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Distance Learning Designed for the U.S. Air Force

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Abstract
The purpose of this descriptive study is to discuss the creation and implementation of a self-paced course designed to present military and academic course content in an engaging and interactive format. The paper reviews the "Introduction to Cross-Cultural Communication" course piloted to 150 Air Force personnel in Spring 2011 and reveals the challenges and opportunities inherent to self-paced courses for student service members and instructors.

Introduction
Members of the military represent a unique student population who face constraints not common to traditional students. Despite increasing deployments and temporary duty assignments, (see Ford, Northrup & Wiley, 2009 for a recent review of research regarding the student-service member) the number of military members seeking higher education is increasing (Baker, 2008). Research devoted to student service members indicates that flexibility and convenience related to academic programs and support services are necessary to most effectively serve the military population (Ford et al., 2009). Keeping these needs in mind throughout the instructional design process, an on-line, self-paced Introduction to Cross-Cultural Communication course was created in 2011 at the Air Force Culture & Language Center. Offered via the Community College of the Air Force, Airmen are instructed in communication skills vital to cross-cultural competence in military service.

The purpose of this descriptive study is to discuss the creation and implementation of a distance education course designed to present military and academic course content in an engaging and interactive format that allows these unique students to complete course requirements at the time and place of their choosing. The remainder of this article will consist of: a brief review of literature devoted to distance education and military professional development, an overview of the course development process, and a discussion of course outcomes including suggestions for future instructors of self-paced courses.

Military Professional Development and Education
The United States military has always had high standards of training to achieve a mission-ready force and has adapted training methods to do so most effectively. Recently, the changing nature of military operations has made culture an important factor for mission success. The U.S. Air Force has realized that this necessitates training the entire force in cross-cultural competence (Air University, 2009). Education and training in the various domains of cross-cultural communication can improve competence in dealing with cultural difference and thereby minimize destructive conflict among national, ethnic, and other cultural groups (McCorkle & Reece, 2009) yet a major challenge is how to deliver this training and education effectively and efficiently to such a large, geographically-dispersed population through the military professional development curriculum.

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Distance Education

Distance education, including online-delivered and web-based courses, has been lauded for providing increased access to quality instruction both for academic courses (Austin & Dean, 2006) and professional development (Artino, 2008; Branzburg & Kennedy, 2001; Fenton & Watkins, 2007; Sandars & Langlois, 2005; Santovec, 2004; Weingardt, Cucciare, Bellotti, & Lai, 2009). In comparative studies, distance learning consistently performs as well as traditional face-to-face instruction in terms of quality and effectiveness (Artino, 2008; Moneta and Kekkonen-Moneta, 2007), yet out performs classroom-based courses in access, flexibility, and convenience. Even following its acceptance, distance education scholars have persisted conducting research to improve the field and have called for continued study in greater context (Kear, 2004). The most recent, yet highly understudied, development in distance education has been the adoption of self-paced online instruction, which further increases the access, flexibility, and convenience of web-based learning (American Society for Training and Development 2005; Artino, 2008; "Building Community in Self-Paced Online Courses", 2005; May, Acquaviva, Dorfman, and Posey, 2009). Presently, online military training has only been addressed briefly (Artino, 2008).

Course Development Process

Content Needs

The Community College of the Air Force (CCAF) is one of the largest community colleges in the country. Courses offered through CCAF must meet both rigorous academic requirements as well as the content and delivery needs of an increasingly diverse Air Force whose students deploy all over the world. Content needs were addressed from both an organizational perspective as a force development tool and from an academic standpoint. Since the course is offered through CCAF for academic credit, academic quality is paramount. Current and relevant cross-cultural communication scholarship was placed at the heart of the course. Additionally, because the course covers a necessary professional development skill for today's Airmen, the military's needs were taken into account during the development of the course. Marrying the two perspectives and providing military relevant frames for information "forces accountability for the material being presented... [and] tailors it to the military audience, [which] enables a military member to understand diverse academic arguments that are taking place, and stimulates the critical thinking skills needed" (Chandler, 2005). Opportunities for students to connect the academic readings and course content to their own military experiences were included to enhance the material and increase student engagement (Roberts, 2002). Following a review of all extant literature on cross-cultural communication competence, both civilian and military, it was determined that the course would focus on developing the knowledge, skills, and attitudes of Airmen in the following areas: narrative and identity, paralanguage use and perception, nonverbal messaging, active listening, identification of communication styles, interaction management, conflict management and relationship building. Unique course content was written expressly for a military audience citing a variety of civilian and military scholarship.

