



# NEWS RELEASE

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## **Keynote Address by Permanent Secretary (Education Development) of the Ministry of Education and Chairman of the Singapore Armed Forces Learning Transformation Advisory Board, Lieutenant-General (NS) Neo Kian Hong, at the SAF Learning Symposium 2014**

01 Oct 2014

General Benedict Lim, Commandant SAFTI MI,  
Members of the SAF Learning Transformation Advisory Board,  
Distinguished guests,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,  
Good morning.

Let me first thank Commandant SAFTI Military Institute (SAFTI MI) for inviting me back. This learning symposium, which was inaugurated in 2012, continues to be a useful platform to share learning trends, concepts and best practices in education and industry.

It is also my honour to be invited to contribute to the SAF as Chairman of the Learning Transformation Advisory Board. There are many areas of similarity between the SAF and the Education Service. A peacetime military is basically an education and training organisation. As the SAF transforms its learning system, Ministry of Education (MOE) is also making significant changes to the education system. My education colleagues will agree with me that it is a beneficial journey to walk together and learn from one another. I was talking with Dr Schatz (workshop facilitator for SLS 2014) that learning goes across and continues on. And some of these (learning) systems that we are talking about actually continue from the education system that we have in the schools and up to the SAF and even beyond. So we are trying to see a continuation (in learning) and if we can have a platform to do that, then it will be really powerful. So maybe the next step we are talking about will be a "Learning Nation" initiative.

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Today, I would like to make some observations about our operating environment. Then I will talk about your SAF learning vision and the institutions that you have established to realise that vision. Finally, I will summarise the key aspects of a good learning system from the perspective of education.

The SAF is highly professional, adaptive and forward looking. Often, it is ahead of times, for example, its ship-to-shore capabilities were envisioned and built over 20 years before it was adapted for disaster relief during the Asian Tsunami. Sometimes, the SAF moves rapidly to close the gap in emerging circumstances, for example the collaboration with the Home Team for homeland security and with other agencies like Ministry of Health (MOH) in dealing with pandemics. I don't think we can find many forces in the world where they have transformed from a conventional force to a full spectrum force in such a short time. The flexibility and range of capabilities have allowed the SAF to play a role as part of international community in places like the Gulf of Aden and Afghanistan. The SAF is not just a security blanket that the nation finds confidence and comfort in, but also a source of pride when it is deployed to help others as well.

While the SAF is a robust learning organisation, things continue to evolve and they are not static. We witness a relentless change in our environment. Different words have been used to describe the new environment. Let me just mention three of them, which are **complexity, pace and scrutiny**. These words do have impact on organisations including the SAF. An example of **complexity** is the challenge of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). On the one hand, we know that we have to use some force, but on the other hand we know that it is not the full solution. And our Minister for Foreign Affairs has just mentioned at the United Nations (General Assembly 69th session General Debate) that we have to combat this at various levels. It appears distant, but yet it is in our midst. In some ways, we are shocked at the beheading of civilians in Iraq and Syria by the ISIS, and they are inviting people from all over the world to join them. When countries started to stop these people from joining ISIS in-theatre, ISIS advised them that they can do it locally in their respective countries. So you see that the threat continues to evolve and it is very difficult to determine what is the sensible thing to do. It is not just operations faraway, but locally, we have to look at the challenge as well. Even the Australians who are fiercely protective of their rights are now willing to trade them for homeland security, and to enact laws to protect their citizens. Therefore there are no straightforward answers.

The **pace** is quickening and we feel that time has become compressed. Through the ubiquitous eye of today's mobile devices, we instantaneously see pictures of what is going on from literally anyone and anywhere. In crisis planning, we used to be able to count on the standard four to eight hours to make sense and take decisions. Now, decision makers and bystanders can witness incidents as things occur. Sometimes, even the decision makers (witness the incidents) later than the bystanders. There is little time to

think and there is tremendous pressure to take action. Some call this a new nervous system, where there is a need for quick thinking and faster response.

Overall, there is greater **scrutiny** for leaders and even response forces. As the Korean vessel carrying children were sinking, pictures were taken of the captain leaving the ship. When Malaysia Airlines MH17 was downed, several pictures were taken, including a vehicle supposedly carrying the Russian air defence missiles with two used pods. Locally, we can also see the incident in Little India and how everything was scrutinised so closely. This certainly has an impact on us. We realised that we can become individually accountable, there can be greater leadership anxiety and decision making can be paralysed. We hope that our actions can withstand scrutiny.

