

Learning competence at the basic level

Many students pass through the halls of the Defense Information School here, learning the skills they will one day need out in the field and down range. The school offers a variety of courses, all relating to public affairs and visual information in the military. One of those classes, the Basic Public Affairs Specialist-Writer course, focuses on the journalism aspect of the field.

“It teaches students to be competent in a lot of different areas—those areas being print journalism, photojournalism, and public affairs,” said Amy Gunnerson, DINFOS instructor. “It teaches them to be competent at a basic level.”

The course is 56 training days long, and is broken up into four sections of no more than 12 students per section, said Gunnerson. There are four journalism instructors, four PA instructors, and two photojournalism instructors per class. At any given time, DINFOS has three BPAS-W classes underway—one class just beginning, a second in the middle of the course, and a third class about to graduate.

Recently, manual cropping and scaling of photos was eliminated from the course as a way to keep up with technology, she said. Software programs with that capability are available out in field, so it’s more efficient to teach the student how to use the software versus the manual way. Public affairs instructors have updated the scenarios students encounter during the field training exercise so that the students aren’t surprised once they leave DINFOS.

“At the end of the course, we have a project called Final Cut, which is actually the name of a newspaper that the students produce entirely on their own,” she said. “They do everything from selecting the stories, to writing the stories, to editing, to taking the photos and designing.”

The students go on a field training exercise for four days, Gunnerson added. Instructors role play as the news media and students man a public affairs office where they answer the phones, answer media queries, and escort media to simulated battlefield areas or accident scenes. Here, students put their public affairs skills to use in a practical environment.

In the end, DINFOS accomplishes its goal.

“We send people out as trained professionals, possibly young and certainly at a basic level, but professional,” said Gunnerson. “Public affairs is a pivotal piece, but it certainly requires us to work with everybody else, to show that we need to change opinions, ways of life, bring a level of trust in that region of the world that hasn’t been there before.”