“Thinking Holistically: PIE in the Sky?”

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Ideally, future intelligence education will be “holistic”—whole person, whole curriculum, and whole career. This essay argues that the Intelligence Community (IC) needs a Professional Intelligence Education (PIE) on par (and integrated) with the Professional Military Education (PME) system within the Department of Defense (DOD). For too long, intelligence education has taken a back seat to intelligence training. For too long, intelligence education has been “piecemeal,” underfunded, sporadic, uncoordinated, and unappreciated. The world grows more complicated and more dangerous daily. The need for intellect in the IC—clear-sighted, critical, “out of the box” thinking—has never been greater. And yet, we have no good educational construct, now or even on the horizon.

Instead of focusing on intelligence education, the IC focuses most of its attention and resources on the short-term benefits of training, making the mistake of lumping “training and education” into one pot. Training has great merit, and deserves resources and attention, but it is not the same as education, and does not produce the same results. There are hundreds of training courses taught daily—in the classroom and online—that are often (but not always) agency-specific and concerned with learning specific skills. These courses are usually short and are usually directly and immediately applicable to job-related activities. Each agency carefully monitors what course is taken when and by whom. While training efficiencies could be achieved and subject-matter content improved, I would argue that the current state of training is, on the whole, pretty good. Not so with education.

By contrast, education is concerned with the development of the mind and of the intellect, and takes time. Education is the vehicle for learning to think critically, to question assumptions, and to hone skills of abstraction and analysis. In the words of a congressional study on military
education, “training programs are highly utilitarian while the education system…is intended to develop ‘habits of mind’ and modes of analysis. As many military leaders have said, ‘we train for certainty and we educate for uncertainty.’”

Developing such habits cannot be done in short seminars that are squeezed into busy work schedules. Additionally, we cannot assume that newly hired intelligence professionals will already have these skills as a natural byproduct of a college education. We should not continue the current piecemeal approach in which a handful of mid-level intelligence professionals are lucky enough to be given a few months to get a Masters Degree in a subject that may or may not be applicable to their follow-on assignment.

We need to think in the long-term, and offer educational opportunities throughout an individual’s career. We need to provide opportunities that allow intelligence professionals to explore ideas; learn to think critically, creatively, and logically; and to demonstrate high standards of academic excellence. We need to layer such education, with each layer structured in such a way as to build on what came before and anticipate what will follow.

Mark Lowenthal, former Assistant Director of Central Intelligence for Analysis and Production and widely respected author on the IC, writes: “The IC still has not achieved a true community-wide approach to education and training. This failure harms the effort to generate more thorough horizontal integration among our 17 intelligence agencies and it distorts vertical career development as well.” He marvels at the IC’s surprising “anti-intellectualism” in light of the fact that it is “an enterprise that depends on intellectual activity as its end result.” Others have long criticized the IC’s dogged reluctance to let its officers pursue full-time graduate degrees, often losing its best and brightest as a result. Major General Robert Scales, former
Commandant of the Army War College, criticizes such institutional rigidity as short sighted and keeping its people “too busy to learn.”

Lowenthal points out several reasons why we cannot let this current state of IC education continue. First, he points out “the large cadre of analysts hired primarily during the Reagan-Casey build-up in the 1980s is retiring. This, coupled with the likely downsizing of workforces (at least among the defense intelligence analysts), will result in an accelerating brain drain.” Secondly, the large number of analysts hired since 2001 has produced a workforce in which more than half of all analysts have fewer than five years experience. He speculates that we may have the least experienced analytical workforce since 1947, when the modern IC was created. And finally, many incoming personnel do not already possess the critical thinking skills the IC so desperately wants and needs. Lowenthal notes that these younger analysts “tend to lack the fundamental skills of in-depth knowledge, writing ability and the capacity to think critically about broader patterns.”

My own observations at the NIU, NGA, and elsewhere support his conclusions.