Can we deal with the complexity? Can we deal with the new **pace**? Are we able to operate under intense scrutiny? How do we prepare our people?

### **"Learning SAF Thinking Warriors"**

You have a good approach as described by the vision of "Learning SAF Thinking Warriors". A "Learning SAF" promotes a strong learning culture that harnesses the organisation's collective knowledge. No individual could be involved in all exercises and operations. But, collectively, there is an abundance of insights and experiences gained from people who had participated in them. When such knowledge is made readily available and shared, new knowledge in turn will be created.

"Thinking Warriors" means that the SAF's individuals and teams have the cognitive abilities to sense-make, innovate and adapt to overcome local conditions and challenges. Evolving situations are sometimes best tackled at source. Old skills would have to be adapted and new skills developed. It is insufficient that the soldiers learn just vocational skills. They require softer skills as well, and more importantly learning to learn.

Much has been done over the years to implement the vision. Particularly important are the key institutions that have been built. Let me talk about some of them. One is the Centre for Leadership Development, the SAF Learning Community, the Centre for Learning Systems and the LEARNet.

First, the **Centre for Leadership Development (CLD)**. Since the year 2000, CLD has introduced the learning organisation initiative and this allowed the leaders a way to develop shared perspectives and also to engage their people. This opened minds has led to productive discussions accelerating the SAF transformation effort. The Centre also plays a crucial role in sustaining the learning culture in the SAF. Learning transformation cannot take place without the chain of command and the culture of the military leadership. The leaders have to be role-model themselves as lifelong-learners and influence their subordinates to learn.

Second, the **SAF Learning Community**. This includes all the Services, the Training Institutes and the Schools in the SAF. The SAF is seen as one learning community. This follows from the idea of One SAF where the entire SAF is a Joint Force and every Service can tap on to the entire suite of capabilities. By having one community, it ensures connection and coherence in learning. This is an important observation by Linda Darling-Hammond in her book "Preparing Teachers for a Changing world", where she emphasised the need for a coherent and connected learning system. This learning symposium and the learning transformation advisory board are good initiatives that will continue to groom this learning community.

Third, **Centre for Learning Systems (CLS)**. The CLS was established to drive the SAF learning transformation particularly in areas of pedagogical practices, curriculum development, and learning technologies. This is like the Plans department designing and constructing the various components of the learning system architecture.

One piece that we can see as a result of this is the **Institute for Military Learning (IML)** created to enhance pedagogical practices. It aims to professionalise the SAF Instructor Corps, and propel the SAF to be a leader in adult learning. It is noted that IML has attained the Singapore Workforce Development Agency's In-house Approved Training Organisation status. I understand that the SAF Instructor Course and SAF Senior Instructor Course - both accredited under the Singapore Workforce Skills Qualifications framework - have started.

Fourth, **LEARNet Portal 2.0**. To exploit technology for learning, LEARNet Portal 2.0 enables learners to access information, collaborate with one another and contribute to the collective experience. The design is based on the learning model that enables the following: (1) self-directed learning, (2) collaborative learning and (3) Accessible Curriculum.

Self-Directed Learning is where people learn on their own. When one owns the learning, it motivates that person to pursue a learning goal and persist in the learning process.

Control is shifted from trainers to learners, transforming the individual from a passive recipient to one that is inquisitive and curious to discover new knowledge. Self-Directed Learning resonates well with what learning transformation wants to achieve as it leads to three important aspects of: ownership of learning, self-management and self-monitoring, and extension of learning.

Collaborative Learning is where people learn from each other. It is essentially anchored on social interactions targeting deeper insights. In a complex environment, one cannot always depend on the leader to provide the clarity in the middle of flying bullets and dusts. Hence, the team has to harness diversity and multiple perspectives amongst them, collaborate, reason the options, and determine the best workable solution to achieve

mission success. We see examples of these in the SAF such as communities of practice, peer sharing, coaching and mentoring.

Curriculum and its curation for accessibility is a key to learning. Last month, the Minister for Education announced during the annual MOE Workplan Seminar 2014 that students and teachers would be able to access a Student Learning Space online portal from 2016. Materials in it are created by teachers in schools, sourced from the Internet and curated by MOE. Similarly, the SAF's collective knowledge must be accessible anytime, anywhere.

You have a clear vision and have put in place good institutions to realise the vision. Now, you just need to rigorously implement the plans.

