

## **Learning in the Canadian Armed Forces: Exploring how Military Officers Write About Training and Education**

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The Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) is a large organization that relies upon people to accomplish a variety of unique and specific tasks. Consisting of approximately 68,000 full-time and 27,000 part-time members spread amongst the Royal Canadian Navy, Royal Canadian Air Force, and Canadian Army, CAF members occupy approximately 100 different occupations (DND, 2021). From the moment an individual joins until they leave the military, they are on a path of continual learning. Often these occupations have no civilian equivalency or external institution capable of providing the necessary learning environment. As a result, the military is responsible to design and deliver the specialized body of knowledge and skills required by its members at all stages of their career. Military members learn within the CAF through education, training, and experience (DND, 2017). Given the range of occupations, the necessity to educate at all stages of a member's career, and the requirement to have a single approach, the CAF Individual Training and Education (IT&E) system is complex. However, literature exploring this system outside of the military is limited. So how does the CAF approach the transmission and acquisition of knowledge within its organization? And what do members think about this?

While most learning within the CAF is prescriptive, mid-level officers at the rank of Major and Lieutenant-Commander in the Joint Command and Staff Programme (JCSP) have an opportunity to critically examine an issue of interest. They do this through the production of a staff paper focused on solving a single problem, and for some, they also complete a master's thesis. Examining what these officers choose to write about represents an opportunity to identify issues that matter most to a particular cohort of officers within the profession of arms. To explore current thinking, this paper examines how ideas about learning manifest in these papers. Thus, understanding their current thinking may help illuminate the future of military education. Post-JCSP, many students will assume roles and responsibilities within the CAF which may shape IT&E directly or indirectly. Prior to examining these papers, a brief overview of learning within the CAF in general and JCSP more specifically is provided.

### **CAF Training and Education**

The CAF is a continuous learning organization with an established professional development system (DND, 2018). There are four pillars of professional development within the CAF: education, training, experience, and self-development. Education is defined as “the provision of a body of knowledge and intellectual skill sets, upon which judgment among competing facts, information and ideas can be critically examined, assessed and interpreted” (DND, 2018, para 26). In contrast, training is “the provision of specific skills, knowledge, and attitudes required to perform assigned tasks and duties” (DND, 2018, para 26). Training normally has a narrow focus ensuring individual students learn the necessary skills to perform their assigned duties while education provides a broader skill set conducive to more abstract problems. These are broad concepts and are often used incorrectly with the broader ideas associated with education often tied to the more specific skill development better captured under the term training. Unless required to understand a particular context, this paper will opt to use the term learning to capture both training and education.

Military training and education are the first two of four pillars within the CAF's professional development framework. This framework is comprised of three parts: (1) individual training, consisting of most formalized training opportunities to learn new skills or competencies; (2) collective training focused on preparing groups of CAF members to perform military tasks to a proscribed standard; and (3) adventure training focused on group fitness and the development of moral courage within a team environment (DND, 1999). The third pillar, employment experience, focuses on continued development while applying the knowledge and skills learned within a classroom in a more practical environment. The final pillar, self-development, is an individual affair and is seen as an informal approach to developing skills. As members enter the CAF and advance within the organization, the importance and influence of each pillar will vary based upon their rank. As members of the CAF advance within the organization, they proceed through five developmental periods. Literature examining training and education within the CAF is scarce. Both Jones (2020) and Gerbrandt (2021) provide a more in-depth look at this subject with a focus on distance learning within the CAF.

### **Joint Command and Staff Program**

The Joint Command and Staff Program (JCSP) is delivered by the Canadian Forces College and offered as a year-long residential program or two years-long distributed program. Focused on officers at the rank of Major / Lieutenant-Commander, JCSP students come from all occupations and elements of the CAF. The course aims to prepare them for command and/or staff appointments. By this point, JCSP students will have completed all occupation and element-specific learning. Almost all officers attending JCSP will have an undergraduate degree, and many will have a graduate degree.

The Joint Command and Staff Program delivers education across five areas: command and leadership; communication skills; military operational planning; component capabilities; and national security and defense studies. During their studies, students create a service paper exploring a specific subject with the intent to identify a problem and present solutions. Those students who are completing a concurrent Master of Defence Studies will also write a thesis (CFC, n.d.).