The IC bows daily to the altar of critical thinking—frequently acknowledging its importance to sound estimates and credible analysis. To rectify workforce shortcomings, we spend millions on seminars that all promise to “teach critical thinking skills,” but sadly, critical thinking is not a skill you can teach in short courses, or online. There are some educationally-based efforts to reach IC analysts through Masters Programs at the National Intelligence University and comparable civilian institutions, but the scale is small relative to the need. Additionally, these programs usually occur only once in an analyst’s entire career and are not part of any building block approach to layered learning.
In my ideal holistic future for intelligence education, we need to think about the profession of intelligence as a whole; the curriculum of instruction as a whole; and the person as a whole—both their intellect and their career. In my ideal future, all members of the IC will have access to an education “system” that is career-long, habit-forming, and carefully integrated so as to layer and mesh information horizontally and vertically. This essay will discuss the steps we need to take to get there.

**Professional Intelligence Education: PIE in the sky?**

The DOD has a long history of providing PME to its service members. According a congressional report on PME, the Department and the services “created officer development systems, with PME at their core, that endeavor to produce skilled war fighters, who are ‘strategically minded, critical thinkers.’” While no one would claim the current system is perfect, and it has been reformed many times in its 200 year history, most acknowledge that our PME system is the “backbone” of our nation’s armed forces, “and the quality of that military education distinguishes U.S. forces around the world.” Those who write about it also say that “at best it has engaged and stimulated students, taught them standard practices, and encouraged innovation and realism in decision making during the stress and confusion of battle. At worst it has been considered a break in the midst of busy careers, a chance to relax and make acquaintances among peers.” By offering opportunities at the primary, intermediate and senior levels, the DOD is able to layer the information provided at each stage in an effort to produce strategic thinkers and leaders.

Unfortunately, the IC has nothing remotely similar. In Lowenthal’s words, current IC education (and training) is “largely self-initiated and haphazard.” In my ideal future, PIE will
be seen as a career-long effort with important milestones related to an individual’s professional and intellectual growth, much as we see the military providing its members with primary, intermediate, and senior service school PME. PIE at the primary level should focus on basic analytical skills and start building the habits of mind and judgment that can be honed over time with subsequent schooling. DOD PME institutions attempt this progression of complexity. Each level has specific educational objectives—tactical level for primary schools, operational level for intermediate, and strategic level for senior levels. PIE levels of instruction need to mirror this approach but with an emphasis on increasing analytical complexity and intellectual development.

Many will say that the IC does not have the resources to provide a “PIE” version of PME, but that is not true. The NIU is already providing intermediate level education. If resourced and expanded appropriately, it alone could provide the kind of multi-level education that the DOD does with its many PME institutions. I agree with Lowenthal when he says the NIU should be the functional equivalent of the Naval War College (USNWC), but with a caveat. The USNWC is a senior service school. For reasons having to do the IC’s relative size and limited resources, the NIU needs to provide the type of intellectual rigor he is referring to, but at all three career levels. It cannot do so with existing resources, of course. It has neither the facilities, nor the manpower, nor faculty expertise to deliver so much, to so many. However, with better resources, consolidation of existing educational institutions, creative and judicious use of private academic institutions, and enthusiastic leadership support, beginning with the Director of National Intelligence (DNI), much progress could be made in the right direction.

Others may suggest that military members already burdened with service specific PME requirements and Joint PME requirements cannot be expected to take on additional PIE responsibilities as well. That is a point well taken, but such overlap can be addressed in terms of
the best educational fit for the service member. On the other hand, there are many intelligence professionals who do not have the benefit of the PME system and have no career-long attention to their intelligence education needs. PIE is an excellent solution for their goals, with military service members participating in PIE on a case-by-case basis.

A Habit of Mind and Judgment

Education is the vehicle for learning to think critically, to question assumptions, and to hone skills of abstraction and analysis. RADM Wisecup, President of the USNWC, eloquently summed up my perspective of the ultimate value of education in his 2009 testimony to the House Armed Services Committee. “What education ultimately contributes… is a habit of mind and judgment (emphasis added) and not a checklist of requirements satisfied.”13 In an ideal future, the multi-layered PIE structure discussed above should make “critical thinking” skills for all IC analysts its top priority. This skill is fundamental to good analysis, but in increasingly short supply. By critical thinking I mean the following:

The intellectually disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action. In its exemplary form, it is based on universal intellectual values that transcend subject matter divisions: clarity, accuracy, precision, consistency, relevance, sound evidence, good reasons, depth, breadth, and fairness.14

This is not an easy goal to achieve, and building good habits requires time, repetition, and reinforcement. I would argue that, in addition to time, most successful institutions offer a two-pronged approach designed to (1) teach students to recognize qualities of excellent scholarship, and (2) force students to apply those qualities to their own scholarship.

