

Value in Consistency



Peter Hohman
President and CEO,
Insurance Institute
of Canada

The Insurance Institute of Canada recently wrapped up a one-year pilot of its new Instructor Certification Program, an initiative that involved more than 30 instructors. Set to roll out in October, the program seeks to ensure that both excellence and engagement are standardized, regardless of where courses are being delivered across the country.

The Insurance Institute of Canada's Instructor Certification Program — made up of four, three-month-long courses — is designed to promote teaching excellence in Chartered Insurance Professional (CIP) and General Insurance Essentials (GIE) classrooms across the country.

“We have a lot of great instructors, and we want excellence in every CIP classroom,” says John McNeil, a learning design and development specialist at the Insurance Institute of Canada. “You should be able to fly to British Columbia or Newfoundland and Labrador, for example, and get a standardized, engaging learning experience. That’s what we’re looking at.”

The program recognizes that teaching insurance is a challenge, and not just because the subject matter can be quite technical. One of the biggest challenges is to break it all down for a diverse audience.

Some students in the CIP program already work in the insurance industry, while others do not; some are learning in the CIP program as mature students, while others are Generation Y Millennials, born between the 1980s and the 2000s; and some people are fluent in one or both of Canada's official languages, while others may be learning French or English as a second language. Beyond those differences, classes may include people who work in different industries altogether.

Classroom diversity means teachers must engage a broad spectrum of learners, each of whom has a preferred method of learning. How should instructors deal with such a broad spectrum of students?

CIP instructor Camille Alexander went through the one-year pilot program, which ended in June. Alexander reports that, among other things, the program taught her how to engage students with different levels of language fluency. For example, she used television as a visual aid to help explain the types of different insurance companies — mutual insurers, stock companies and direct writers.

“When you are at home watching TV, your assignment this week is to look at how many commercials you see for various insurance companies,” Alexander recalls telling the class. “The students remember jingles. They remember visuals and the celebrities associated

with insurers. They weren’t getting it in writing,” she reports.

NEW WAY OF LEARNING

The certification program’s first course delves into different learning styles and teaching theories, attempting to understand people’s brain chemistries and how they learn, whether teaching adults, younger students or those with learning exceptionalities. The program’s second course puts the theory into practice and discusses how to build the optimal learning experience.

“The best practice when you are creating a learning experience is to determine what the learning objectives are,” suggests Tino Corsetti, senior director of academic programs at the Insurance Institute of Canada. “What does the learner have to learn? What is observable or measurable in terms of the performance or the behaviour that’s going to

show you that they’ve learned it?” Corsetti asks.

The second course also addresses best practices for teaching students, something CIP instructor Mike Risi says has helped him ensure that a broad cross-section of his students view his teaching methods positively.

The course reinforces the importance of making it clear to students how instructors have structured the presentation of their course material, adds Enrico Mastrangeli, who has been a CIP instructor for approximately four years.

“There’s a transparency and a structure to ensure that there’s closure on any learning objectives for that specific chapter. It’s opening up another communication line with students,” Mastrangeli suggests.

Risi notes that he uses a lot of video when he does presentations or training, and will be doing the same in his

“A lot of people today, when they learn, they want it virtual, real-world and live. If you’re teaching the same way you did 30 years ago, it’s not going to work in today’s environment. To engage the students, instructors have to work harder, work smarter, and we have to let the students teach us as well, because the environment is changing.”

CIP course. “I learned that’s what the 20-somethings are looking for — they want to see video and multi-media. I’ve become good at searching YouTube for different things,” he says.

On the other hand, Risi points out, “more experienced folks want to be able to share their experiences. That’s what you want — getting their involvement, as opposed to just standing up there and preaching to the class. You want to try and make it interactive.”

NEED TO ASSESS

As soon as the optimal learning environment has been defined, the third course in the program discusses assessment techniques. How does the instructor assess students’ progress? How do students assess their own progress?

“As we take instructors through the program, they are building their own assessment tools,” McNeil says. “They are building their own lesson plans. They are building their own mid-term exams. Everything the instructors build will be relevant in their own classrooms,” he adds.

The fourth and final course deals with in-class delivery techniques. It discusses attention spans and engagement techniques in both in-class and virtual

worlds. This part of the course prepares instructors how to manage a virtual learning environment.

“A lot of people today, when they learn, they want it virtual, real-world and live,” Alexander says. “If you’re teaching the same way you did 30 years ago, it’s not going to work in today’s environment. To engage the students, instructors have to work harder, work smarter, and we have to let the students teach us as well, because the environment is changing.”

Mastrangeli happened to be part of the one-year pilot at the same time he was teaching a CIP course. Students who had taken classes with him before he completed the certification course could see some tweaks that he had incorporated into his CIP class, he says. “And the feedback was just phenomenal.”

Mastrangeli credits the certification program for an increase in the number of his students who passed the national CIP exam with honours standing.

The ultimate goal of the program is to help CIP instructors create an active, motivational learning climate, says McNeil. “Learners want to come and take part,” he emphasizes.

“They are personalizing the material, they are able to internalize it, and put it

into use at their own industry work settings. They are able to call upon different examples and use the material to solve various different learning problems. The learning is engaging and fun, but they are also critically thinking and learning at higher learning levels,” McNeil says.

Overall, a co-design team made up of about 10 to 15 experienced instructors across Canada helped McNeil design the course curriculum. “They were bringing in best practices,” related to creating mid-term exams and lesson plans, as well as ensuring content was relevant, he says.

Risi adds that the value of the program extends beyond just teaching in the CIP classrooms. “Some of the things I’ve implemented by facilitating training at work,” he says.

CIP instructors of all stripes who went through the pilot program vouched for its ability to transform the way they thought about teaching. The program is designed to raise the bar for all instructors.

“I’ve been teaching a long time, and I thought the way I was teaching was great,” says Alexander. “I thought I was on the right track, but this program had me totally re-assess myself as an instructor.” ≡