Delivery Needs

The needs of the student-service member were met not only through instructional content but also through the delivery of the course itself. With each step in the curriculum design process, the needs and realities of the Air Force student were taken into consideration so that each student would have an opportunity not only to take this course online but also at his/her own pace. This would accommodate students stationed anywhere in the world while also accounting for the possibility of erratic and demanding military work schedules, whether at home or deployed. Accommodating students who otherwise would be unable to attend traditional face-to-face courses aligns with one of the main goals of distance education (Beldarrain, 2006). Despite the

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fact that (as is inherent to distance education) self-pacing increases the pressure for students to be self-motivated and manage their time efficiently (Lorenzetti, 2005; Murphy, Rodríguez-Manzanares, and Barbour, 2011; Short, 2000), the potential benefits to the student-service member outweighed risk. Risk was further abated by the reduction in negative academic outcome due to CCAF grade reporting policies and the possibility for course repetition [1].
The course development process followed the AF Instructional System Development model's five phase process involving the analysis of instructional need, tailored design, content development, course launch/ implementation, and continuous analysis (Air University, 2011).

Course Design

Readings were exclusively delivered as eReserves in PDF format (Poe & McAbee, 2007) through Blackboard, eliminating the need for students to locate and/or ship text materials. The 45-contact hour course is completely self-paced and delivered on-line via the Blackboard Learning Management System. The course was fifteen weeks in duration to allow ample time to complete the course's twelve modules. Each course lesson was designed to be analogous with a consistent design scheme to reduce student difficulty with web-delivered course material. Each lesson began with an introductory video by the professor lasting approximately five minutes, followed by a movie-clip application, and 20 web pages (on average) of course content per lesson. An average of two readings, a military-relevant and academically-based reading (1-2 hours), were included and linked into the content. Interactive knowledge checks and scenario-based exercises were embedded in each lesson. The majority of the content and situational judgment tests had a military focus and applied academic material to the profession of arms. The weekly time commitment for students was estimated at 4-5 hours, which included engaging with the digital material and preparing for/taking the midterm and final exams. Given the introductory, community-college level of the course, students were assessed based on the application and comprehension levels of learning. Throughout the course, several assessment measures were administered:

- A Pre-Course Survey included 24 items designed to measure both attitudes and dispositions related to cross-cultural competence and motivation to learn.
- A Knowledge Pretest included 36 items drawn from the 12 lessons of the course.
- A Midterm Exam tested students on the content from lessons 1-6 and included 42 items.
- A Final Exam tested students on the content from lessons 7-12 and included 35 items.
- A Post-Course Survey of 38 items collected student reactions to instruction for program evaluation.

Course Outcomes and Future Directions

In February 2011, the on-line, self-paced Introduction to Cross-Cultural Communication (CCC) pilot course, offered via CCAF, opened for 150 enlisted Airmen, 133 of whom were Active Duty in addition to 8 Reservists and 9 Air National Guard members. The course was offered at no cost to these enlisted Airmen by the Air Force Culture and Language Center (AFCLC) via distance learning. Under the accreditation purview of both Air University and the CCAF, it fulfilled 3 general elective or social science credits towards any CCAF degree. The Spring CCC course began on 17 Feb 2011 and concluded on 01 June, graduating 101 students. With a student retention rate of 73%, Introduction to Cross-Cultural Communication surpassed the national average by 4% [2].

The average gain in student learning from pre-course to post-course was 18% which was a significant increase in student learning. Additionally, the mean scores for all attitudinal variables increased significantly from pre-course to post-course, with "cultural self-efficacy" showing the greatest increase.