My graduate school was very good at taking this two-pronged approach. Assignments for a substance-based class like Religion and Politics, for example, were critiqued as if we were
in an analysis course. Every assignment was part of a department-wide, holistic effort to “train my brain” to think critically—in and beyond the classroom. The effort was both horizontal and vertical. Horizontal in the sense that the effort occurred between courses running simultaneously; vertical in the sense that complexity of thinking and scholarship was layered—increasing from one semester to the next, and from one year to the next.

A system of PIE offers the IC a way to build and reinforce critical thinking habits in the IC analytical community. It could help to “professionalize” the IC by building and reinforcing analytic standards. Mirroring standards common to professions such as academia, medicine and law, the DNI has made establishing high analytic standards a community-wide priority in the past several years. The DNI Analytical Standards,15 issued in 2007, establish universal principles, and are clearly a step in the right direction. However, you cannot just tell someone to “write and think better,” nor does the IC as a whole embrace these standards. Anecdotal evidence suggests that knowledge of the DNI Analytical Standards is unknown to many intelligence organizations, particularly at the military service level, and application of those standards to intelligence products other than those written for classes teaching “Intelligence Analysis 101” is sporadic at best. Thus, we find that neither DNI Analytic Standards, nor any other analytic standards are being taught and applied in any consistent, habit-forming way.

Lowenthal and others agree that the current state of intelligence education is piecemeal, but piecemeal is not bad in and of itself. If everyone is teaching and reinforcing the same basic principles, we might still be able to achieve better critical thinking skills throughout the IC. For example, I was trained as a political scientist. As such, I was taught “the scientific method” as it applies to all the social sciences. I was taught to think in terms of research questions, hypotheses, methodology, findings, and conclusions. I was taught how to collect, process, and communicate
information in a universally agreed upon format. We have that in common as a profession, regardless of where we were taught. These standards are reinforced through journals, conferences, and so on.

In our ideal future we should make these standards part and parcel of every analytical effort in every intelligence course and every intelligence document in the entire IC—classroom or no classroom. If we can get the entire IC to embrace and apply common standards, then when students arrive at intelligence educational institutions such as the NIU, classes will be able to hone those skills as opposed to trying to create them from scratch. This would represent what Lowenthal calls “a true community-wide approach to education and training.” However, due to human dynamics, bureaucratic foot-dragging, and fiscal constraints, that goal will undoubtedly take many years to achieve.

Steps Forward

Although intelligence educational institutions are already taking a disciplined and comprehensive approach to curricula development, the current approach is not as holistic in approach as it could be. As is common at any academic institution, most students take a slate of courses in any given term that complement one another in terms of substance. Core courses are typically taught early in an academic year, with a shift to electives as core courses are completed. The substantive content of one course is balanced against the substantive content of another in order to accomplish many institutional learning objectives. Students typically start with courses that have a broad focus and end with courses that provide in-depth knowledge of a given topic.

A more holistic approach treats opportunities to teach and reinforce critical thinking skills as seriously as we take opportunities to integrate subject matter information. Educational
institutions seldom do enough to try to determine whether courses complement one another in terms of the required assignments. I would like to suggest that complementary and/or appropriately sequenced writing, reading and speaking assignments could revolutionize the way we currently try to build good “habits of mind and judgment.”

