TO: Service Career Field Managers

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SUBJECT: Revising the Online Public Affairs Qualification Course (PAQC-DL)

Introduction

Recent developments in the military public affairs community has led to an increased interest in the training conducted at the Defense Information School. In addition to the increased focus on the career path for a military public affairs officer, the training related to that career path has come under review. The majority of the training for career public affairs officers is provided on-site at the Defense Information School, but for quite a while now, the school has provided the initial training course in the public affairs career path online, mainly for reservists. While the course was originally designed for reservists to take over a 24-week period, more and more interest is being shown in having active duty officers and senior enlisted service members take the online version of the course. The reasoning for this is that there is a shortage of qualified public affairs officers, so the services are looking for ways to fast-track candidates but without a lot of expense.

Original PAQC-DL Course

The original PAQC-DL course consists mainly of PDF documents covering the different topics, or lectures, within the course. In addition to the lectures, the students are provided with exercise assignments that they need to complete and submit. While students were required to participate in discussion forums, there wasn’t much collaboration occurring within the course among the students. With the increased interest in the course and the improvements in learning management
system (LMS) platforms, it’s time to take a closer look at the PAQC-DL course and see how it can be improved.

**Learning Theory**

When looking at how to re-design the course, it is important to also take a look at the different learning theories and select the best theory for the course and its audience. In the case of PAQC-DL, the audience consists of college or service academy graduates for the officers, and senior enlisted members, the majority of whom have their bachelor degrees, with many also holding masters degrees. Students will already be familiar with communication principles, so the focus of the course is on the military aspect of public affairs.

For these adult learners, many with experiences that could benefit their classmates, the Course Development Office at the Defense Information School feels that the best approach to delivering the course is to use a constructivist model. In constructivism, according to Hein (1991), constructivism “refers to the idea that learners construct knowledge for themselves - each learner individually (and socially) constructs meaning - as he or she learns.” We propose to take constructivism to the social level and have the students not only learn from their instructors, but also from their classmates. This form of constructivism is known as social constructivism.

Social constructivism, according to the Teaching and Resource Center at Berkeley University, is defined as “a variety of cognitive constructivism that emphasizes the collaborative nature of much learning.” With social constructivism, students receive motivation through the success of the group, developing teamwork skills that will serve them when they are out in the field.

**Applying Constructivism to PAQC-DL**

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The resident class, taught at the Defense Information School, provides plenty of opportunities for students to learn from each other’s experiences. Students work on group projects, just as they would once they reach their duty stations. The faculty at the Defense Information School set up scenarios that the students participate in, just as if they were actually responding to media queries and press conferences. The problem that needs to be solved is how the resident experience can be translated to the online experience.

With the improved LMS platforms, including the one we currently use at the school, we can have students collaborate in groups on projects, even though they may not be in the same geographic location. By using collaborative tools, such as video conferencing, that are part of the LMS platform and Google Apps for Education, students are able to meet and work on projects together, sharing their different experiences with regards to the different scenarios provided as part of their assignments.

Using the constructivist model at this level provides quite a few advantages. According to Schell & Janice (2013), “individuals are thought to learn more effectively when they are forced to discover knowledge for themselves rather than when they are instructed. The role of the instructor in this setting is to act as a guide in the learning process.” This works well, with the distance learning instructor being available to assist and answer questions as needed while the students work on their own to figure out and solve the problem.

According to Ertmer & Newby (1993), state that “it is essential that content knowledge be embedded in the situation in which it is used,” meaning that it is important that the students learn in realistic settings and that the tasks related to lived experiences. To help do this, again using
technology available through the LMS, instructors can now recreate the press conference experience that previously only the resident students had enjoyed.

Conclusion

So, based on the reasoning provided above, the course development office at the Defense Information School is going to put together an outline of the proposed changes to the PAQC-DL course for further review and approval. Keep in mind that we don’t intend to change any of the terminal or enabling learning objectives. Our goal is to enhance the current online learning experience for our students so that they experience the full benefits of the course material.
References