### **Research Method**

A total of 784 documents, consisting of service papers (n=609) and Masters of Defence Studies theses (n=175) were written by JCSP students between 2018 and 2022. Publicly available, these papers were accessed from the Canadian Forces College online repository in April 2023. Coding occurred in three rounds. First, papers were grouped into one of three overarching themes based upon their title and if necessary, a review of their abstract (see Table 1 below). The three themes were (1) People, which is the focus of this paper (n=181); (2) Operations (n=345); and (3) Organization (n=258).

	People	Operations	Organization
2022	36	86	21
2021	38	102	67
2020	32	47	50
2019	42	60	53
2018	33	50	67
Total	181	345	258

Table 1 – Papers by over-arching theme (Round 1)

Next, titles and paper aims were used to classify papers within *Personnel* into the following four categories (see Table 2 below): (1) Conduct and Culture (n=52), exploring issues around institutional culture; (2) Learning (n=58), which will be discussed below; (3) Administration and Finance (n=11), focused on the application of policy; and (4) Recruitment and Retention (n=60), exploring ways to get people into the military and keep those already serving.

	Conduct & Culture	Learning	Administration & Finance	Recruitment & Retention
2022	9	11	3	13
2021	17	13	2	6
2020	9	8	3	12
2019	13	20	0	9
2018	4	6	3	20
Total	52	58	11	60

Table 2 – Papers within *Personnel* (Round 2)

Finally, papers were coded based on their specific subject based upon abstracts (see Table 3 below for list of codes). An initial list of a priori codes was produced based on the types of learning that occur within the CAF. While this worked for some data (i.e., mentorship and leadership), codes such as *training* were simply too broad to capture the nuances of each paper. Concurrent with analyzing each paper based on the subject, I also noted which element they focused on, with most papers looking at the CAF as a whole (n=31) followed by Canadian Army (n=20).

Code	#
Pedagogy	6
Leadership	7
Mentorship	3
Education	5
Training System	4
Individual Training	4
Collective Training	4
Occupational Training	6
Technology	7
Human Performance	11

Table 3 – Papers within *Learning* (Round 3)

### Findings

On average, 23% of the papers produced each year focused on people within the CAF with 7% of the total sample dedicated to learning. This was much lower than I expected given the size and reach of the CAF’s training and education system. Learning is a broad term and was divided into ten distinct codes. The following will briefly describe each code and summarize the topics explored. Rather than critiquing the authors’ arguments, my intent is to explicate what is being explored to show what these specific members think about CAF learning.

*Pedagogy* – This is a wide-ranging category focused on evaluation (Way, 2022), praxis related to technology (Audet, 2019), and over-arching officer training (Schmidt, 2018). In these papers, the authors confronted issues with the status quo and present changes in terms of how training is conducted or the ways in which technology was integrated.

*Leadership* – These seven papers drew upon existing CAF leadership doctrine and pointed to ways in which it needed to improve (Sheasby, 2021) and innovate (Stewart, 2019; Robarts, 2019), while also considering the effects of operational tempo (Braybrook, 2019). While Labbé (2021) drew upon management sciences and Schamuhn (2018) looked to theories on organizational change, both spoke to a need to re-envision exactly what an officer is.

*Mentorship* – The three theses exploring mentorship in the CAF adopted different approaches to the subject. Hansen (2021) positioned mentorship as a solution to the military’s current recruitment and retention problems. Drawing from business and academia, they suggested mentorship to respond to diversity and demographic issues within the CAF. Doré (2021a) looked at mentorship to foster organizational learning while Lucas (2019) presented a practical guide for mentors.

*Education* – Drawing upon the CAF’s own definition of education stated earlier, these papers explored ideas around professional development and learning relevant but perhaps less defined skill sets such as Charette’s (2022) suggestion that CAF officers must develop digital literacy and Stewarts’ (2019) discussion on the need for joint operations (i.e., army and navy working together) education. While Beatty (2021) focused on the CAF as a learning organization and how

that impacts change, Sharpe (2020) and Doré (2021b) examined professional development within the Canadian Army.

