Copyright © Commonwealth of Australia 2020

This publication, excluding the cover image and the Australian Defence Force and Australian Defence College logos, are licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 international licence, the terms of which are available at www.creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0
Professional military education in the context of disruption

Paul Davidson and Jane Tsakissiris

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
the blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.

W.B. Yeats

Introduction

In 1919, the Irish poet, W.B. Yeats reflected on the dreadful afterglow of the worst war the world had known.¹ Disruption, even if of lesser magnitude than that of the First World War, continues to pose a threat to peace and prosperity. The destabilising global impact of the COVID-19 virus in 2020 is a calamitous example of disruption wrought by unpreparedness and overwhelming threat. In any nation or organisation, decision-makers strive to minimise uncertainty amidst environmental turbulence so that their predictions may be more accurate, and thus allow better decision-making. Uncertainty is a product of disruption brought

about by the demands and effects of change. The familiar rules no longer apply, and as Yeats wrote, anarchy brings chaos.

However, there is a distinction between the disruption in ‘normal’ environmental turbulence, even that brought on by crisis and unpredictability, and the disruption deliberately brought on by organisations as part of competitive strategy. Military leaders both initiate and respond to disruptive environments. Because of the role of disruption as both an environmental reality and on occasions an intended effect, Professional Military Education (PME) needs to address disruption in the development of effective military leadership competencies in its officers. It can do this through creating awareness of the nature of disruption and the options for response that it presents. This is not straightforward. The demand to understand disruption without necessarily controlling or removing it is counterintuitive to military leaders whose default approach is to opt for linear command, even in the context of non-linear complexity. Only by being open to the discomfort of its inherent threat, by understanding its nature, can disruption become an ally rather than an enemy.

Disruption appears ubiquitous in both the past and the present. It manifests in new forms of warfare, from unconventional and asymmetric to cyber and space, to conflict between non-state actors and nebulous forces. A shadowy enemy may be a citizen shopkeeper by day and terrorist by night. The ‘grey-zone’ has governments and forces operating below the threshold of declared war, all struggling for legitimacy, power and hegemony. The negotiated conventions of armed conflict are frequently disregarded in the fog of war, and the resulting disruption threatens the prospect of any rule-based international order.

This paper examines the nature of disruption and our instinctual resistance to tolerating it and proposes that an understanding of disruption should be designated as a key priority for PME.

The context of disruption and the need for new strategy

In management theory, the concept of ‘disruptive innovation’ was famously popularised by Harvard University Business Professor Clayton Christensen and colleagues. They described it as a deliberate process in which ‘a smaller company

---

4 Stephen Frühling, Defence planning and uncertainty: Preparing for the next Asia Pacific War (London: Routledge, 2014).
with fewer resources is able to challenge successful incumbent businesses’. In the business world, proponents of creative disruption observe that market entrants often succeed by targeting overlooked segments with products or services offering more suitable and lower-priced functionality.

This challenges our typical view of disruption, suggesting it can serve as a strategy to drive adaptation and innovation. The start-up successes of Amazon, Alibaba, Atlassian and Facebook are examples of companies that have intentionally created disruption and benefited as a result. They brought deliberate and enterprising disruption to their markets, and they continue to do so.

More generally, formulated strategy aside, disruption in international relations has been a more or less constant dynamic in human history. The challenge is how to manage such disruption rather than to simplistically avoid it in, especially in international conflict where understanding the centre of gravity of friendly and hostile forces has become critical in campaign planning.

What distinguishes intentional disruption from its effect in unintended chaos? Certainly, this is one model for disruptive innovation in the wider environment. It turns on its head the notion that disruption is necessarily undesirable, but this notion is not new. In the classical work on military strategy attributed to Sun Tzu (519-476 BC), it is counselled that: ‘in the midst of chaos, there is also opportunity. Appear weak when you are strong, and strong when you are weak’. This cryptic advice is aimed at obtaining benefits from disruption, whether one is innocently experiencing it, or deliberately causing it. Insights for the military and the non-military strategist can be gained by examining disruption as both a part of the environment and a potential strategy.

