



Operational Pause: A Teaching Tip for Administrators and Faculty in Times of Sudden and Unexpected Environmental Change Such as with COVID-19

Army publication ADP 5-0 *The Operations Process* describes a circular framework of planning, preparation and execution. The process includes ongoing assessment of how well a plan and its implementation are meeting mission objectives. This publication and many of the military instructors who have schooled me on the subject tell us that, during the operations process, commanders should follow the one-third (commander planning) - two-thirds (for subordinate planning and preparation) rule. In other words, it is important at the top to take the time to assess the situation and develop a clear, executable plan but to do so expediently so as to allow those who must implement the plan the larger share of time for planning and preparation.

Because this logic has been ingrained in me for over two decades in the military, I am surprised in retrospect by my critical reaction to the announcement this March that my children would have their spring break extended by two weeks while their high school teachers developed a plan for remote learning. I was wrong not to recognize the need for this operational pause and embrace the reality that this time of idleness would ultimately reduce chaos and improve mission execution; that is, my children would learn more with less mayhem. Alternatively, our post-secondary plan to move to remote learning immediately and for an ill-defined time period following students' virtual return from spring break did not include an operational pause.

As teachers of colleges of agriculture and simply perhaps as adults, we know that thoughtful preparation is important, and we spend countless hours designing, building and fine-tuning our classes prior to the start of the term; that is, planning. Once the term begins, we implement our plan and work to evaluate its success through various means of assessment such as exams, assignments and eliciting student feedback. We do the best we can and, when necessary and when time and conditions allow, we adapt the plan during the term.

I am advocating that we can do better, certainly when faced by a radical change such as an unexpected and complete transition to remote teaching and learning, and more generally throughout a less unusual term, by ensuring there is time for planning; specifically, by being willing to employ an operational pause when our assessments tell us it would be beneficial.

At the level of the institution, this may mean a complete stop to the actual instructional process to allow for institution-level and then unit-level planning and issuing of guidance followed by instructor-level planning and instructional design and development. Institutional guidance may include recommendations and, depending of the culture of the institution, perhaps some level of detailed guidance regarding instructional modes to be employed so as to allow for more targeted support for instructors and reduce the learning curve for our students. Both are important. Support for instructors is paramount when technologies are not well established or widely adopted, both because instructors not well versed on the true capabilities (and limitations) of the technologies cannot practice learned planning and because a sudden growth in use of particular technologies by instructors with a wide-range of levels of experience is certainly going to tax the system. If there is no time to learn the technology before including it in the teaching plan, instructors and their supporting instructional technology staff fall back on the position of working reactively. From the side of students, it has become apparent that, while assumed generally technology-savvy, this is far from universally true for our student body.

Anecdotal evidence collected from a “how is it going” survey conducted in my sophomore-level agricultural finance class this term identified that students are feeling overwhelmed. This was due to the number of tools they were required to learn and the sheer volume of emails with constantly changing guidance on the way forward to be the most challenging aspect of the move to remote learning. This perceived chaos far outpaced other options, including what I expected to be most important: missing interaction with their peers. I would argue that we can mitigate this outcome considerably with planning and communication of clear guidance, first from the institution to the units and instructors and then to the students. And that doing so naturally requires an operational pause.

This is not a criticism of the spectacular response to the pandemic and the need for social distancing. The notion that everyone from institutional leadership to students did amazing things in quickly adopting a learning structure at times vastly different from that employed just days or weeks prior is heartfelt. We are most thankful for leadership at all levels. Rather, my premise is that we can learn from this unprecedented experience and be willing to forgo instructional time initially so as to improve our ability to offer content and facilitate learning and the ability of students to adapt to our new expectations.

My platoon sergeant once told me during a training exercise designed to be chaotic and overtax our resources that we could work really hard and hope for the best or we could work smart so as to expect the best. As we carefully assess what we learned from this experience and work to apply it towards building an instructional emergency action plan for the future, we should overcome the strong desire to continue to roll on and be deliberate about building in an operational pause.

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