

Continuing Education Training and Where to Find It

by Ken Giffhorn, Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's final guidance for the recertification of operators of community and nontransient noncommunity public water systems requires states to establish training requirements for renewal based on the level of certification held by the operator and to require all operators to acquire necessary amounts and types of state approved training. It is anticipated that similar requirements will be included in any future amendments to the Clean Water Act and affect wastewater treatment plant operators as well. This places a significant requirement on the states to review and approve all types of appropriate training: formal classroom instruction, correspondence courses, training in conjunction with professional conferences or seminars, CD-ROM-based instruction and Internet-based training. This also places a burden on the certified operator to identify previously approved training venues or request state approval prior to participating in continuing education.

The purpose of this article is to pose two questions to the certification community: 1) How do we best use Web-Based Training (WBT) to recertify operators? 2) Would a national registry of "accredited continuing education" assist state and tribal certifying boards in carrying out their responsibility and ease the burden to operators?

The virtual campus offered by academic institutions and professional associations such as American Water Works Association or the Water Environment Federation has become the home for self-paced education and training on the Web. Many state agencies are turning to the Internet to help them with continuing education for licensed professionals.

Interactive courses explain concepts, explore real examples, and offer exercises to help the individual learn by doing, all from the convenience of their place of work or home. Class begins whenever the student wants. They work at their own pace and earn certificates and continuing education credits for successfully completing classes. Web-Based Training (WBT)

has proven to be both practical and cost-effective.

Internet-based training, Internet-based instruction, Web-based learning are very similar, if not synonymous with WBT. Regardless of what we call it we are talking about instruction as opposed to mere information presentation.

Characteristics of WBT include:

- Self-directed and self-paced
- Individual or group instruction
- Interactive
- Media rich
- Can include process or plant simulation

At the same time WBT is not a collection of information pages (PowerPoint online) or an online book to be merely read.

WBT lends itself to continuing education and skill upgrading because it provides for managed instruction, whereby scores and trainee records may be retained and available for inspection, curricula are controlled and updated as change occurs, and certification boards have the tools and information to monitor training results.

We have all retained textbooks from formal classes for continued reference on the job. A similar process could be incorporated in WBT whereby the student is provided a collection of tools, i.e., calculators, process flow simulators, decision trees to mention just a few, that could be used on the job every day.

Several universities are now offering Internet-based credit courses. Others are offering courses that certify individuals in a particular group of skills such as Geographic Information Systems. These courses while Internet-based may include instructor interaction through chat rooms, hardcopy texts and external application software.

Other traditional distance learning could include videotaped training or videoconferencing, correspondence courses or some other form of computer-based training such as CD-ROMs.

We have been discussing just one training approach. Given the magnitude of operator training available, how do we

ensure that training is appropriate for continuing education, and how can the operator be confident that credit will be given for training completed?

One approach that should be explored is to establish a national registry of approved continuing education. This could provide one-stop service for operators. To be truly successful the registry should be inclusive and list all types of training to allow the operator to pursue the continuing education program that best fits their needs. If a course were included in the registry the operator would be confident of receiving credit for completing the course. Additionally, trainers would have one centralized location to submit lessons and training programs for approval and assessment of appropriate credit. State certifying authorities could list all approved training recognized in that jurisdiction. Certifying officials would no longer have to continually answer individual operator questions concerning what has been approved, what is pending approval and what is not approved. Depending on its sophistication the registry could be searched by subject, state, level of operator certification to mention a few. It is conceivable that such a registry could also document individual operator training, providing the certifying authority with a centralized repository of operator training accomplishments.

Does such a centralized repository currently exist? No, and one isn't even in the planning stages at this time. Would such a repository provide a valuable service to both the operator and the certifier? Yes, but who should be responsible for establishing such a repository; is it a viable function for the Association of Boards of Certification? As you can see this article finishes with more questions than answers.

It is anticipated that these and many other questions will be discussed at the ABC Annual Conference, January 16-19, 2001 in Charleston, SC. Check out the ABC web site at <http://www.abccert.org/conferences> for more details. Let us hear your opinions and suggestions on how a successful program could be implemented. ❖