It is not difficult to find examples of disruption in our contemporary environment. The old order in society struggles for continuity as its institutions are no longer trusted. Reports of alleged widespread sexual abuse of children by priests have compromised the church’s historic moral legitimacy. Similarly, much publicised scandals and the findings of royal commissions have eroded trust in the corporate and finance sectors. The phenomenon of ‘fake news’ has brought a loss of respect for even the concept of truth in the broadcast media. ‘Fact-checking’ has become a speciality option for only selected news items, thus allowing the perception that unselected items may be of dubious veracity. News ‘outlets’ are

seen uncritically as instruments of their owners, rather than as objective and impartial sources of information and professional journalism. Media commentary is not trusted as once it was for its balance and accuracy. People appear to believe what they want to believe, with little regard for evidence. Societal values and widely-held beliefs are increasingly challenged—if not discarded altogether, and reasoned debate is drowned out by populist revolt and totalitarian constraint.

Some of these broader disruptions facing society are also evident in the business world. Disruption and downsizing with automation are used by companies ostensibly in the interests of productivity, yet too often they yield only anxiety and malaise. The evidence is that many around the world have lost trust in their leaders and their purpose of work, and so disengage into idleness, resistance and ‘empty labour’. It is more than the few bosses exploiting their workers; it is a failure by business leaders to do the hard labour of coming to a respectful appreciation of what it is that their customer actually values and may therefore wish to purchase as part of a sustainable commercial relationship.

Just as this understanding of the customer’s needs and wants is critical to developing a value proposition in business, so a deep understanding by military leaders of the enemy’s intentions, grand strategy and centre of gravity is essential for strategy development and implementation. The commander’s intent must be built on an accurate estimate of the enemy’s intent. Without it, disruption in the logic of decision-making about meaning and purpose can result only in adhocracy and anarchy. As Yeats wrote, ‘Surely the Second Coming is at hand?’ Is rescue possible? Different voices offer different solutions. Some look to new technology as a panacea, arguing that big data will yield productive insights. Some expect that education and infrastructure spending of themselves will bring social order and sustainability. Economists hold, unsurprisingly, that rising prosperity will lead to global harmony. Others are optimistic that negotiated political solutions will yield an adjusted rules-based international order. The different perspectives on the best way to manage during the contemporary period of disruption are very relevant considerations for those preparing to take

---


10 Yeats, ‘The Second Coming’.


up strategic roles within the realm of national security and strategy. The stakes are high, indeed.

Yet, beyond these different potential solutions, it is evident that the nature of disruption must become a central priority for the military professional and for the PME system that seeks to develop these leaders. This will, however, not be straightforward. To manage productively amid chaos demands new models and ways of behaving, as well as a counterintuitive readiness to *unlearn* what has taken so much time to learn. However, like the word ‘disruption’, the term ‘unlearning’ can be misleading and may trigger resistance, as in being required to cede precious territory. This oppositional resistance can be dealt with by defining ‘unlearning’ as ‘not about forgetting but choosing an alternative mental model or paradigm to add to the skills or knowledge we have’.14 It takes a certain maturity and personal security to let go of familiar behaviours that previously had priority in bringing success. Consider the following insight from the business sector:

> What once made companies powerful, like ownership of assets, expertise, large workforces, and historical brands, are to some extent paradoxically becoming liabilities that make change harder. Often the metrics that once mattered most—profitability, revenue—seem to have become less vital than potential for the future.15

Disruption requires decision-makers to develop new and different criteria for evaluating success and to design innovative approaches to achieve it. Similarly, organisations risk being caught out by the ‘unknown unknown’, the unanticipated risk, like the ‘black swan’ whose very existence was not anticipated.16 In an environment of disruption, new mental models need to be continually developed and tested. The disruptor catches on, and catches up, before it is realised that the old ways have not been disposed of quickly enough, and attachment to the old has slowed down adoption of the new. This requires a readiness to step out into the unknown, building on history but not confined by it. These lessons are important for all organisations but are especially true of the historically orientated profession of arms. The regimental silver in the officers’ mess is a cultural icon of a unit’s identity and may rightfully be retained to lionise former victories and a continuity of culture but pride in the past should not encourage backward-looking blindness at the expense of preparing for the future.

