

Information Technology

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Lectures on the Go

As more colleges use 'coursecasting,' professors are split on its place in teaching

By BROCK READ

Washington

Take your typical college student — bright, curious, but probably a bit sleep-deprived and short on attention span. Stick that student in a lecture hall with a professor droning on for 50 minutes about macroeconomics or teleology. Then give the student a laptop with wireless access to the Internet, which lets him or her furtively chat with friends via instant-messenger software.

What you have is a situation in which a professor's teachings do not completely sink in, says Patrick Thaddeus Jackson, an assistant professor of international relations at American University.

That scenario is all too familiar to Mr. Jackson, who aptly describes his speaking style as "blitzkrieg speed" and his students as voracious consumers of technology. But the professor says

he no longer worries, as he once did, that pieces of his lectures will slip through the cracks. And for that, he credits a technology known as podcasting.

Podcasting allows anyone with a microphone and an Internet connection to create audio files that others can download automatically to their iPods or similar digital-audio players. Listeners can download the files one at a time, or they can subscribe to a podcast and have a series of recordings transferred to their players whenever they hook the devices up to their computers. Podcasts allow students to go over passages while, for example, working out at the gym or jogging to lunch.

More and more professors, including Mr. Jackson, are turning to the technology to record their lectures and send them to their students, in what many are calling "coursecasting." The portability of coursecasting, its proponents say, makes the technology ideal for students who fall behind in class or those for whom English is a second language. And some advocates say that coursecasting can be more

than just a review tool, that it can also enliven classroom interaction and help lecturers critique themselves.

But many professors remain wary of the technology. Critics suggest that it will lead to empty classrooms or serve as a crutch for late-sleeping students, and some worry about coursecasting's intellectual-property implications.

Still, the ubiquity of iPods on campuses suggests that the idea has a future. "One of the things you do by podcasting is participate in student culture," Mr. Jackson says, arguing that college students are more likely to show up for class if they think a professor is speaking their language. "Students already have this stuff. Why not let them use the things?"

Skipping the Library

Mr. Jackson laid out his broader vision of coursecasting last month at a daylong seminar run by American that drew more than 50 professors. The technology, he suggested, could help them turn the entire campus into a classroom. Are your students having trouble following your lectures? Podcast your classes, he said, and students can review them at their leisure. Are your class sessions heavy with information and light on discussion? Make students listen to a podcast before class, and they will show up ready to converse.

He is hardly the only coursecasting proponent. Duke University — which last year handed out iPods to every incoming freshman — played host to its own conference on coursecasting a week before American's. The two-day affair explored many uses of iPods, including classroom applications.

Drexel University, which distributed iPods to students in its School of Education this fall, also has experimented with podcasting.

And perhaps the largest coursecasting project is at Purdue University at West Lafayette. Campus officials have no plans to give away iPods, but they point out that even students who do not own a portable music player can use laptops or desktop computers to listen to the recordings.

At the Purdue main campus, the project grew out of an earlier effort that made recordings of course lectures available to students on cassette tapes.

For years, students at Purdue who missed an important class headed off to the campus library, where up-to-date cassette recordings of more than 90 courses sat waiting to be checked out.

But this fall, Purdue's podcasting project, called BoilerCast, is letting students skip the library: The project's Web site stores recordings made in about 70 different courses. Students can download the podcasts individually or subscribe to have a whole semester's worth of lectures automatically transferred to their portable MP3 players.

The site has had a promising start. At the end of BoilerCast's first week, students had downloaded 533 class podcasts. And campus officials say they expect more professors to volunteer for the podcasting program next semester, when the university will do more to publicize the project.

When they pitch the podcasting initiative, technology officers at Purdue will be able to make at least one potent argument: It will not mean any extra work for professors. A faculty member who wants to have his or her lectures put online can simply show up to class and wear a small microphone while speaking. Purdue's technology staff members then retrieve the recordings and put them online.

Purdue's podcasting project arose from a desire to let students study without being tethered to their computers, according to Michael Gay, the university's manager of broadcast networks and services for information technology. "We're trying to give people as many options as possible if they miss a course and need to catch up — or if they just want to review," he says.

A handful of other colleges have adopted a similar logic. American University's Washington College of Law, for example, has started podcasting guest speeches and interviews conducted by professors with legal luminaries.