My suggestion would require that an entire faculty come to consensus on writing and critical thinking objectives for each phase of an academic course of study (no matter the length of the curriculum—one year or several). Equal attention should be given to course-wide integration that enhances both subject matter expertise and critical thinking skills. Faculty should break the course of study down into its component parts (semesters or terms) and decide the critical thinking objectives it can work on collectively during that block of instruction—and what assignments will best achieve that goal. While individual faculty members usually apply this kind of thinking to their own course construction, the holistic approach I am suggesting takes that thinking one step further to a focus on the entire curriculum. The capstone exercise should equally demonstrate both sets of skills.

The USNWC offers a model for this kind of approach. While it is administratively labor intensive and does interfere with faculty freedom over course assignments, faculty there are enthusiastic about its positive effects on student learning. RADM Wisecup testified, “Members of the teaching departments usually become quite committed to the collective enterprise of curricular development and teaching. The curriculum is constantly in some degree of revision because every faculty member is personally dedicated to the product.”

Faculty members, in any location, need to look beyond the immediacy of the moment and their particular course. The beauty of this concept is that it is something that can happen now. I have observed that few students remember what they learned in any one class. They can
frequently not even remember who taught a given class just months after they finish it. What is learned in one class melts into a collective educational experience punctuated by a few memorable “ah hah” moments. I believe we can “train their brains” better if we look at the entire academic year (and beyond, when possible) in terms of stages of intellectual growth. Faculties should break a course of instruction down by terms, come to consensus on which kinds of assignments are best undertaken early or late in an academic year, and build the agreed upon types of assignments into their individual courses. Additionally, each faculty member should be encouraged to look for extra opportunities to build on and/or reinforce the work of other faculty members. Eventually, if a career-long “PIE system” comes into being, one entire level of instruction will ideally be integrated with an entire level of instruction that comes before and/or after.

In Conclusion

In 1998, Holder and Murray wrote the following in reference to PME. This essay argues that with only slight modification, the same could be said about the current state of intelligence education. It too, is in “disarray.”

There is no clear understanding of how to prepare combat leaders or forces. This bodes ill for our ability to deal with an uncertain future in which war is sure to occur. Current and foreseeable conditions demand Joint Staff officers who are stronger, more innovative, and more competitive and joint force commanders who are better prepared.... Accordingly education must become a regular activity for career officers. Though one cannot expect officers to study continuously while serving in line assignments, they should be required to meet established learning objectives at each stage of their careers.

This essay has argued that if the IC were to create a career-long series of educational opportunities like the military does; make enhanced “critical thinking” skills for all IC analysts a top priority; and take a holistic approach to achieving that goal, we could do much to improve
intelligence education. While all of this is possible in the long term—and this paper has suggested that an expanded role for the NIU is one possible solution—in our current budget-constrained environment, we can expect no revolution in intelligence education structure, priorities, or extra resources in the immediate future. However, a more holistic approach, that places equal emphasis on both subject matter expertise and critical thinking skills, is possible right now.


3 Lowenthal, p. 87.


6 Lowenthal, p. 87.

7 Crossroads, p. 13.


9 Crossroads, p. 8. See also William Park, Captain, USN, who says of the PME system, “In our military educational institutions, America's precious tax dollars are financing educated warriors and leaders capable of coherent, dynamic thought addressing the myriad conundrums on today's battlefield. Having been educated at an academy, a war college, and an elite civilian institution, I can attest that my thoughts and assumptions were rigorously challenged at each, and the American people are getting superb, educated leaders from their warrior schools and at a bargain price.” In “Nobody Asked Me But...Military Education is a Real Deal.” Proceedings Volume 136, Number 2 (February 2010). http://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2010-02/nobody-asked-me-butmilitary-education-real-deal (accessed 11 March 2012).

10 Holder and Murray, p 81.

11 Lowenthal, p. 87.

12 Ibid, p. 88. I am using USNWC, as opposed to NWC, to distinguish it from the National War College.


16 Lowenthal, p. 88.

17 When I visited the Naval War College in 2009 as part of the House Armed Services Committee, Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations Staff Delegation, I had the opportunity to talk informally to many faculty members. I found them to be enthusiastic proponents of this approach to teaching and learning.

18 Wisecup, p. 6.

19 Holder and Murray, p. 81.

20 Ibid.
Bibliography