---


One example of an innovation in management decision-making is the use of design thinking. This approach relies on a structured approach based on sense-making through immersion in user experiences to yield deeper insights into what is required in the exchange of value and meaning. Design thinking has the potential to deliver superior outcomes, lower risks and reduced costs of change, even though it may also demonstrate that ‘uncertainty is unavoidable in innovation’.\(^\text{17}\) In the military, it requires an understanding and appreciation of the perspectives held by enemy forces and the drivers in their decision-making. This almost certainly requires moving outside of one’s conceptual and cultural comfort zone. A preparedness to think outside the square is fundamental to leadership in decision-making, especially in a disruptive environment.

In this environment, risk tolerance by itself is not enough, and, indeed, risk seeking may be a more adaptive behaviour. For example, British First Sea Lord Admiral Sir John Fisher was known for his statement in 1915 that ‘in war the first principle is to disobey orders. Any fool can obey an order’. He was criticising the Royal Navy’s rigid command and control culture, enforced by its senior leadership, thereby wasting an invaluable operational opportunity in the battle of Jutland to defeat the German High Seas fleet\(^\text{18}\).

The benefits of leaving old mindsets behind should not, however, mean acting without due thought. There is a need to apply standards regarding what is ethical, and sustainable.\(^\text{19}\) Affirmation of values in an intelligent military is likely to address the stoic virtues of courage, justice, temperance and wisdom.\(^\text{20}\) The challenge here is thus not to just ask ‘what?’ but ‘why?’ (so that everything that is proposed is subjugated to the organisational purpose, not just to preserving current status or familiar doctrine). This can be dangerous and unpopular, but it may be critical to open the way for enlightened dialogue at a depth previously unexplored because it is, in essence, a respectful question about purpose.

In the disruptive environment, all conclusions are interim, and not all disruption is creative, innovative and beneficial. Thus, making a significant contribution has to be in the service of some acceptable purpose and end-state. As von Clausewitz warned, the military commander’s strategy must serve the political object in the


nation’s grand strategy. Similarly, the fact that an action produces disruption doesn’t mean it is right and proper, or that it is therefore justified as yielding constructive outcomes. The English philosopher, John Stuart Mill (1806–1873) observed that ‘the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilised community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others’. The virtue of any intent must be assessed in the context of the merit of its motive and its consequence. Some disruption is painful, unjustifiable and merely disruptive; it may also be judged to be plainly wrong in its intent and effect. Disruption of itself is morally neutral. It should be evaluated carefully for its historical antecedents and its actual consequences, as well as the intent it serves. Acting ‘in good faith’ though with disruptive consequences, may still be unethical, or ethical, depending on the situation.

The new strategy that may develop from this dialogue can then begin with the clarity of intent to which all else can now be directed. Paradoxically, it may be the disruption itself that it is the catalytic enabler. The decision-maker who is sufficiently secure to risk even their own security will likely be the one who invites old lines to be crossed as staff ask ‘why?’ The genuinely well-intentioned challenge can serve to sharply refocus and even to unlock stored-up organisational capability.

This section has provided a summary of some of the key challenges emerging from an environment of disruption. It has argued that developing strategies for organisations in a disruptive environment requires a process of unlearning and detachment, along with making apparently perverse and contradictory non-linear moves (as shown in Figure 1). Positional awareness is critical for strategic purpose.

The following broad steps are proposed as essential to decision-making, especially in conditions of disruption.

