

Confidence over Compliance – A New Model for Artillery Training

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Every Gunner officer that has completed their baseline training has suffered, the same or similar, myriad of assessments before presenting themselves to their Regiments, minted to the Royal Canadian Artillery School's (RCAS) standard of a complete product. At the core of that baseline training is a series of practical tests in which a junior officer, having only minimal experience in any given subject, must ensure they fill each assessment box with a checkmark to avoid the instructor's dreaded use of "unsuccessful," denoting student failure. This system of check in the box assessments places stress on the students to perform as prescribed by virtue of filling each box. One could be easily forgiven for accepting this process as the only format to test students. After all, the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) strives to create scenarios in training which produce stressful situations to test soldiers. In addition, it appears to be the way it has always been done. What better way to assess than by a standard check in the box format? However, this system does scant more than produce test anxiety and does little to teach young leaders about the "so what," the why, and the relevance it has to the battle they are about to be engaged in. Rather than a focus on learning through this type of assessment, the student is tied to adherence to the pass criteria in which they simply need to memorize which checkmarks are critical to success and do those things to ensure they enjoy their stress-free weekends at the mess. This type of instruction within the Artillery Corps does not promote the type of learning required for any battlefield, and it certainly does not promote the most important trait required of junior officers once they leave training: that of confidence. This short essay argues that the Royal Canadian Artillery Corps and by extension the RCAS needs to transition to a Train to Confidence learning and assessment model to better prepare junior leaders for their

technical and tactical tasks and at the unit level. This essay will first explore the Experiential Learning Theory and provide an alternate learning model for the Corps to adopt before arguing that a new learning and assessment approach is required as a result of the changing nature of artillery combat, the rapid expansion of the CAF, and the changing nature of the next generation of recruits.

The army still focuses its teaching techniques at the base level around the concept of Explain, Demonstrate, and Imitate. Although in principle it works efficiently enough, it is limiting in that one is expected to replicate the example provided to pass an intended assessment and does not account for the fluidity inherent in combat operations. This type of instruction approaches what Brazilian philosopher and educator Paulo Freire called the banking technique in which the teacher deposits ideas into the student and then the student is expected to withdraw the deposit to address a question or problem.¹ The issue with this sort of education is that it is based on recall and established immediate actions rather than relying on critical thought. David Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory offers an alternative learning format that can easily be adapted to junior officer training. Kolb posits that learned ideas are "formed and reformed through experience," and that "no two thoughts are ever the same, since experience always intervenes."² Kolb's experiential learning model is broken into 4 stages. Stage 1 is Concrete Experience, in which a student experiences something new. Stage 2 is Reflective Observation, in which a student reflects upon the new experience and acknowledges gaps between the experience obtained and the concept trying to be taught. Stage 3 is Abstract

¹ Paulo Freire in David Kolb's, *Experiential Learning: experience as the source of learning and development* (Prentice Hall, 1984), 27.

² Kolb, *Experiential Learning: experience as the source of learning and development*, 26.

Conceptualization, in which a student uses the experience and their reflection on the experience to adapt new ideas, concepts, or ways in which to approach a problem or task. Lastly, stage 4 is Active Experimentation, in which a student can test their new ideas.³ By transitioning away from the current model of assessment and adopting something like Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory, officer training could focus on confidence in theory, tactics, and techniques rather than on whatever pass criteria enable them to take the next step.

The Troop and Battery recce assessments that all artillery officers go through in baseline training offers one example in which to imagine how a change in instruction and assessment models could alter training. The recce assessment criteria inevitably drives the student to focus on distances between guns, distances between the gun and the director, and standard pass criteria of actions like clearing Artillery Manoeuvre Areas (AMAs) and ensuring proper five-point contingency plans are given to the recce party while the Officer is conducting the recce. If the student fails to do any of these things, the recce will be a failure. As the student becomes hyper-focused on the pass criteria of their assessment, recces become formulaic as students will tend to shy away from risk.⁴ The result is often a developed Battery or Troop position with no tactical value in which a student has deliberately avoided risk to ensure success. Although this current method enables a standard that instructors can assess to, it doesn't produce a product that is grounded in combat expectations. For example, meterage between guns and

³ "Theory and Scholarship: The Experiential Learning Cycle," Carleton University, accessed February 22, 2026, <https://carleton.ca/experientialeducation/experiential-learning-theory-and-scholarship/>.

