

Leveraging the ‘Staff Ride’ for Active Learning in Public Safety Management

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ABSTRACT

The unique experience known as the “Staff Ride” is an important part of Professional Military Education (PME). Unfortunately, despite a growth in the acceptance of “active learning” approaches to education – particularly for teaching management and leadership – the staff ride model has not been widely adopted in many of the educational and professional disciplines where it has the potential to be an effective tool. There have been a small number of examples of its use both in academic and professional education outside of the military, but the advantages of the staff ride are such that wider use would be a valuable addition to those studying public safety management in fields like criminal justice, homeland security, and emergency management. This article compares the staff ride to active learning and the Harvard Business School “case method,” and shows that it shares many of the same desirable traits as widely accepted models.

INTRODUCTION

Those who teach complex subjects are always on the lookout for new pedagogical techniques and approaches that will enable presentation of complicated and multi-faceted subject matter in a way that resonates with students. Active learning, service learning, simulations and various other methods are commonly discussed approaches to improving understanding by engaging students in coursework that is different from a traditional lecture or discussion format. One approach, currently used mostly in professional military education (PME), that is worthy of far more exploration in the education of public safety management and leadership is a unique, and perhaps uniquely valuable, form of active learning: the Staff Ride.

The United States Army War College conducts staff rides on the grounds of the historic Gettysburg battlefield (USAWC, 2015); where students spend the day traversing the terrain, discussing the strategy of the leaders who commanded troops there, discussing the resources and logistical underpinnings of the forces at the battle, and examining the role Gettysburg played in the larger story of the Civil War. The staff ride is no battlefield “tour” – it is lead by a historian and strategic educator, features voluminous preparation (in terms of readings and discussions), has set-piece discussions among participants, and various other attributes which distinguish it from even an educational tour of a historical battlefield. The purpose of the staff ride is not to see the terrain and talk about battle as a historical event, but rather to contextualize theoretical and practical theories from class sessions in a real world example, and to examine leadership, decision-making, and strategy through the lens of a shared case study.

The staff ride is a commonplace technique in the world of Professional Military Education (PME), and used in a small number of non-military disciplines (though typically those are closely related to security and strategic studies). The staff ride, though, has much more utility and applicability than its current limited use outside the military context would suggest; particularly in light of the increasing level of interest in active learning as a way of engaging students and improving educational outcomes.

Staff rides have proven themselves as effective teaching methods for generations of military officers; however they’ve also shown the distinct ability to inspire critical thought and crucial insights for those who don’t wear the uniform. Tom Ricks, a journalist and author who examines national security, in fact had the initial insight that led to his very controversial book “The Generals” from a staff ride. Ricks’ book levies a strong criticism of the trajectory of Generalship and leadership accountability in the United States Army since World War II. As Ricks describes:

In 2005, while I was writing *Fiasco*, I went on a Johns Hopkins University staff ride study of the allied campaign in Sicily in 1943. While we were standing on a hilltop in central Sicily, one of Professor Eliot Cohen’s students related the tale of Omar Bradley firing Terry de la Mesa Allen, commander of the 1st Infantry Division, after Allen won one of the toughest battles of the campaign. I was stunned. Here I was coming out of Iraq, where generals were failing yet not being removed, and I was being told about the firing of one of the most successful American generals during our first year of World War II. How could that be? Why had the Army’s approach to leadership and accountability changed so much? That was the beginning of this book (Thompson, 2010).

Rick’s experience with the staff ride is not unique, in fact the reason that militaries have used this tool for several hundred years (they reportedly began in 18th century Prussia) is exactly the catalytic effect on thinking about such issues that he experienced. While the staff ride is not a model that could be easily applied to every discipline or subject matter, it is a technique of active learning that is distinctly useful for those studying management or policy related to public safety – i.e. in the fields of criminal justice, homeland security or emergency management. These public safety disciplines – like military studies – are usually practitioner-focused fields (providing insights to police officers, intelligence analysts, first responders and emergency managers), have a distinct geographical context (crimes and disasters occur in a particular place), and require learning lessons from previous experiences and episodes (each incident or case is a chance for a reassessment of policy and process in light of new information). In these ways, public safety disciplines have some distinct parallels to military studies, and as such have much to learn from the large literature on military education and training.