1. *Knowing the current position.* This requires an accurate assessment on current capability in terms of competence and resources that can be brought to bear, and a sound appreciation of the organisation’s history, present mission and culture, especially its risk tolerance. At first glance the necessity for such knowledge seems self-evident. The warning is that, as with self-awareness, our capacity for self-serving self-deception is limitless. History is littered with military tragedies stemming from hubris and unchallenged incompetence.

---

Disruptive environments easily stimulate panic and a counterproductive urge to be seen to be doing something, almost anything, when a cool-headed if discomforting assessment is needed.

2. **Knowing why a course of action is proposed.** This may include reference to a problem statement, or a description of the desirable end-state or destination. This can be expressed in terms of achievable objectives, which serve to make real the intended benefits of the decision-making process. This requires vision and communication. Effective communication underlies the consultation process necessary to build the vision and to incentivise collaboration with critical stakeholders.

3. **Formulating a strategy about how to get from the current position to the desired destination.** The options here may be many and the preferred alternative will depend on the unique situational realities. It is critical that the strategies transparently serve the organisational objectives. In the military, strategies must serve the political objectives.

**Figure 1:** Decision-making in the context of disruption

While this model aligns with many well-known ways of thinking about strategy, it is important to point out that effective strategies may need to be radical, both to bring about disruption and to defend against it. To use the sailing metaphor,
a tacking strategy may be necessary, one in which direction and heading are constantly changing, as tactics are set and reset to deal with disruptive local conditions, but the destination remains the same.

The captain may tack with new sail settings to cope with variable winds or to stay ‘close hauled’ just long enough to extract maximum boat speed. Then, the boat comes onto a new, and again temporary heading to achieve the desired position over time—even if it means that the new heading appears at first unlikely to do so. It is a change of direction but not a change of destination. The metaphor teaches that this requires a clear understanding of strategic intent and a preparedness to adapt to changing conditions.

**Implications for professional military education**

Where does this leave the professional military educator? The broad trends noted above are evident in the national security context. Conventional warfare is intersecting with new forms of conflict in cyber and space domains, so traditional command and control structures are under challenge from developments in technology and complexity.\(^{24}\) As in the business and political worlds, national security professionals will need to adapt to the environment of disruption. This means, too, that professional military educators will need to navigate this period of change. They will need to consider what the conditions of disruption demand in response and what opportunities they may offer.

Importantly, this means encouraging students to think of themselves as operators in an environment of disruption who also have the potential to become a disruptive force. For example, disabling the adversary’s communication and supply lines may be the only sensible strategy in an environment of disruption, rather than frontal assault. The presence of non-state actors in asymmetric conflict may make major land battles with clear-cut Mahanian victories militarily desirable but impracticable and elusive. The battlelines are no longer as clear as they were when wars were formally declared. Even the identity of the protagonists, along with their objectives, may not be obvious. War, in general, has become increasingly complex.\(^{25}\) Engaging with this context as well as the challenges and opportunities that it presents should form the starting point for PME.

This endeavour is not completely new for PME or education in general. Educational curricula need to be in a constant state of flux, balancing opposing views,

---


and adapting to new ideas and developments, while also adhering to core truths and enduring wisdom. This means that established theories must be continually examined for their value as well as for their capacity to deceive and distract by irrelevance brought by the passage of time. Enduring wisdom must be progressively updated and remythologised in terms of present and future thought forms. These qualities of education and the skills of those who specialise in providing it can be leveraged in a demanding time of disruption.

As providers of PME come to grips with the demands of the disruptive environment, there is a need to leverage changing social trends in its pedagogies and content (e.g. blended learning, collaborative learning and work-integrated learning). Educators serve as change agents in the process of learning. Using traditional lecturing merely to transfer information is an inefficient and ineffective way to learn about one’s place and potential in a disruptive environment. New technologies need to be incorporated into PME and used appropriately, to increase student engagement while also building the skills required of future leaders. PME is likely to make increasing use of realistic simulators, although they are not the whole answer. The caution is made by Clerkin:

Digitisation of information has made knowledge easy, fast, and cheap. It has made rote information less valuable and routine skills replaceable. Abilities that are not easily programmable, such as to create and innovate, and connect with others as social beings, will become some of the most important skills in business and leadership.

