

AETC Future Learning Division 'tweets' for new programs

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6/23/2009 - **RANDOLPH AIR FORCE BASE, Texas** -- Air Education and Training Command's Future Learning Division plummeted into the social networking, micro blogging Web site Twitter last month in an effort to explore the site's potential uses in training today's Airmen for tomorrow.

"[The future learning division is] looking into different media and how we might be able to use it," said Col. John Thompson, AETC Future Learning Division director. "We look at any sort of innovation to improve the efficiency or effectiveness of our education and training programs."

Twitter allows users to file "tweets" posing questions, posting links to articles or general status updates. Brevity is key as users are allotted only 140 characters for their posts.

The division's entrance into Twitter coincides with top Department of Defense officials announcing the benefits of social networking as a "huge strategic asset for the United States" citing social networking Web sites use in allowing information to continue to flow about recent conflicts from the Iran election.

"I think one of the more -- maybe more significant developments in the last 20 years or so has been the advance of communications technology in the hands of average citizens around the world," said Secretary of Defense Robert Gates in a June 18 press conference. "It is increasingly difficult for an authoritarian government to maintain control of all the means of communication that are available to its citizens."

The division joins other Air Force groups on the year's fastest-growing social networking site. According to a June 15 "Time" magazine article, Twitter grew in popularity by more than 1,200 percent last year. The learning division is attempting to answer questions of how to turn a popular networking tool into a learning tool.

"We know outside our firewall our folks are using social media anyhow," Colonel Thompson said. "So how do we tie into that? How do we use that to make our own collaborative environment?"

USAFFuturelearn, the division's official Twitter username, "tweets" about once a week and has amassed more than 25 followers, said Jayne Williams, professional networking program manager. The division follows other mobile learning experts, Air Force bases that use Twitter as a branch of public affairs, NASA and the White House to understand how different users utilize the medium.

"Ideally, if the population continues to embrace Twitter, I see the day where senior Air Force leadership tweets," Colonel Thompson said.

Others are also starting to share this sentiment.

"I think our force, whose average age is 20-ish, 20-21, you know, they -- this is how they live. It's what they've grown up on," said Adm. Michael Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in the same June 18 press conference. "And so for leaders ... it's really important to be connected to that and understand it, certainly not be as facile as they are on it, but to understand because I think communicating that way and moving information around that way, whether it's administrative information or information in warfare, is absolutely critical."

Thus far, the future learning division sent tweets about successful social networking demos for AETC senior leadership, meetings on visions for Air Force recruiting in 2015 and planning future learning trends for the Air Force.

"There are a variety of social media products out there," Colonel Thompson said.
"The Air Force is looking into using different social media and still learning lessons on their value and how you can incorporate that into our learning process for education and training systems."