What is a “staff ride?” The question of what constitutes a staff ride is a tough one, and not one with a single agreed upon answer. The United States Marine Corps defines a staff ride as: “... a case study, typically of a military battle or campaign, conducted on the ground where the event happened. It is considered an essential instructional technique in advanced military schools and in field units (USMC, 2015).” The Marine Corps definition – while certainly true – is a bit broader than the way in which a staff ride is typically described. While it is certainly a case study, and does take place on the terrain of the actual event, those two attributes could leave the impression that a staff ride is a historical battlefield tour – which it is not.

What distinguishes a staff ride from a historical battlefield tour are two main attributes, which are well described by the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) – one of the few non-military educational institutions that consistently uses the staff ride model of active learning. The first difference is one of process and approach, the second one of content and focus (SAIS, 2015).

The first difference is that a staff ride is a participatory active-learning event, not a passive tour in which a historian tells the story of some bygone event. On a battlefield tour, the leader – typically a historian or tour guide – tells stories and answers questions about the historical event. This approach is much closer to a traditional classroom experience of lecture and discussion than it is to active learning. The leader of a staff ride serves not as a guide per se, but as a moderator of discussion and debate within the group, and a poser of questions to a group of participants who are already familiar with the history.

The second difference is that a staff ride is less about historical education than it is about education related to leadership and management – participants will discuss the historical event (what happened), but will devote much more time to the roles of those involved, their decision making processes, the impacts of those decisions, and their personal and organizational incentives, biases, and limitations.

Who Uses Staff Rides? The most common users, and originators, of the staff ride are the educational institutions of the military. These include the Service Academies, Command and Staff Colleges, the War Colleges and other Professional Military Education (PME) schools. These schools inherited a long tradition of using the staff ride that dates back hundreds of years to the Prussian general staff.

The staff ride is not just used by educational institutions in the military though; it is also used by Officers in order to communicate insights to their troops, or to build esprit de corps and relationships within their ranks and with coalition partners. For example, in Iraq the innovative US Army officer H R McMaster used a staff ride build understanding and trust between his troops and the Iraqis they were working with.

McMaster strengthened his position in another innovative way: by taking his officers for an outing with Iraqi officers during which he conducted a staff ride – the military term for a formal professional examination of a historical battlefield – of a spot near Mosul where Alexander the Great had routed the Army of the Persian Empire. It was a subtle way of showing that the Americans recognized that they were representatives of one of the world's youngest cultures trying to work with people from one of the world's oldest cultures (Ricks, 2006).

Non-military institutions and leaders have also used staff rides, but far less than they have been used by the military. Academic institutions of several stripes – both of the traditional university variety and professional or pre-professional schools – have used staff rides as a way to apply learning done in the classroom to the practical world inhabited by the practitioner. That said, even when such staff rides are undertaken by traditional (i.e. non-military) educational institutions, they have tended to be universities that have ties to the military, or teach about subjects tangential to the military mission sets (like foreign policy, strategy, security, etc.).

The School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) at Johns Hopkins, for example, uses and hosts staff rides, including the one that Tom Ricks credits with inspiring the questions that lead to his book *The Generals*. Princeton’s Center for International Security Studies (CISS) hosts staff rides – in addition to other active learning events like crisis simulations – for its students at the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs. (Princeton, 2015) Military schools – like Norwich University (Norwich University, 2015) – and the military studies departments of traditional universities – like the one at the University of Dayton (Univ. of Dayton, 2015) – are also using staff rides to actively engage students.

