Hey Avalanche Educators: Language Matters

Clarifying AAA Education Guidelines for Course Structure, Student Outcomes, Course Provider Responsibilities

Story by Kirk Bachman, AAA Education Committee Chair

As a professional organization representing those who work in the avalanche industry, the American Avalanche Association developed guidelines in 1999 for avalanche education in the US. These guidelines were refined and revised in 2007 for the benefit of avalanche education course providers, instructors, and students. The purpose of the AAA Guidelines for US Avalanche Education is to provide a general benchmark for skill progressions between different levels of avalanche education, for the public’s benefit. AAA believes that avalanche education can be more thoughtfully, consistently, and responsibly conducted and can achieve more constructive outcomes for students when course providers and avalanche instructors in the United States strive to embrace common guidelines and practices.

In fall 2011, under the oversight of AAA’s Education Committee, the course provider listing program was launched to allow any avalanche education course provider to be listed on www.avalanche.org after providing a self-evaluation application stating that the prospective program was in compliance with some basic standards of conformity, including land-use permits, insurance, and AAA professional-level course leaders and instructors. Applicants also submit a sample syllabus for each level of avalanche training they wish to list. The program was launched to help facilitate a more consistent stream of avalanche education in the United States, but was designed to be self-regulating as the AAA’s capacity to regulate was beyond the scope of the organization. As such:

AAA does not oversee, control or warrant the character or quality of any individual or entity’s avalanche programs, including those of any listed course providers, and is not responsible for the content of their specific courses or programs. Those interested in taking avalanche courses from course providers listed on AAA’s website or otherwise, should independently investigate and assess these course providers and their specific courses and programs.

To date, 22 course providers in the US have voluntarily submitted their application and are participating in the course listing program.

Addressing the Challenges in US Avalanche Education

In developing the guidelines as well as the course provider listing program, the AAA Education Committee endeavors to provide course providers, instructors, and avalanche-education students a framework for more consistency and appropriate training for identifying student outcomes and course-provider responsibilities.

In years past, both course providers and students often had difficulty distinguishing between awareness-level courses and level 1 training. Students often discovered after the fact that their course was not compliant to guidelines or standards. As a result many students lacked consistency in training, and often there were holes in their skills and readiness for the next course. It is incumbent on professional avalanche community members to understand the scope of each training as identified in the AAA guidelines, and market their courses to prospective students accordingly.

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One problem is that the US avalanche education industry often misrepresents the notion that course attendance will result in certification. It is common for attendees to receive a course certificate after completing a course. Course providers and avalanche educators need to make it very clear that receiving a certificate of course completion does not convey that the student is certified. However, it is beyond the scope of AAA guidelines to test students for awareness, level 1, and level 2 training.

To become certified, a student needs to be evaluated on his/her abilities to assess a variety of snowpacks and avalanche conditions, evaluate terrain, and conduct safe group travel and risk management where there is potential avalanche hazard. In adherence to AAA guidelines, this occurs only at an advanced training level. The AAA offers the AvPro program where testing of this manner occurs. This is launched to help facilitate a more consistent stream of avalanche education in the United States.

Common Misuse of Terminology or Misrepresentation

• A course provider is accredited or endorsed by the AAA.
• A student has been certified at the Level 1 or Level 2 avalanche training.
• A course provider is affiliated with or endorsed to use the AAA logo.
• A course meets the standards of the AAA for level 1 or level 2 training.
• A course provider is accredited or endorsed by the AAA.
• An avalanche course is offered by an avalanche school.
• A course is a part of the AAA national training program.
• A course provider is a member of the AAA.

Commonly cited by course providers and avalanche instructors as indicators of quality and consistency, these terms are not necessarily meaningful without regard to the content of the course or the level of training it provides.

Positive Directions For Course Providers and Avalanche Instructors

The AAA wholeheartedly supports course providers and avalanche instructors who are familiar with the guidelines for avalanche education in the US and encourages them to utilize AAA guidelines in designing curriculum for avalanche courses. It is appropriate for a course provider to convey to the student that: This course follows...