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Professors using blogs, podcasts as teaching tools

The Arizona Republic

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 or dusted the house.

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

Learning becomes more interactive and can take place in the middle of the night.

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

"Many a quiet student has really come to life on their blogs," said UA lecturer Bill Endres, who uses blogs in English courses.

The trend is inspired by students, who are no strangers to blogging and podcasting in their daily lives.

In the past few years, Arizona State University and UA have started services to help professors add blogs and podcasts to their classrooms.

ASU estimates it has about 400 blogs and 150 podcasts being used in college 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 on the cutting edge and even a bit daring by his peers.

Even those who use the technology had to overcome reservations.

Some worried that they lacked the time to devote to a blog or that making their lectures available on audio encouraged students to skip classes.

Blogs: extending class

UA junior Matthew Brooks had a blog for the first time in spring 2005 in an English course.

Students were required to write their assignments on the blog.

Students had discussions and would give opinions on each other's writing.

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DAVID WALLACE/The Arizona Republic

ASU computer-science professor Subbarao Kambhampati uses a blog for his classes.

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"It helped me tremendously with my writing," Brooks, 21, said.

Other students are still adjusting.

ASU senior Al Welle, 35, said 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 said.

ASU computer-science Professor Subbarao Kambhampati has one of the more active blogs.

The computer-science professor started his blog in the fall after years of sending daily e-mails to his students.

A blog seemed like a natural extension.

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.

The blog enables him to reach out to students beyond the two-plus hours of class time every week.

"How is project 1 going?" he asked recently online. "Any difficulties understanding the code?"

He is experimenting with ways to make his blog better.

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 the blogging.

This semester, he made blogging part of the grade along with in-class participation.

Blog entries have picked up, with students leaving about 60 percent of the posts, he said.

Podcasts: 24/7 lectures

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.

That was even though she knew little about the technology.

Thanks to the UA's Learning Technologies Center, that didn't matter.

Senior consultant Stuart Glogoff set her up with an inchlong digital recorder.

Hudson wraps it around her arm with Velcro before each class.

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

Her Monday and Wednesday lectures are available by Thursday evening on the class Web site.

She is still mastering the technology and will occasionally hit the wrong button and erase a lecture.

Hudson had reservations in the beginning, mainly because she's not tech-savvy.

She didn't even own an iPod. Glogoff reminded her that even if she didn't own one, most of her students did.

Hudson also worried that making audio recordings available would stop some students from coming to class.

She avoids this by giving a short writing assignment at the start of class.

If students skip, they don't get credit.

Wikis: virtual projects

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

The most well-known wiki is Wikipedia, a free, editable encyclopedia.

Class wikis can be secured so that only those in the class or just a few people can edit them.

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 and his students also set up a wiki guide to ASU called "Uni 100."

Students share thoughts there on everything from classes to relationships to the war in Iraq.

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

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

Future: portable college

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.

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