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Blogs, podcasts encourage 24/7 classroom

Professors adopt new methods to engage tech-savvy students

By Anne Ryman  
The Arizona Republic

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PHOENIX -- When University of Arizona student Megan Plesea left her technology class last semester, she was never far from her professor.

On his Web site, she wrote essays and talked to classmates late at night on a class blog. She downloaded the professor's lectures and listened to them as she walked her dog.

Blogs and podcasts are making their way into traditional college classrooms, changing the way students learn and professors teach.

Professors say the new learning modes improve their ability to communicate with students and foster more interaction.

"Many a quiet student has really come to life on their blogs," says lecturer Bill Endres, who uses blogs in English courses. "Some students actually have become stars in the social realm in classes because students think their blogs are funny."

In the past few years, Arizona State University in Tempe and the University of Arizona in Tucson have started services to help professors add blogs and podcasts to their classrooms. ASU estimates 400 blogs and 150 podcasts are being used in its courses; UA has about 200 blogs and about a dozen podcasts.

It's by no means the norm in the traditional college classroom, even though many online classes use blogs and audio lectures. On campus, a professor with a blog or podcast is considered cutting-edge by peers.

UA junior Matthew Brooks first had a blog in an English course. Students were required to write their assignments on the blog, and they had discussions and would give opinions on each other's writing.

"It helped me tremendously with my writing," says Brooks.

But ASU senior Al Welle says he found podcasts no substitute for classroom lectures because they don't capture a professor's nuances.

"If you are only listening to the lectures, you aren't seeing what they write on the board," he says.

Gaining momentum

ASU computer-science professor Subbarao Kambhampati started his blog in the fall after years of sending daily e-mail to his students.

Nearly every day he writes a thought or a discussion question on his blog, and students can post responses. He includes links to articles based on that day's lecture.

Last semester, his comments made up the bulk of the blog, and some students who just wanted to pass the course weren't interested in blogging.

This semester he made blogging part of the grade. Blog entries have picked up, with students leaving about 60 percent of the posts, he says.

Not as widely used as blogs, but gaining in popularity, are podcasts.

UA assistant professor Leila Hudson started recording her class on Islamic civilization a year ago.

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Senior consultant Stuart Glogoff of UA's Learning Technologies Center set her up with an inch-long digital recorder. She wraps it around her arm with Velcro before each class.

"You don't really even know it's there," she says.

Hudson had reservations in the beginning, mainly because she's not tech-savvy. She also worried that making audio recordings available would stop some students from attending class.

She avoids this by giving a short writing assignment at the start of class. If students skip, they don't get credit.

**And there's more**

Besides podcasts and blogs, a handful of professors are experimenting with wikis -- Web sites where students add, edit and collaborate on documents.

ASU assistant professor Philip Bernick, who is doing research on wikis, created one for ASU's English department. Entries range from advice for the "Help I'm Struggling" student to inspirational quotes called "Some Thoughts on Writing."

Bernick says he likes wikis because they encourage students to write.

He predicts wikis, podcasts and blogs will become more widespread because they are cheap to set up and more professors will realize their benefits.

University officials predict that professors and students will use even more technology in the classrooms. Technology devices will become smaller and more powerful. Professors likely will begin making video of their lectures available.

Adrian Sannier, ASU's technology officer, says that with all the devices students have and bring to class, from cell phones to wireless-ready laptops, their expectations are rising.

"They made these investments, they're bringing them to school, and they want to use them," he says. "We're scrambling to stay at the forefront of how students can get software and tools."

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