*Individual Training* – The four papers examining aspects of individual training approached the subject in very different ways. While Jones (2021) spoke to professionalizing a specific set of skills within the RCAF, both D’Souza (2020) and Summerfield (2019) looked at army-specific training and the need to justify current approaches. Finally, Caines (2019) addressed longstanding issues with CAF project management by proposing it as a more general skill set.

*Collective Training* – Except for a single example that looked at joint training (Deschamps, 2021), the remaining three papers focused on the Canadian Army. Poirier (2020) looked at the need to prepare convoys to deal with the realities of irregular warfare while Ali (2019) and Hillier (2019) both explored army training, with the former focused on ideas of economy and efficiency of training while the latter argued the value of force-on-force training (i.e., scenarios that pit one team against another) within the army.

*Specific Occupational Training* – In contrast to individual training, which speaks to common training, *Occupational Training* focuses on those papers which critique the training and education within a single occupation. While aspects of these papers might blur the line between *Personnel* and *Organization*, a focus on training is central to the argument of each. While there are approximately 100 occupations in the CAF, the six papers within this code focused on two of them – aircrew and artillery. For the artillery, all four papers spoke to finding a balance between generalist and specialist skills with authors taking different approaches.

*Technology* – Whereas pedagogy explored both what is taught and how instruction occurs, technology focused specifically on how simulation (i.e., gaming and virtual reality) could improve training. Jordan (2021) looked to modern gaming technologies to improve aircrew training while both Durand (2019) and Sanson (2018) examined simulation within the navy, specifically the inclusion of virtual reality and synthetic training environments. Graham (2021) and Nitu (2019) explored vehicle simulation within the army and the ways in which this is integrated into training.

*Human Performance* – These papers focused on fitness specific to the Navy (Hill, 2022), resilience in general (Evans, 2019; MacLeod, 2019; Michaud, 2018), resilience to reduce injury (Chabot, 2019), or general stressors (Nault, 2021), and mental health (Beaudette, 2019). Throughout, these papers drew upon the current programs, operational tempo, and what most authors identified as a lack of existing support.

## Discussion

By examining what officers attending JCSP chose to write about, I sought to understand how ideas related to learning manifested within their staff papers and theses. Through this analysis, it became clear topics related to military operations (i.e., critiquing tactics or discussing aspects of peace keeping) and the institution as an organization (i.e., structural reorganization) are explored considerably more frequently than issues related to people (23%). This is not surprising and perhaps attributable to members being more familiar with operational and organizational issues. It is also possible that this lack of attention could be indicative of a system

that works well for most people or perhaps a level of general satisfaction with the Canadian military's professional development system.

Of the papers explored, only 7% explore subjects related to learning. While the subjects varied, it is noteworthy that there was no examination of the individual learner or the military instructor. Given all members experience the training and education system as students and many as instructors, it is interesting that no one focused on the learner or teacher. For those papers speaking to pedagogy, the conversation tended to focus on technology and how it could be incorporated into training. It is also significant that formal learning was discussed but informal and experiential learning were not mentioned. This is noteworthy given one of the CAF's professional development pillars focuses on an individual's experience.

There are two key limitations within this study. First, the data is based on what officers wrote during JCSP. This immediately excludes non-commissioned officers and members (i.e. sergeants and corporals), a group that is involved in the majority of CAF-delivered training. Second, the number of papers written by Training Development Officers (i.e., the CAF's cadre of professional educators) and those with experience instructing and leading within the individual training system is unknown.

### Conclusion

As a large organization, the CAF is responsible to design, develop, and deliver most institutional learning. This ranges from simple skills to the evaluation of thousands of members working alongside one another. Despite the reach of education and training within the military, learning occupies a small percentage of the total number of staff papers and thesis produced each year on JCSP and none argue for an increase in critical education. One limitation of this paper is that it focused solely on officers and what they are writing and overlooks the perspective of non-commissioned officers and members. This was a practical decision owing to what scholarship is publicly accessible. Given the broad range of learning within the CAF and limited literature exploring this subject, this paper focused on those officers attending JCSP to illuminate what they think about learning in what is arguably a niche area of study. Notwithstanding the limited number of papers produced, this research shows that students are exploring the area of learning through a wide range of topics.

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