Staff rides are used by numerous institutions that provide professional and practical education and training, including for disciplines like the fire service. These staff rides are often more focused on the tactical level rather than the strategic or managerial level, but they have many of the same pedagogical benefits and dynamics. For example, various local, state (Holmes, 2005) and national level (Alexander, 2002) fire services use staff rides to engage their leaders in training. The use of staff rides for training members of the fire service have even gone so far as to lead to the development of mobile phone “apps” to foster quicker and more uniform staff rides (Wildfire Today, 2012).

The Staff Ride as “Active Learning” and “Problem-Based Learning.” Active learning means many things to many different people, but most definitions tend to converge on the idea that it differs from traditional (or “passive”) classroom experience – like lecturing – by having students engage in the learning process actively. This could take many forms – exercises, simulations, team-based projects, games, debates, or other pedagogical techniques that require student interaction with the material (and often with each other) (Prince, 2004).

The staff ride is quite clearly a form of active learning. In fact, the Marine Corps University describes staff rides as “...a group exercise requiring participation and active engagement by the participants (USMC, 2015).” Rather than receiving a lecture about an historical episode or reading a vignette about it (both of which may occur prior to the staff ride), the participants walk the ground while having a guided discussion, using real life locations to spur theoretically relevant questions and insights.

Princeton’s CISS describes its staff rides as “... intensely collaborative learning experiences and require participants to study the battle beforehand and to actively contribute to discussions... (Princeton, 2015).” In fact, while CISS has facilitators to lead the staff rides, responsibility for the “organizing and executing” of the staff ride falls to the students involved (Princeton, 2015). One Princeton student called his staff ride experience “... by far, the most enlightening experience I have had here at Princeton ... everyone on the ride was fully invested in the effort and fostered some intelligent, informed discussions ... (Princeton, 2015).”

It is not just anecdotal evidence from staff ride participants that suggest such active learning is effective though. Research suggests that the importance of active learning stems from some of the advantages it provides to students:

...several studies have shown that students prefer strategies promoting active learning to traditional lectures. Other research studies have shown that evaluating students’ achievement have demonstrated that many strategies promoting active learning are comparable to lectures in promoting mastery of content but superior to lectures in

promoting the development of students skills in thinking and writing. Further, some cognitive research has shown that a significant number of individuals have learning styles best served by pedagogical techniques other than lecturing (Bonwell & Eison, 1991).

The staff ride is a clear form of active learning, and also a form of Problem Based Learning (PBL). Problem based learning is “an instructional method where relevant problems are introduced at the beginning of the instruction cycle and used to provide the context and motivation for the learning that follows (Prince, 2004).” In the case of the staff ride, both theoretical and substantive information about the episode to be examined are studied in advance, and during the course of the staff ride students actively participate in discussions and speculations while grafting their mental models onto the actual terrain on which the incident played out.

The Staff Ride Model as a Variation on the “Case Method” of Teaching Management. The Harvard Business School’s (HBS) “case method” approach to teaching about business and management is one that has many parallels to the staff ride. While originating at HBS, it is a pedagogical methodology that has had broad impact in other professional schools. There are examples of the case method being applied to public management and science (Herreid, 2005) among other disciplines. HBS describes the case method as:

...a form of instructor-guided, discussion-based learning. It introduces complex and often ambiguous real-world scenarios into the classroom, typically through a case study with a protagonist facing an important decision. The case method represents a shift from the traditional, instructor-centered model of education to a participant-centered one in which students play a lead role in their own and each other’s learning (Christensen Center, 2015).

The case method is an important variation on active learning. The focus on active learning is apparent in that HBS claims “85 percent of the talking” in case method classes is done by students rather than professors, and that in many courses “50 percent of a student’s grade” is based on the quality of their participation (HBS, 2015). The case method, like staff rides, focus on learning that “... goes beyond the transfer of knowledge to include the development of analytical, decision-making, and communication skills, and the cultivation of self-awareness, judgment, and the capacity to lead (Christensen Center, 2015).”