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The most highly rated post-course feedback item was: "I would recommend this course to others." Additionally, 67 (61%) students indicated that the course content is "extremely relevant" to their service in the Air Force. 51 (47%) students stated that the best part about the course was its self-paced and online format. One student noted: "I would suggest to any Airman that is deploying to take this course. It would greatly expand their understanding of other cultures increasing mission effectiveness and making the experience easier to undergo." The course included a midterm and final exam, each worth 150 points. The total point value for grade calculation was 300 points. The mean class average was 83%.

Based on student feedback from course pilot, two major changes were made to the August 2011 iteration of the course:

19 students requested more "graded" measures be added. Consequently, quizzes were inserted between each lesson using adaptive release to slow down students and deter them from finishing the whole course in several days. These quizzes also helped familiarize them with the format of the midterm and final exams administered via Blackboard. The point allocation for the course was therefore revised as follows: 100 points for 10 quizzes, 100 points for the midterm exam, and 100 points for the final exam.

18 students requested an "interactive" item be added to the course. As a result, the current iteration of the course includes a Wiki. Optional discussion prompts were inserted into each lesson where students can write about their personal connections to the course content. This Wiki option aims to promote a sense of community among the students in the course and enables students to provide educational vignettes for both current and future students. The wiki prompt in each lesson begins with the phrase "Be the Ethnographer" so that students are encouraged to take part in the course and apply course concepts to their past experiences. Students have the option of commenting upon other students' wiki postings or creating a new one of their own. Here is an example of a wiki prompt from Lesson 11 "Managing Conflict and Building Relationships":

> Be the Ethnographer! As you read, relationships depend on the ability to communicate respect. On the class wiki, share how you have had respect communicated to you. How have you communicated respect to others? If you have had an experience communicating respect across cultures, whether successful or unsuccessful, describe your encounter.

Student feedback on these improvements will be compiled after November 2011 upon the completion of the course. It is the author's intention to use the stories and vignettes provided by students in their wiki entries to update the existing situational judgment tests found throughout the course. To reiterate the lessons learned from the pilot iteration of Introduction to Cross-Cultural Communication, the authors make the following suggestions to future instructors of self-paced courses:

- To connect to students in the opening minutes of each lesson, prepare short introductory videos outlining the main points of each lesson and describing how they connect to overall course objectives. This is a great chance for students to see their professor and connect a face with a name.
- To create community among students in the course, incorporate a wiki option with discussion prompts where students can describe how they connect to the course content and read about one another's experiences. This helps students stay engaged with the course and can create a "classroom" feeling that is often lacking in self-paced courses.
- To help regulate student pacing and prepare students for major graded measures, utilize adaptive release technology and knowledge checks between lessons. This will not only

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familiarize students with the types of questions they can expect on exams, but it will also distribute the total points for the course more evenly and help students pace themselves.

Conclusion

Because asynchronous academic instruction is relatively new in the field of distance education, increased examination of such courses is needed in order to exchange ideas about best practices. By examining the development process and student learning outcomes of asynchronous electronically-delivered education materials as a case study, academic knowledge regarding delivery methods and reaching unique student populations will be improved. Previous research has shown that case-based asynchronous online education is somewhat deficient in affecting student learning outcomes (Chen, Rong-An & Harris, 2006), however the results from this course show that significant student learning gains are possible with online case-method delivery. Moreover, based on student evaluations, distance delivery methods met student needs and facilitated the learning experience for student service-members. Lessons learned from this experience included the necessity for assisting student regulation of time resources and developing connections between instructor and students by utilizing asynchronous digital communication such as wikis and instructor video. Descriptive study of the development, design, implementation and evaluation of this course in subsequent iterations is a rich area for future study. Results from this research contribute to the growing body of knowledge regarding asynchronous, self-paced distance education for unique student populations.

Endnotes

[1] http://www.culture.af.mil/library/pdf/cccfaq.pdf

[2] According to the 2010 Distance Education Survey Results, Trends in eLearning: Tracking the Impact of eLearning at Community Colleges, the national student retention average for on-line courses is 69%.

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