Let me summarise by highlighting three key aspects of a good education system. First, in MOE, we say that the education system is only as good as the teachers that we have. We have a reputable education system because of the good teachers produced by National Institute of Education (NIE) and academy of Singapore teachers. In the SAF, the training system and CLD ensure that we have good leaders and facilitators of learning. IML is a good effort to ensure that we have good teaching skills. Sometimes, we assume that just because we have good commanders, they are automatically good teachers. That is not true. That's why 10 ago, we sent some of our school commanders to NIE to train on their practical skills. We hope to continue that as we build up the IML at the same time. So it is a very good idea to have expertise in pedagogy.

Second, in education, curriculum development is core businesses. Mr Wong Siew Hong (Deputy Director-General of Education [Curriculum] from MOE, member of the SAF Learning Transformation Advisory Board) will be able to tell you that. He is in charge of curriculum and they have a 300-strong outfit curating knowledge for us to teach our students in the schools. We are halfway there with the CLS curating knowledge for curriculum development. The curriculum should also be updated and distributed. Through the student learning space, students can access the materials and benefit from self-directed and collaborative learning. The SAF curriculum development and review initiative and the LEARNet Portal 2.0 will similarly ensure that military personnel are likewise able to benefit from the concepts and systems. This project is a huge undertaking and it is useful to share lessons between the SAF and MOE. Especially useful for the SAF learning community would be MOE's deep understanding of how learners learn.

Third, in education, we believe that teachers grow best when they learn by doing and are properly coached and mentored. Systems and curriculum don't train teachers, other experienced teachers do. Mentors coach, observe and provide feedback. Similarly, in the SAF, the commanders in the chain of command are responsible to coach and mentor two levels down. LEARNet is but the means to augment the process. Military personnel learn

by doing and by observation. If you recall, the SAF was able to transform very quickly because of the string of operations in the past 10 to 15 years. These learning opportunities saw a generation of leaders learn as they executed their missions. They shared their lessons and then used these experiences to transform the organisation. Therefore, the learning transformation must likewise be carried by both the chain of command and the learning community. We are looking at NIE - we hope that the NIE lecturers are also able to spend a certain part of their time teaching in the schools, and we hope that some teachers who are doing very well in the schools are able to conduct some lessons in NIE. Similarly, what we hope to see - which is a good idea - is that we have commanders, who are practitioners, who are able to spend some time teaching at the institutes and the schools, and vice versa, those who are in the schools continue to participate in operations and also in planning in the headquarters. This way, they are able to be practitioners at the same time, and learn, develop and move on from there. This is something that has to be thought through carefully, but it is a good idea because things are moving forward so quickly. One of the dilemmas that we have when I was still in the force is that we found that people in the chain of command understand the latest challenge, but they have no time to teach. And then there are people who teach but are a bit behind the curve because they are not practitioners. The question is how do you merge two together and allow everybody to give a bit of time and ending up with roles as both practitioners and teachers. That would be something very useful to think about.

## **Conclusion**

So let me conclude: there are significant developments in the areas of learning sciences and exploiting technologies for learning. We hear of examples of what is happening in the industry. You hear of Coursera, you hear of massive online learning, and we should be able to tap on some of these technologies to help us and enable us to learn more effectively. In education, we talk about breadth and depth. We need to have both. The question is how do we organise ourselves to do that and how do we exploit technologies to enable us to do that. Through learning symposium like this and the advisory board, you may want to ride on the wave of new ideas. It is also useful for you to know that the students coming to you would be familiar with this (learning system), because in the education system, we are doing that. So hopefully you have a system like that in education and when people come to the SAF, they are very familiar with it. We are also trying to do that for the continuing education bit. I was telling some of them it's about the "cradle to grave" kind of mission - learning across society. So the SAF shouldn't be left behind. I think if we are on the same system and process of learning, there will be continual of learning for everyone.

In the process of the SAF learning transformation journey, there would inevitably be hits and misses. The journey of implementation might be more drawn out than one would initially expect. The whole feedback system is very important. But with a coherent

strategy and clear roadmaps, I am confident that the outcomes would be transformational, and would bring SAF to the next higher level.

I wish all of you a very fruitful Learning Symposium ahead. Thank you.

**News Release:**

- Singapore Armed Forces Launch New LEARNet Portal 2.0 (Document No: MINDEF\_20141001001\_2)

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