

Dual screens allowed the tester to make side-by-side comparison of the two online courses.



# Online Captain's Courses

*Mariners Learning System has the multimedia advantage over pioneer Explorer's Guide.*

Whether we like it or not, a large part of the modern mariner's education is taking place in front of a computer screen. The required or optional boating safety courses for nearly every state can be taken online. Each week, new cruising, seamanship, and boat maintenance courses and quizzes are sprouting on the Web.

So it should come as no surprise that for several years, professional mariners have been able to take online courses and exams required to earn a variety of commercial credentials. Today, if a sailor seeks the entry-level license required by the U.S. Coast Guard for operators of uninspected passenger vessels (OUPV), which allows an operator to carry up to six passengers for hire, he only needs to peel away from his LCD screen for one day to take a proctored exam.

Currently, the U.S. Coast Guard's National Maritime Center (NMC) has authorized more than 200 schools to offer so-called "captain's courses." The courses help mariners meet the classroom and exam requirements for various credentials, ranging from the OUPV to Master Unlimited. These courses can

also help them fulfill the requirements for specialized endorsements such as towing, sailing auxiliary, radar, etc.

## WHAT WE TESTED

For this article, *Practical Sailor* chose to examine online courses from two companies: Explorer's Guide, and the Mariners Learning System from the Mariners School. At the time *PS* began researching this article in late 2009, these were the only schools that offered Coast Guard-approved versions of the entry-level OUPV course, the 100-ton masters license upgrade, and the sailing auxiliary endorsement. Recently, Sea School, a long-established instructional program, had its online course approved by the NMC. We will look at Sea School's course in a future review.

The Explorer's Guide Maritime Training School was the first online OUPV course to be approved by the Coast Guard. The program, which first went online in 2006, was developed by Capt. Gary Kulibert, a former employee involved with training, technology, and education within the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources

(DNR). When Kulibert retired from the DNR, he graduated from what he calls a "very disappointing" captain's licensing course, and decided he could do better.

Initially, Kulibert developed a classroom program. Only when he began seeking state accreditation through Northeast Wisconsin Technical College (NWTC) did the subject of an online offering come up. The school was heavily invested in distance education, and the course seemed ideal for distance learning.

After a couple years of working with the NMC's progressive-minded director, Capt. David Stalfort, Explorer's Guide not only had a fully accredited course, but one that could be carried out almost entirely online. Because it is affiliated with an accredited college, Explorer's Guide students are eligible for federal financial assistance under the G.I. Bill. Kulibert also has arranged for the final proctored testing to take place at Department of Defense-approved sites, making it very convenient for service men and women.

"It's very popular among Coast Guard officers," said Kulibert. "We also have several students who are stationed on military ships abroad who are taking our course. It's convenient for them, because they already have the required documented sea time."

As with the Explorer's Guide program, the Mariners Learning System (MLS) evolved from a classroom course. Capt. Bob Figular, the owner of the company, was in charge of several courses around the country. These were typically long-weekend "crash" courses designed to meet the busy schedules of working men and women. Figular, like Kulibert, reiterates that his main goal is to teach the subject matter, not rote memorization just to pass the Coast Guard exam.

According to Figular, the transition to an online program was prompted by two things: inconsistency in the classroom and a high number of learning

impaired or handicapped students.

“We had excellent teachers around the country,” said Figular, “but sometimes, we’d still get these classroom situations that didn’t work. For example, we’d have an outstanding woman teacher, but there would be some guys in the classroom who, for whatever reason, didn’t mesh well with a woman instructor.”

Unlike the Explorer’s program, which piggybacks on the popular online learning program called Blackboard, Figular developed a customized Web-based architecture. The process was expensive and time consuming, but the result is a multi-faceted instructional program that makes very effective use of the multimedia environment.

