

Soldiers “Reach Back” for Continuous Learning and Engagement

Training Magazine

By Patrick Devlin

<http://www.trainingmag.com/msg/publications/training.jsp>

Military training, unlike most other types of professional training, is about life and death. There is no room for gaps in learning. To keep troops at peak performance, many military training organizations recognize the benefits of leveraging technology and having their programs readily available online.

At the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College (CGSC) Lifelong Learning Center, manager Jake Pennington’s mission is to deploy the best and most current technology solutions available to support the officer corps and enhance the learning environment for students. CGSC educates up to 10,000 Army majors a year – resident students, officers at satellite locations and reserve task battalions, and soldiers deployed overseas.

Pennington decided to leverage CGSC’s Blackboard Learn™ system to go beyond the basics of online learning and focus on building a lifelong learner – not only as Army majors continued through their CGSC training and education, but also when they become lieutenant colonels and beyond. To achieve this goal, CGSC designed “Reachback” – an archive of materials and content from its nine unclassified “core” courses, five “advanced warfighter” courses and 170 electives. Both current students and alumni can access the materials, and as instructors update and enhance course content in subsequent years, the new information is added.

“Reachback ensures that alumni accessing content always receive the latest materials and information to keep their learning relevant and timely,” said Pennington. “Alumni can access this material for the rest of their careers – even from electives they may have not taken while students – and be confident that they have the most advanced and recent information available.”

Reachback delivers a continuous learning environment where soldiers can pull information to help them deal with real situations that arise when they are in theater – “teachable moments” when access to content, instructors, classmates and other subject matter experts is critical. Access to this kind of information could be beneficial in an instance where the Army is deployed to a place like Afghanistan, and a soldier needs to learn more about survival and fighting in a cold and austere mountainous environment.



Blackboard
ProEd

It is not only the soldiers on the battlefield who benefit from Reachback, explains CGSC professor Col. (Ret.) Michael Martinez. “While Blackboard enables soldiers in theater to pull the information they need, students back in the classroom also benefit from the information shared online by the warfighters. Examples of what the soldiers are experiencing in real-time help to help prepare other soldiers who may one day face similar challenges.”

Reachback also fosters communities of learning via wikis, blogs and other social media applications that connect instructors, students and alumni. Information can be shared, real-world experiences discussed and relationships between instructors and other students and alumni developed. Instructors frequently pull this information into class discussions and help to better prepare current students for the realities they are training for.

As a result of Reachback and the continuous learning environment fostered at CGSC, traditional courses have evolved into strategic engagements, with communities built around courses, content and discussion. As Army soldiers find themselves in life or death situations everyday, this access to information and resources is invaluable.

Patrick Devlin serves as Vice President, Market Development for the ProEd division at Blackboard. He directs all aspects of market development and customer engagement for the Professional Education team focused on the career college, government and corporate markets. Patrick has over 20 years of software engineering, product development, sales, marketing and general management experience. He can be contacted at Patrick.Devlin@blackboard.com.

Training material used with permission of Nielsen Business Media, Inc.