What is it that both staff rides and the HBS case method provide to students? They offer the chance for students to place themselves in the shoes of decision makers and leaders dealing with complex decisions. They provide students a real world “model” onto which to project and evaluate theoretical insights and previous learning. Students are able to:

...place themselves in the role of the decision maker ... and identify the problem they are faced with. The next step is to perform the necessary analysis—examining the causes and considering alternative courses of actions to come to a set of recommendations (HBS, 2015).

The main difference between a staff ride and the “case method” is that while cases bring “...complex and often ambiguous real-world scenarios into the classroom ...” (Christensen Center, 2015) staff rides doing something similar by bringing students outside of the classroom rather than bringing the scenarios inside. Staff rides function as interactive case studies in public safety management. It is no coincidence that two techniques adopted by two separate institutions (the military and business schools) attempting to train strategic leaders should choose the case

method. HBS says “Simply put, we believe the case method is the best way to prepare students for the challenges of leadership (HBS, 2015).”

The Challenges of the Staff Ride for Public Safety Education. While the staff ride is a potentially valuable addition to existing active learning techniques, as well as to traditional lecture style learning (which is sometimes appropriate), it is no panacea. It is most definitely a supplement to existing active learning pedagogies including class discussion, group projects, exercises and simulations and the like. Staff rides are a venue in which students are able to use, exercise and explore theoretical frameworks and historical examples they have already learned through class work and reading. In addition to the fact that staff rides are necessarily limited because they rely heavily on previous learning, they are also limited in other more practical ways.

Staff rides’ utility may be limited by geography, required preparation time, and resources. Staff rides, by their nature, require going to some place where a sufficiently important event happened in order to walk through and discuss the event. Programs focused on homeland security or intelligence at Universities that are not near the locations of major terrorist attacks, for example, may have trouble finding suitably close and important sites to visit. Criminal Justice and Emergency Management classes may be less constrained, as few places have no history of serious crime or natural disaster. If there is no suitable site nearby, travel may be required which brings in the potential for resource constraints. (The staff ride that Tom Ricks cited as starting him on the theoretical path toward The Generals involved travel to Sicily) The constraints on resources and travel may not be as big a limitation if the staff ride is treated as the Capstone for a semester long course, rather than as merely just another class meeting. That said, there are other constraints resulting from travel, even travel to nearby locations. Some universities will require paperwork and waivers for students to travel off campus during class, and there are organizational challenges that result from having to move students using campus resources (like buses) or using their own personal vehicles. Most of these challenges are, however, surmountable in at least many cases.

Additionally, technology may enable some interesting ways of virtualizing the staff ride, for example the Virginia Military Institute (VMI) has used a “virtual leadership staff ride” to overcome some of these constraints and limitations, by leveraging tools like Google Maps (VMI, 2015). The idea that technology can lower the organizational and logistical constraints on active learning endeavors is hardly surprising, but the “virtualization” of staff rides presents yet another example of how this might occur. While this approach might have down sides (like not walking the actual terrain that features in the incident), advances in digital mapping, presentation technology, and other tools might be able to limit the downside while decreasing the costs of staff rides immensely. Additionally, it is likely that technology will enable such staff rides to be recorded and documented, such that even students who are not able to attend might benefit from the discussions and insights. As in most areas of technology adoption for education, there are both advantages and disadvantages to each approach, and it is likely to be the instructors and program leadership who will be in the best position to assess those tradeoffs.

Perhaps the most important limitation to the use of the staff ride is that in order for it to be as valuable as it can be, it requires a large amount of preparation work and time for both the instructor(s) and the students. It requires much research into the site and event(s) being examined, compiling a sufficient set of background readings to prepare the students, a clear timeline and plan

for the day of the event, and typically several classes to establish the analytic framework and key questions with the students so they're prepared for the event upon arrival. Staff Rides require a lot of work to be effective, but when done correctly they leverage important insights about active learning and the importance of case studies for management and leadership education, to help prepare future managers and leaders for many of the kinds of problems and decisions that their predecessors have struggled with, reacted to, and sometimes made mistakes with.

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