**HOW WE TESTED**

For this article, we asked the two schools to provide our tester, a licensed captain, with a login name and password to the schools’ online curriculum. Schools also were asked to provide all of their course materials for review. Courses were evaluated on four basic criteria, with some of the data supplemented by an online opinion sample of past students:

- Customer service: How easy is it to get technical support? Does the provider inform potential students of all the requirements for obtaining a license? How much support did the company provide as the student goes through the license application process?
- Online interface: How well is the teaching material organized and presented, and how easy is it to navigate through the various modules and tests?
- Curriculum and assessment: Does the course just “teach to the test” or does it provide the student with a clear understanding of the subject matter?
- Supporting materials: How effective were the supporting books, materials and user’s guides in supplementing the online lectures and quizzes?

Because they are designed to meet standards set by the National Maritime Center, the two courses share many common aspects. The core curriculum, and the basic assessments are very similar. Upon completion of the course, mariners are given a certificate that indicates they have met the testing require-

ments for licensing. This certification is then submitted to the National Maritime Center, along with the other required materials—application form, proof of citizenship, physical exam, proof of CPR training, etc. It is important to note that although most of the course study and pre-assessment can be completed online, sailors still need to present themselves at an approved testing center for a proctored exam. This is so that the NMC can verify the identity of the test-taker.

**EXPLORER’S GUIDE**

Some 400 students per year participate in Explorer’s Guide programs, but the school maintains a personalized learning experience. While the Northeast Wisconsin Technical College staff provides logistical support, Kulibert or the two-person staff at Explorer’s Guide handle general course questions and assist students with licensing application. The website does a good job of explaining the U.S. Coast Guard pre-requisites prior to enrollment, but does not make it fully clear that a proctored test is required before a license can be issued.

Kulibert is the lead instructor and writes all of the instructional material. He fields any questions regarding content. When a student is having trouble with a particular problem, Kulibert prefers to work it out over the phone. He expects to be called by students and is, frequently. Upon completion of the course, students can go to one of 55 centers around the country for their proctored testing. The list of centers is available upon request.

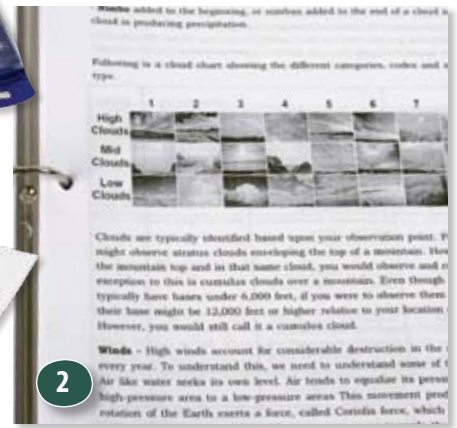
Because it is affiliated with NWTTC, Explorer’s uses the school’s online

AS VALUE GUIDE	WEB-BASED CAPTAIN’S COURSES	
	EXPLORER LLC ✓	MARINERS LEARNING SYSTEM ★
PRICE (OUPV)	\$695	\$595
YEARS IN OPERATION (ONLINE)	4 years	3 years
ONLINE GRADUATES	3,000	15,000
NUMBER OF EXAM LOCATIONS	55	200
NUMBER OF ONLINE COURSE OFFERINGS	7	10
MINIMUM HOURS REQUIRED (OUPV)	56 hrs.	56 hrs.
24-HOUR TECH SUPPORT	Yes	Yes
STATE ACCREDITED	Yes	Pending
COURSE EXPIRATION	18 months	1 year
G.I. BILL ELIGIBLE	Yes	Yes
RATINGS		
APPLICATION GUIDANCE	Fair	Fair
CUSTOMER SERVICE	Good	Good
VARIETY OF TEACHING TOOLS	Fair	Good
EASE OF USE	Fair	Good
QUALITY OF ONLINE LESSONS, QUIZZES	Good	Good
TEXT AND SUPPORT MATERIALS	Good	Good
OVERALL SCORE	Fair	Good
★ Best Choice    ✓ Recommended		

platform, Blackboard, a Web-based interface used by more than 5,000 institutions worldwide. Although the interface is flexible and can be tailored to match curriculum, Explorer takes advantage of only a few of the online features found in some mainstream courses. For example, the video and PDF library is small and there are very few video lectures.

