Modern military operations require extensive coordination and collaboration between branches of the armed services. They also rely on the strength of backup forces, such as the National Guard and Army, Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force Reserves, in perhaps greater measure than at any other time in history.

To improve the abilities of all of these organizations to work together, the Joint Forces Staff College (JFSC) educates military officers and national security leaders in joint multinational and interagency operational-level planning and war fighting. Additionally, it must fulfill a Congressional mandate that Reserve and National Guard personnel receive the “joint education” equivalent to that of full-time staff.

The challenge to fulfilling this requirement is that joint education for Reservists has traditionally been taught in a 10-week in-residence course. However, this schedule is not feasible for Reservists and Guardsmen, almost all of whom have full-time jobs outside of the military. The solution was to establish the 40-week Advanced Joint Professional Military Education Course (AJPME) which uses Blackboard products for 37 weeks of distance learning in combination with three weeks in residence at JFSC in Norfolk, VA.

Long-Distance Acculturation

During the first 12 weeks of the distance learning segment of the AJPME program, students work individually through Blackboard Learn. After that, they enter an intensive interactive period, during which they work collaboratively with remote colleagues from other branches of the Services. This includes exercises creating organizational policies and working on operational art case studies.
Even though the majority of the course occurs in the distance-learning environment, Dr. Ken Pisel, Dean of the Joint Continuing and Distance Education School, says that stronger relationships are being established between the various branches of the military. “With the old in-residence program, we had a ‘farewell dinner’ and everyone would promise to stay in touch, but never did. Our participants are used to being in contact online, so they’re maintaining the relationships they establish even after the course has ended. Since getting to know the other branches of the Service is critical to joint operations, the online environment is really facilitating that goal,” he explains.

The results of a pre- and post-course survey illustrate the effectiveness of the program. Pisel says that initially it is possible to determine which branch of the Service respondents are from by examining the location of their answers plotted on a scatter diagram. By the end of the course, however, the points on the diagram tend to cluster together, indicating that participants have successfully taken into account the strengths and concerns of the other branches.

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AJPME was the Military’s First SCORM-Compliant Educational Program

At the same time that AJPME was being developed, the Department of Defense established the Shareable Content Object Reference Model (SCORM) as the standard for electronic content. The SCORM compatibility of JFSC courses at NDU has greatly streamlined the process of developing and revising content to stay up to date with changing strategies, techniques and world events.

Greg Frederick is a courseware programmer, multimedia developer and Blackboard administrator at JFSC. Describing the interface between its SCORM repository and Blackboard Learn’s content management system, he says, “It used to take a day-and-a-half to two days every month to upload updates and revisions to all the different lessons. With content packages already in the system, we enter a content location, click and it’s uploaded right away.”

SCORM compliance and the resulting ease of object manipulation are further illustrated by the inclusion of multimedia presentations as part of AJPME. Participants in the in-residence Joint and Combined War Fighting School had direct access to the experience and expertise of on-site three- and four-star senior fellows, who were part of the program. Since that kind of direct contact is not possible in the distance-learning environment, Pisel recorded interviews with these senior fellows, created sound bytes and inserted them into the AJPME lessons.

He also recounts being able to include other outside material quickly and easily. “We were able to adapt one particular multimedia operational art case study in three days. It would have taken several months to develop a similar presentation from scratch without SCORM,” he says.

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