⁴ This is a personal experience, but I have both witnessed and been party to assessments where placing one's guns in a straight line with maximum distances between was done to enable the pass of the assessment rather than stop to think tactically or about the relevance of the scenario. Indeed, several times through my career across multiple courses I have been guilty of striving to meet the criterion of an assessment rather than risk a failure by employing creativity or attempting new ways of doing tasks.

directors can certainly be altered in combat to allow for the flexibility to increase survivability. Clearing AMAs for security is among the first thing tossed to the side, even on training exercises, as Batteries sacrifice security for speed of action. These are three examples taken from a single assessment that every artillery officer goes through, and on all counts, they would not apply in combat where space and time are vital to enable flexible plans. Now, if Kolb's Model could be utilized in training and the artillery recce assessment remains the example, a student would complete and repeat the 4 stages in which they complete the recce, assess their performance, come up with new ideas for the way in which to conduct recces, and test their new ideas without the stress of assessment. Through repetition of the recce process under little stress and with a focus to obtain confidence in the task, the junior officer will naturally improve. This should drive students to test new position types and plans in a way which enables a holistic and flexible understanding of the concept. In this type of training, the instructor acts as a mentor and can enable injects that challenge students to a higher level. The goal of this type of approach is the confidence and flexibility obtained rather than the strict adherence to a criterion that a junior leader may revert to under combat stress.

The need for a fluid and adaptable training model based on experience and confidence rather than assessment is also vital as the nature of combat is rapidly changing. The current war in Ukraine offers the best example of this. The most predominant change has come with the pervasive use of drones. All combat formations on either side of the conflict now have a mix of drone capability, with Ukrainian Brigades even having the dedicated support of Drone

Battalions and Companies.⁵ Although the rapid advancement of drone technology may constitute a revolution in military affairs, long-held beliefs on the nature of manoeuvre war are also being challenged with the war in Ukraine transitioning over its duration from fighting in small groupings with a focus on manoeuvre to more attritional and positional warfare.⁶ These changes have also impacted traditional artillery doctrine. Both sides of the conflict in Ukraine are now planning their artillery deployments with at least 500 meters between guns with dug-in positions and netting to protect from adversary attack.⁷ When guns do have to move and shoot, they utilize firing points from hides, and resupply is being conducted on a 'when available' basis rather than a standard push/pull sustainment system.⁸ Even the use of fires is changing, with an example being Ukrainian artillery being utilized to suppress electronic warfare systems to enable drone strikes⁹ rather than targeting of enemy manoeuvre and guns. Nevertheless, although the war environment is changing, the CAF's Land Operations publication is still accurate in characterizing land combat as an environment rife with "friction, uncertainty, ceaseless change, and violence" in which leaders must make decisions with "incomplete, inaccurate, or contradictory information."¹⁰ When taking into account the new aspects of combat in Ukraine in combination with the old reliable insights within Land Operations, it is clear that the current check in the box training and assessment structure for artillery officers in no way prepares officers for the war of now or the war of the future. If anything, training

⁵ Jack Watling and Nick Reynolds, *Tactical Developments During the Third Year of the Russo-Ukrainian War*, (London, UK: Royal United Services Institute, 2025), 10.

⁶ Watling and Reynolds, *Tactical Developments During the Third Year of the Russo-Ukrainian War*, 3.

⁷ *Ibid*, 12.

⁸ *Ibid*.

⁹ *Ibid*, 10.

¹⁰ CAF, *Land Operations*, B-GL-300-001/FP-001, (Minister of National Defence, 2008), 2-17.

should be approached in a way in which the current challenges on the battlefield are played out in training in which students can creatively and flexibly approach new problems based on their experiences rather than trying to pass assessments.

A change of training and assessment techniques should also be adopted as Canada has indicated the desire to grow the military which will require a quickened training pace offered by a Training to Confidence assessment model. In recent months, there has been talk in the news cycle about a move to increase the Canadian Reserves to a total of 400,000 soldiers from a 2024 total of 44,482.¹¹ Last year, 2025, was also the CAF's most successful year of recruiting in the last decade with a total of 6,700 recruits joining the regular forces.¹² Nevertheless, although the goal appears to be an intake of new soldiers, there is also an indication that the CAF training system does not have the tools to accommodate the influx of recruits. A May 2025 CBC article indicates that new recruits are suffering long waits for training, leading to employment dissatisfaction, and that, in the 2023-24 fiscal year, 9.4% of new recruits quit as a result.¹³ Although there may be current issues with the training system, the push for more recruits within the CAF shows no sign of diminishing and is expected to continue in the near term which places the onus on the Artillery Corps to push for new formats of training to increase output. As a Corps, one must acknowledge that we need to speed up the production of qualified soldiers,

¹¹ Abigale Subdhan and Arisa Valyear, "What to know about Canadian Armed Forces, its part time reserves and its increase in applications," *The Globe and Mail*, 24 February 2026, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-canada-armed-forces-reserves-defence-strategy/>.