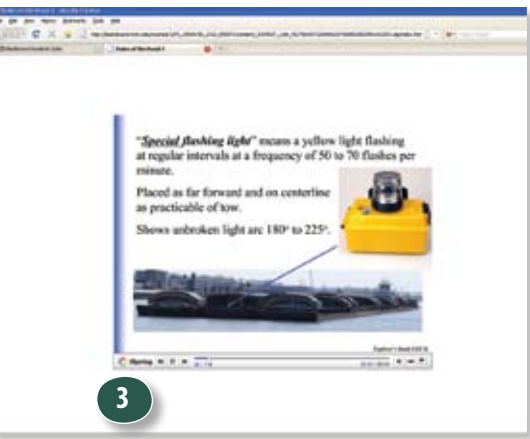
The interface could be more intuitive, but, in our opinion, anyone with basic Internet skills could quickly pick it up. Compared to what advanced online schools in other fields are using, the learning environment is bland and one-dimensional. Most of NWTTC’s online teaching material is conveyed through slideshows that closely resemble a basic Powerpoint presentation.

Developed through Kulibert’s

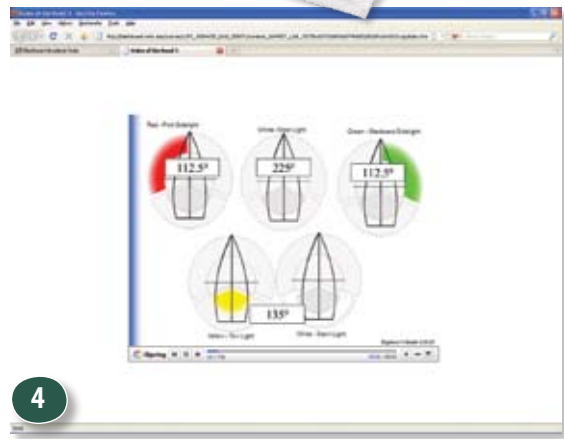


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**EXPLORER'S GUIDE**

1. Explorer's Guide kit includes Navigation Rules, NOAA Nautical Chart No. 1, and a small rope for knotwork.
2. A small cloud chart in the textbook is an example of a topic that could be better presented online.
3. & 4. Most of the lessons are presented in Powerpoint-like slideshows.

classwork, the slideshows divide each unit into manageable chunks, but the program does not take advantage of the many interactive and multi-media experiences that the Web allows. No audio accompanies the slideshows, for example. Having Kulibert available for personalized support helps to somewhat offset this gap in material.

The supporting texts and materials that Explorer's Guide provides are a step above what mail-order courses have been offering for years. Two items testers were happy to see in the package were softbound copies of Chart No. 1 (which serves as the key for chart symbols, abbreviations, and terms) and Rules of the Road. Most of the reading and material is contained in a 352-page student manual that covers all of the material that one can expect on the test.

Explorer's Guide also provides a dividers, parallel rules, a chart of Long Island Sound, and a small length of rope for knot-tying exercises. The material effectively covers some known trouble spots, such as converting a

true heading to a compass heading. The most challenging material, plotting, is supported by a video lecture. Only two former students responded to our opinion sample; both rated the overall experience as excellent.

**Bottom line:** This is a basic online course with personalized instructor support. Its chief advantage is its strong tech support and accredited status, which opens up financial-aid opportunities. It makes only limited use of the teaching potential of an online learning environment.

**MARINERS LEARNING SYSTEM**

The foundation of Mariners Learning System (MLS) is a series of professionally produced video lectures. The lectures appear in pop-up windows that are accessible within each unit. For example, a video icon is posted at a strategic point in the written, bulleted lecture on plotting. Clicking on the icon begins the lecture. Didn't get it the first time? Rewind and play it again. Out on the road? You can view the videos on your smart phone.

