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Long Distance Learning

The very first effort to train firefighters formally was in the English Fire Service in the 1870's. Sir Eyre Massey-Shaw, a former Army officer introduced the concept of the training and education of firefighters by creating a fire school. The London Fire Brigades Fire School is a classic example of how the fire service has been training individuals ever since. It was a drill school. Shaw provides a textbook and there was a drill ground. Shaw was careful to select individuals to go into that drill school that were physically fit, psychologically prepared and emotionally suited to work 24-hours a day, 7 days a week. In those early days he chose to bring most of those people out of the maritime industry because he was aware that sailors were used to long arduous hours with a minimum amount of rest from duty.

A lot of things have changed in the fire service since Sir Eyre Massey-Shaw's basic drill school in 1871. Yet, many things have not changed at all. The fire service overall has become a much more complicated and intellectually challenging pursuit. Yet, the methods in which we train firefighters still remain somewhat along the lines of that early effort. There is a training manual and a drill ground. Fire academies are physical, and in many ways still very basic. They are based upon a military model of training recruits

Yet, there is also recognition in the fire service that what you learn in the recruit academy is nothing more than a smattering of what you need to know to survive in a lifelong environment of the fire service. The concept of lifelong learning and the mechanism of doing all of your learning on the drill ground in many ways are mutually contradictory. As a person leaves the fire academy and enters their professional life there are many things that they need to learn that do not require the presence of hoses and ladders and nozzles.

That is the premise of this particular article. What we are going to explore is a overall concept called "lifelong learning." It is related to several other concepts. The first of these is self paced instructional materials. The second of these is a concept of long-distance learning, i.e., being a long way away from the source of the information and yet simultaneously being able to acquire as job knowledge. The combination of all of these concepts will be incorporated in an overall theme called "independent learning".

Independent learning focuses on the creation of opportunities and experiences necessary for a firefighter to become increasingly capable, self-reliant and self-motivated at their own pace. What is envisioned by this concept is that students begin to value learning as an empowering activity of great personal and of social worth to them. Moreover it is anticipated that this concept will be applied to strengthen the definition of what a professional firefighter needs to know in the in the future.



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According to the professional writers on this particular concept (Kesten, En, 1987, pg 3) "Independent learning is that learning in which the learner, in conjunction with relevant others, can make the decisions necessary to meet the learners own learning needs".

In the fire service we have grown accustomed to the idea that training is part of the department's responsibility. If you don't know something it is because you haven't been trained. That is why many fire departments have training officers. Their job is to assess the need of their individual firefighters and to provide training programs that meet those needs. However, it is also true that many fire departments lack staffing resources to put an individual in charge of that responsibility. However, the fire service by itself is not exempt from the consequences of the lack of knowledge. For example it is just as important that a fire department and a single station fire department in the back hills of one of our less well developed states know about a BLEVE phenomenon as it is for one in downtown Kingman Arizona. Independent learning is based upon the idea that knowledge can be acquired separate from the responsibility of the organization. It is based more on the need to have certain competencies and skills regardless of the limitations of the organizational structure.

In the process of independent learning firefighters have the opportunity to develop values, attitudes, knowledge and skills that are needed to become increasingly capable of making responsible decisions and to take actions dealing with their own level of competency. It is noted that it's pretty difficult to be a firefighter without those physical skills. We do not wish to diminish those in any way. To the contrary, basic fire academies are intended to give an individual the ability to handle the physical side of the job. The physical side of this job, however, is not what gives individuals difficulty. It is the mental framework of decision making processes including but not limited to the manner in which we make decisions on the fire ground, in the firehouse, in front of city councils and in the public view.

As I mentioned earlier; the concept of lifelong learning. Education and training that continue to give insight into the phenomenon of firefighting is not something that terminates when one graduates from recruit academies. The proliferation of community college programs and the ongoing training cycle of many fire departments is a reflection of the fact that this phenomenon already exists. The continuous growth of an individual's capability and power in many ways is connected to their ability to absorb new information and to gain new skills in coping with their job responsibilities.

Initially individuals entering the fire service learn how to do things and as they gain in responsibility, i.e. promotion and rank they learn why they need to do things. Abstract thought and in some cases specific bodies of knowledge that are needed as individuals pursue high levels of responsibility in the fire service are not obtained upon the drill ground. They are obtained in textbooks, readings, and in face-to-face experiences of the transfer of knowledge from the older generation to an emerging generation.



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The concept of independent learning is simply this. It is based upon the individual accessing and utilizing training information that is not dependent upon others for execution. Independent means self-reliant. Independent means the desktop of a fire station desk. Independent means learning at home if you are motivated to do so. Independent means that different people move through the material at a different pace. Most fire departments operate a training schedule that is fairly rigid. Most community colleges run programs that are based upon cycles that are consistent with the school year. Independent learning is separate from both of these.

In as much as you may have never functioned within a learning environment before, it is appropriate that we spend a few moments taking about the terminology that is used to describe this environment. The following terms are used to describe the environment in which a person may be acquiring new skills and knowledge. How many of them are you already familiar with?

BBS (Bulletin Board System) -- A computerized meeting and announcement system that allows people to carry on discussions, upload and download files, and make announcements without the people being connected to the computer at the same time. There are many thousands (millions?) of BBS's around the world, most are very small, running on a single IBM clone PC with 1 or 2 phone lines. Some are very large and the line between a BBS and a system like CompuServe gets crossed at some point, but it is not clearly drawn.

Browser -- A Client program (software) that is used to look at various kinds of Internet resources. See Also: Client, URL, WWW, Netscape, Mosaic, Home Page (or Homepage)

Distance learning - A term encompassing all learning that takes place at locations remote from the point of instruction. Distance learning may take the form of an instructor-led course delivered via satellite to multiple remote locations. Distance learning may also be training applications delivered via computer networks to students at any network node. Web-based training is one distance learning method in that the training application resides on a Web server while students may use the training from any location that can access the server.

E-mail (Electronic Mail) -- Messages, usually text, sent from one person to another via computer. E-mail can also be sent automatically to a large number of addresses (Mailing List). See Also: Listserv, Maillist

Instructional Systems Design (ISD) - A formal process for designing training, be it computer-based or traditional instructor-led training. The ISD process, as applied to CBT and WBT, suggests a comprehensive needs analysis, user analysis, design document (including flowcharts, storyboards, and evaluation procedures), application prototype, finished computer application, usability testing, and effectiveness evaluation.



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Multimedia - Multimedia describes any application that uses multiple media (graphics, text, animations, audio, video). However, multimedia is primarily thought of as any application that uses high-bandwidth media (audio and video) and is most often delivered on CD-Rom. Multimedia does not describe the purpose of the application, such as CD-Rom, only the nature of media used in the application. CBT and WBT may also be considered multimedia applications if they incorporate multimedia to meet instructional objectives.

Well, how did you do? If you are already on top of these terms you are probably ready to see the changes over the next 5 to 10 years. If you are not – best be getting ready.

Long distance learning is more flexible, more democratic and more response to the needs of individual students. We already have an entire generation of young adults that have grown up with computer literacy. It is likely that this methodology will be used by your fire agency sometime in the very near future.

This process encourages a strong sense of individual purpose and reinforces and supports those who are motivated to take responsibility for their own competency. However, independent learning does not walk away from the body of knowledge of the fire service. It makes full use of the resources that a fire department has already acquired to increase its knowledge. This would include, but not be limited to such things as textbook, references, audiovisual support, mentoring relationships and the availability of time to seek and achieve this learning environment.

The fire service is beginning to embrace these new concepts, but not a speed that it should be happening.