More than anything, understanding our place and potential in a disruptive environment will demand that PME is directed to ensuring the profession of arms is not so much a ‘learned’ profession, as a learning profession. Isolated learning experiences can provide key skills and knowledge but, as this article has argued, periods of disruption require a constant negotiation between the environment as it changes and those facts that are enduring, such as the nation’s goals of security. This process demands that the military professional becomes a lifelong learner. This places additional emphasis on the working relationship between military and academia, to create an innovative culture that encourages critical thinking and collaboration rather than traditional instructional techniques.

27 Cathleen Clerkin, ‘Creative leadership and social intelligence: The key to leading in the digital age’ in Mathew Sowcik, Anthony C. Andenoro, Mindy McNutt and Susan E. Murphy (eds.), Leadership 2050 (Bingley: Emerald Group, 2015), 175–185.
PME places an additional emphasis on developing the skills of leadership, and these will be particularly tested in an environment of disruption. To this end, leadership education should focus less on management control and more on the communication of intent. Working environments governed by a commander’s intent that is fully understood will provide the best possible environment for the necessary independent and original thought from all members of a team to be fostered. To maximise engagement and contribution, the old command and control model must be replaced by consultation and power-sharing. Appointed leaders who espouse disruption while constraining any question of their authority will need to share power and encourage leadership by coaching, rather than try to hold on to power by restraint and formal regulation. This will likely mean the pain of short-term loss with long-term gain. It is always an unpalatable message for appointed leaders to hear: ‘Your time is up, your way of thinking is no longer appropriate, and your leadership style is no longer acceptable’. Nevertheless, in the current circumstances, with the enduring unprecedented effects and demands of disruption caused by the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, this message may need to be delivered to particular decision-makers.

Those holding power will need to be educated in how to let that power go when appropriate. A renewed focus on intent, rather than control, may need to be an explicit emphasis in PME to make it both normal and practicable. PME needs to provide opportunities to develop the interpersonal skills required for authentic consultation with subordinates. This requires explicit training in coaching. Leadership education in PME must be aligned with the latest insights from management theory. Leadership in conditions of disruption requires a different kind of thinking and acting than in conditions of business as usual, and this needs to be reflected in leadership education. Leadership education must allow for students to develop tolerance for ambiguity for the benefits of diversity to be realised.

Beyond the skills of leadership in disruptive environments, students of PME will need to become better analysts of such environments, and better at finding the opportunities and constraints that they provide. Curricula need to encompass learning activities that highlight the importance of addressing environmental risk, where alternatives and probabilities are not known. There may be a need to focus on techniques to generate novel alternatives, such as scenario analysis and stakeholder engagement. Scenario analysis can elicit creative solutions by


examining possible futures with varying uncertainties. Stakeholder engagement facilitates strategy building to include reference to all those affecting and affected by any plan. Both of these approaches must be enriched with challenging problem sets, providing students with the opportunity to apply their critical thinking skills to the environment that we are increasingly facing.

**Conclusion**

Educating leaders to manage in conditions of disruption is not simple. Decision-making in increasingly disruptive contexts calls for continual re-examination of purpose and intent and a readiness to move beyond the familiar. The implications for PME include explicit attention to unlearning as well as to learning, and to the professional development of the military leader and their leadership style. This requires skill in managing in conditions of disruption and uncertainty. Steps to be taken include knowing the present position, the purpose of the mission, and the strategy developed to ensure success. Decision-making needs to incorporate both the methodical and the unconventional. This demands an organisational culture of innovation, agility and flexibility, and tolerance for ambiguity and risk. To prepare for such an environment, PME needs to incorporate these learnings. There is a need for specific work to achieve this and foster a culture where creativity and innovation, balanced against the discipline for military operations, prepares people to prevail in the uncertainty of future warfare.\(^{32}\)

---