One nice feature is that many of the MLS videos on various topics ranging from firefighting to safety at sea are accessible from a single website, making it easy for smart phone users to review videos anywhere.

Around-the-clock online support is provided by a team of technicians. Professional instructors are on call to field difficult subject questions over the phone. MLS guarantees a response time of less than four "business hours."

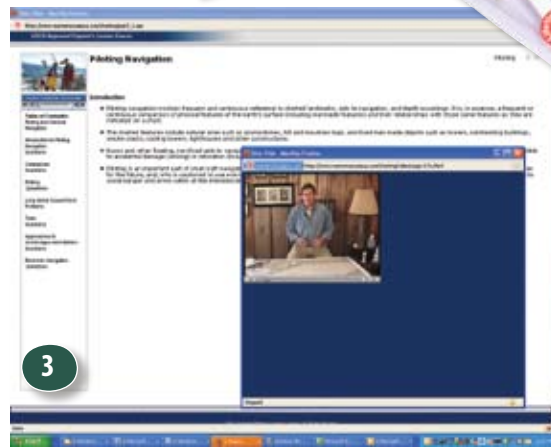
MLS was the only online school to have more than five students participate in our online opinion sample. Of the 28 former students, 19 rated their overall experience good or better. The lowest score was for online interface, with five people scoring it as poor, and two scoring it as fair.

In our view, the website does an effective job of explaining the pre-requisites for obtaining a captain's license. Like any online course, it takes some time to become familiarized with the format, but our testers found the module-oriented architecture to be easy to navigate.



**MARINERS LEARNING SYSTEM**

1. Recycled graphics in the textbook yielded some text callouts that were faint or too small to read.
2. Spiral bound texts are supplemented with navigation tools, even a calculator.
3. Excellent video lectures guide plotting lessons.
4. The "classroom" page is logical and easy to navigate.



The supporting materials provided for the basic OUPV course include three spiral-bound study guides arranged by study unit: deck general (180 pages), navigation (152 pages), and rules of the road (122 pages). There are separate notebooks for the various endorsements such as sailing and towing. Practice quizzes are integrated into the workbooks, so these study guides make it convenient to study and assess progress without going online. Also included in the packet is a MLS briefcase, two pencils, a calculator, pencil sharpener, parallel rule, and dividers.

Mariners has clearly made a significant investment in a sophisticated online learning platform, and much of the company's success will hinge on its ability to draw average boaters into its program, not just professionals. To that end, the company has signed on several affiliates to broaden its reach. Most recently, the consumer advocacy group BoatU.S. has joined as an affiliate. The MLS course is also offered through Rutgers University in New Jersey, and

according to Figural, courses qualify under the G.I. Bill and will soon have state accreditation.

**Bottom line:** The Mariners Learning System's multimedia approach clearly addresses more learning styles than the Explorer's Guide program. The supporting materials, with their integrated quizzes, are more versatile. The professionally produced videos do a good job of mimicking classroom experience. Having smart phone access is another excellent bonus.

**CONCLUSION**

If you are a self-motivated learner who doesn't have time or an affinity for the classroom, online courses are an excellent route through the Coast Guard OUPV testing and licensing process. Of the two courses, the Mariners Learning System clearly offers more. The quality and quantity of online videos, the intelligent interface, and the comprehensive quizzing and assessment sets it above the Explorer's Guide program. We'd recommend Explorer's Guide only

for those who seek a state-accredited course immediately.

In our view, neither course is better than the ideal: a well-paced classroom run by an exceptionally effective teacher, offering individual attention. A serious student would also look for quality on-the-water instruction. If you have money and time, you can find both on-the-water training and effective teachers at a reputable on-location school. PS will be looking at these and other opportunities later this year.

For a more in-depth look at one student's experience with the Mariners Learning System, check out our blog at [www.insidepracticalsailor.com](http://www.insidepracticalsailor.com). ▲

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