

Distributed Learning Initiative Delivers Training Anywhere, Any Time

By Donna Miles
American Forces Press Service

WASHINGTON, April 24, 2008 – Every seven seconds, someone within the Defense Department completes an online training course through a program that's become the gold standard for delivering education and training anywhere, any time.

The Advanced Distributed Learning Initiative, ADL for short, has grown by leaps and bounds since defense planners proposed the concept in the 1997 Quadrennial Defense Review.

"We are some of the best-trained forces in the world, but they wanted to know how we can do it more effectively and more efficiently," said Paul Jesukiewicz, deputy director for the ADL Initiative. "The Office of Personnel Readiness had the vision to put this initiative together to answer that QDR question."

The military services have long used the Internet to deliver individual training and education to their members. They developed electronic courseware that troops could access regardless of where they happened to be in the world or the hour of the day.

"This is bringing the training to the servicemember and civilian, rather than them having to go to the training," said Robert A. Wisher, who directs the effort.

That saves travel time and costs and reduces time away from the student's home station. And because instruction is self-paced, Wisher said, it also tends to be more effective.

Studies of distributed learning describe the phenomenon as the "rule of thirds."

"You can save money by a third, and then either improve performance by a third or reduce time by a third -- either one, but not both," Wisher explained.

The Defense Acquisition University at Fort Belvoir, Va., for example, spent \$500,000 to convert its traditional defense acquisition course to a self-paced course offered through ADL. Instead of spending nine days in a resident course, plus two travel days getting to and from Fort Belvoir, students take a 25-hour online course "on their time, when they can do it," Jesukiewicz said.

The conversion offered other payoffs, too, he said. The course can now accommodate 14,000 to 15,000 students a year, not the previous 3,000. And it's cheaper for the Defense Department to maintain the course -- \$1.5 million a year vs. \$6 million for traditional training.

Wisher doesn't predict any end to traditional resident military training, but said ADL offers a promising alternative or addition.

"ADL is not appropriate for everything, particularly for teaching hands-on tasks like jumping out of an airplane ... or some live-fire activities," he said. "But for much of the knowledge you need to know, with step-by-step procedures and factual information, it is a really good way to go."

Sometimes a "blended solution" is the best option, Jesukiewicz said. Students can get the basics through an online course to prepare for follow-on resident training. "The idea is, what can they do ahead of time that reduces time spent in the classroom course while maximizing its effectiveness?" he said.

As the Defense Department began promoting online training, it encountered a big problem: All the services were developing their own courses independently and couldn't share them with each other. For example, even if the Army and Navy both offered online courses about electronics that covered many of the same topics, they both create their own courses, Jesukiewicz said.

"They realized that all this content was out there, but they couldn't talk to each other," Jesukiewicz said.

The Defense Department adopted one standard and issued an instruction requiring the services to use it when developing new courses. The standard, called SCORM -- for shareable content object reference

model -- provides universal, internationally recognizable guidelines for development software content that promotes sharing.

"Specifications and standards make things work together," Wisher said. "So a course that was developed by one service can be used by another service. This allows reuse and reinvention, and repurposing of content for other uses."

That means the military doesn't have to reinvent the wheel every time it needs a new course, explained Dan Gardner, who is leading the department's training transformation initiative. If the Marine Corps has a computer-based course on close-combat skills and the Army wants to develop one, the Army can adapt the Marines' course to its own needs. A course delivered to generals and flag officers at the National Defense University can be tailored for delivery to junior officers or noncommissioned officers.

Another advantage, Wisher said, is that students can tap into parts of courses when that's all they need.

The department is building a repository of what Gardner estimated could be tens of thousands of advanced distributed learning courses and modules, many already SCORM-compliant.

"We are basically at first base right now," Wisher said. "We have a model that brings us all together, but now it's a matter of populating the content and making that accessible, ... all through the Internet."

"We're providing virtual learning virtually anywhere," Jesukiewicz said. "This is revolutionizing the way we train people."

The effort is winning acclaim beyond the Defense Department. Other countries and government agencies are adopting SCORM standards for their online coursework.

Earlier this week, the United States Distance Learning Association honored U.S. Joint Forces Command's Joint Knowledge Online effort for exemplary work advancing the field of distance learning.

Joint Knowledge Development and Distribution's JKO received the association's 2008 "21st Century Best Practice" award, the highest honor it awards an organization in the industry.

The award came on the brink of JKO's one-year anniversary since it was made available to joint warfighters. In the last year, it has grown from 100 to 185 courses online, with more than 2,000 hours of online instruction.

Related Articles:

[Joint Knowledge Online Earns Prestigious Award for Distance Learning](#)