¹² Dorcas Marfo, "Canadian Armed Forces applications jump Nearly 13%," *CTV News*, January 23, 2026, <https://www.ctvnews.ca/canada/article/canadian-armed-forces-applications-jump-nearly-13/>.

¹³ Murray Brewster, "Leaker Canadian military report shows many new recruits are quickly leaving," *CBC News*, May 16, 2025, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/military-retention-program-defunding-1.7536509>.

and to do that, trust must be placed in CAF recruitment to select the right applicants for the job. If trust is maintained, by the time applicants make it to the RCAS, a Train to Confidence model can be adopted with a focus on producing confident officers ready for their first Regimental stint. The training system cannot handle repeated failures of soldiers in baseline training as they inevitably become a *clog* in the system that steals both time and resources from the training institutions. Adopting a training model flexible enough to allow for maximum learning while acknowledging shortcomings that do not halt candidate progression will ensure rapid production of soldiers into the regimental system, reduce current strain on the training system, and meet the CAF's broader intent of rapid growth. As the Artillery Corps with a short-term intent to grow a new Air Defence Regiment, another Close Support Regiment, and a Rocket Regiment within the next half decade, new training techniques that produce soldiers cannot be overlooked and should be sought continuously to facilitate growth.

Lastly, the recruit of the now and the near future will require a change in training techniques. As Generation Z recruits, those born between 1996 and 2012,¹⁴ work their way into the CAF recruiting system, their generational experiences have created norms and expectations that all elements of the CAF will have to deal with. Generation Z recruits will be technologically proficient but less socially inclined and wary of risk. They will also generally place their mental health as a top priority in picking their place of work and will choose to leave jobs that do not mesh with their priorities.¹⁵ In addition, the generation prefers more hands on and interactive

¹⁴ Diana Dascalu, Theodora Ogden, Lucia Retter, and Kate Utting, *Generation Z and Joint Professional Military Education*, RRA3249-1 (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2024), 1.

¹⁵ Dascalu et al, *Generation Z and Joint Professional Military Education*, 7-11.

learning than prior generations.¹⁶ The current system of instruction with check in the box assessments will not continue to work if the Artillery Corps is to grow and adapt to the future. If mental health and hands on learning are top priorities of the next generation of soldier, what better way to entice them into the Gunnery trade than by offering them an environment in which they can be mentored through their mistakes and gain confidence through hands on training in what they will be tasked to do at the Regiments. The current system, although one that has been in place for generations of soldiers, will serve only to drive the next generation of recruits away.

In conclusion, the Royal Canadian Artillery Corps is at a crossroads with its current training model. The check in the box assessment technique is antiquated and does not produce the confidence in the soldier that will be expected of them at the Regiment and on the battlefield. There are better options for training our soldiers in which David Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory provides a great basis for which to build a Train to Confidence model. Choosing a learning model that enables junior leaders to build confidence through experience serves the needs of the current operating environment, as the nature of war is rapidly changing and soldiers must remain flexible to survive. In addition, the CAF is expanding and the Artillery Corps needs a system to deal with an influx of recruits based on output of confidence to the units rather than enabling a standing cadre of failed candidates. Lastly, despite everything else, the Corps may have little choice but to adapt as the soldiers of the now and near future will

¹⁶ EIM Editorial Team, "How to Gen Z: Adapting Teaching Methods for the Learning Style of Digital Natives" *Evidence in Motion*, August 20, 2024, <https://eimpartnerships.com/articles/gen-z-learning-style-how-to-adapt-teaching-methods-for-digital-natives>.

demand a different learning approach tailored to hands on learning and mental health. Not adapting to these needs will lead to a lack of interest in Gunnery, a lack of blood in the Corps, and a host of incoming equipment and new Regimental aspirations that will be dead on arrival because the troops and leadership required will not be available to fall in. With the recent release of Inflection Point and the Canadian Army Modernization Order (CAMO), now is as good a time as any in the last decade to look inward at how we produce our soldiers and leaders of the future and push for a change to confidence over compliance in training.

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