



---

# Military Cross-Cultural Competence

Guest post by Lauren Mackenzie

## Context & Definition

Although the importance of cultural awareness has been widely acknowledged by the U.S. military for decades, questions of how culture should be taught and who should teach it have received renewed attention since 9/11. The wide range of missions across the U.S. military, the hierarchical rank structure, and the variety of military occupation specialties require a broad, multi-dimensional approach to culture training and education. Several service culture centers have emerged to meet the needs of this diverse population in the last decade, to include: the U.S. Army's *Culture Center* (Sierra Vista, AZ), the Navy's *Center for Language, Regional Expertise & Culture* (Pensacola, FL), the Air Force *Culture & Language Center* (Montgomery, AL) and the Marine Corps *Center for Advanced Operational Culture Learning* (Quantico, VA). The culture centers house a mix of military and civilian faculty from the fields of communication, anthropology, international relations, and psychology to teach, research and assess the implications of culture for military personnel. The Defense Language and National Security Education website lists links to them all (<http://www.cultureready.org/>).

The unpredictable nature and location of military operations requires a set of universal and transferrable culture concepts and skills that personnel can employ wherever they go. The different branches of service have acknowledged the need for personnel to learn "how to learn" about culture, to observe cultural difference, and how to interact appropriately and effectively no matter where they find themselves in the world. As such, cross-cultural competence (3C) emerged as a key outcome of culture training and education. A commonly used working definition of military cross-cultural competence (Selmeski, 2007) is: *the ability to quickly and accurately comprehend, then act effectively and appropriately in a culturally complex environment to achieve the desired effect – without necessarily having exposure to a particular group, region or language*. However, each branch approaches the definition slightly differently. Sands & Greene-Sands (2014) review each military branch's definition as well as the research, policy, learning, and application considerations for military contexts, to include the historical development of cross-cultural competence in professional military education and training. Along with cross-cultural competence, the military uses the terms "intercultural competence", "cultural capabilities" and "culture-general competencies" (Rasmussen & Sieck, 2015) to characterize the skills and knowledge that are applicable in any culture.

## Considerations for Teaching Military Cross-Cultural Competence

Since 3C is no longer recognized as solely the domain of Foreign Area Officers or Special Forces, the Department of Defense has taken steps to create a culture policy for the General Purpose Force. A baseline has been put forth to guide culture instruction and includes such skills as: acquiring cultural knowledge, demonstrating cultural self-awareness, cultural perspective-taking, and cultural observation. A "living" annotated bibliography devoted to *Cross-Cultural Competence in the Department of Defense* (Gallus et al., 2014) surveys the hundreds of articles, reports and book chapters that have emerged from a wide variety of academic disciplines and military branches in the past decade. Most military culture education efforts acknowledge the variety of 3C enablers, such as: knowledge (e.g., of culture-general concepts such as holism), skills (e.g., decoding nonverbal cues), and affective characteristics (e.g., curiosity). Of the various 3C skills, however, most military culture training programs emphasize the behavioral outcomes (e.g., ability to conduct cross-cultural negotiations). Mackenzie, Fogarty & Khachadorian (2013) review pertinent considerations for teaching military students and suggest best practices for designing and delivering on-line culture courses. Recommendations include:

- *Military relevance*: Students respond best to course content that is both framed using tools that are familiar to them (e.g., OODA loop) and applied to scenarios consistent with the types of situations they are likely to experience in their military profession.
- *Self-paced*: Students take courses while deployed or stationed all over the world, where Internet connections can be intermittent and time differences can be significant. In order to meet the needs of military students' atypical and unpredictable schedules, asynchronous course offerings are recommended, with voluntary opportunities for student interaction (e.g., course wiki).
- *Academically sound*: Contributions from a variety of subject matter experts in the areas of anthropology, communication, and cultural geography, etc address the interdisciplinary nature of culture. This, in turn, leads to more effective and robust academic content that is taught throughout the semester.
- *Systematically assessed*: Conducting pre- and post-assessment measures, along with student exit surveys, help to continuously improve the course content and design.

## Key Challenges

Assessment persists as a key challenge for developing military cross-cultural competence. As is the case in other professional contexts, self-report measures are used most frequently (due to the ease with which they can be administered) but with caution. For military purposes, ecological validity is crucial yet difficult to attain for measuring 3C in such a diverse population. Situational judgment tests and hybrid culture education courses with mission-centered, task oriented scenarios have been used with some success but can be difficult to sustain. The pervasive tendency to quantify the qualitative nature of culture and communication continues to be problematic. It is in collaboration

and open dialogue among military academics and their civilian counterparts that the potential for addressing such challenges is beginning to emerge.

*To cite this article, use this format:*

Mackenzie, Lauren. (2016, February 3). Guest post: Military cross-cultural competence. Center for Intercultural Dialogue. Available from: <https://centerforinterculturaldialogue.org/2016/02/03/military-cross-cultural-competence/>



*This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.*

## References

Gallus, J. A., Gouge, M. C., Fosher, K., Jasparro, V., Coleman, S., Selmeski, B., & Klafehn, J. L. (2014). *Cross-cultural competence in the Department of Defense: An annotated bibliography*. Special Report 71. Ft. Belvoir, VA: U.S. Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences. Available from: [http://www.mcu.usmc.mil/caocl/TRG/Research and Other Works/Special Report 71.pdf](http://www.mcu.usmc.mil/caocl/TRG/Research%20and%20Other%20Works/Special%20Report%2071.pdf)

Mackenzie, L., Fogarty, P. & Khachadoorian, A. (2013). A model for military online culture education: Key findings and best practices. *EDUCAUSE Review*, 48(4) July/Aug. Available from: <http://www.educause.edu/ero/article/model-online-military-culture-education-key-findings-and-best-practices>

Rasmussen, L. I., & Sieck, W. R. (2015). Culture-general competence: Evidence from a cognitive field study of professionals who work in many cultures. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 48, 75-90.

Sands, R. & Greene-Sands, A. (2014). *Cross-cultural competence for a 21st century military*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

Selmeski, B. (2007). *Military cross-cultural competence: Core concepts and individual development*. Royal Military College of Canada, Centre for Security, Armed Forces & Society, Occasional Paper Series—Number 1. Available from: <http://www.cultureready.org/cultural-competency/research-postion-papers/military-cross-cultural-competence-core-concepts-and>