And the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor's School of Dentistry has used podcasting for most of its lectures since January. Like Purdue, the university has tried to make it as easy as possible for professors to participate. But instead of giving that work to technology staff members, the university has recruited students to do it. The students tap into the lecture-hall sound system to record class sessions, and then they digitize the recordings and put them online.

The program has been a big hit, says Lynn Johnson, director of dental informatics: Over 80 percent of the school's 100 or so students say they listen to at least some of the coursecasts.

And, perhaps unsurprisingly, technology companies are already getting in on the act. Pick-A-Prof, a company that runs Web sites where students comment anonymously about their professors, recently unveiled a service that lets professors podcast their lectures. Initially, the company charged students \$5 per download and split the revenue with participating professors. But that cost proved a hefty fee in an age when computer users can download songs for less than a dollar. After few students bought the lecture recordings, the company decided to waive its fees for them.

So far the project is in a pilot phase involving only four faculty members — one from Texas A&M University at College Station and three from the University of Texas at Austin. But company officials say they plan to offer the service nationwide next term.

A Chance to Catch Up

Though recording a lecture may seem like a none-too-novel idea, Mr. Jackson says that coursecasting

opens up powerful new possibilities by harnessing the convenience of the Internet and the portability of MP3 players.

Students might not take the time to listen to course recordings if they have to sit at a computer (or, worse yet, a library carrel) to do so, he says. But give them the option of reviewing while they are doing laundry or waiting for a bus, and they might just take you up on it.

"Everybody knows that when you say something in class, the first time, not everybody is paying attention," Mr. Jackson says. "But if you make your lecture available as a podcast, students can relisten to troublesome passages, and it's easy for them to slow things down."

That makes the technology especially useful for students whose native language is not English, some professors say. And it gives students without backgrounds in certain topics a chance to catch up with more experienced peers, according to Linda Herkenhoff, an adjunct assistant professor in the graduate business program at St. Mary's College, in California.

For a graduate-level course in quantitative analysis, Ms. Herkenhoff creates two different series of podcasts, each recontextualizing highlights from her lectures. One recaps the lectures for students who may need help understanding tricky concepts. Another comes with additional material, which she records outside class, for advanced students who want to explore topics in greater detail. The dual coursecasts, Ms. Herkenhoff says, have helped her keep students "with a variety of skill sets" from feeling overwhelmed or growing bored.

"It's made me much more relaxed when I lecture, because I'm not stressing out knowing that those four people in the corner aren't quite getting something," she says.

But if students are relying on the podcast for information, some professors ask, will they even bother showing up for class in the first place? Skeptics argue that for all of the theoretical justifications for the technology, coursecasting may end up serving chiefly as an excuse for students predisposed to skip lectures.

"When I talked about this with my colleagues, the first thing they all said was 'well, no one's going to go to class,'" says G. Marc Loudon, a professor of medicinal chemistry at Purdue who has posted lectures for students as both audio and video files. Mr. Loudon offers a fairly unsympathetic rejoinder to those concerns: "If a podcast can capture everything you do in class, you deserve to have nobody coming."

But most professors who podcast admit that they take special steps to keep students from simply tuning in to class on their iPods.

Scott R. Homan, an assistant professor in organizational leadership and supervision at Purdue, says that after one bad experience in a large lecture course — a number of students showed up when he took attendance and left immediately thereafter — he started penalizing students a grade point for every class

session they missed.

And Scott L. Ksander, an information-technology engineer at the university, offered students a different incentive for showing up to class when he delivered a guest lecture for one of Purdue's podcasted courses. "Those of you who didn't come to class, but are listening to the podcast, should know that one of the answers to the next test is on the screen," he said. "But I'm not going to tell you what it is."

No matter what professors do, some students will occasionally download a coursecast instead of showing up for class, say those who have tried the podcasting service. But most students are savvy enough to realize that coursecasts aren't an alternative to class, says Rebecca Ivic, president of the campus Macintosh-users group. "If a class is focused on student interaction and participation, I don't see it as a real problem," she says.

And students who know about coursecasting tend to view it as an accompaniment to course Web pages and other online study tools, according to Justin Williams, one of the first students to try out Purdue's service. Mr. Williams, who says he lobbied professors to podcast their courses last year, calls BoilerCast "a great way to complement the presentation slides many professors already offer online."

Death of the 'Sage'

The threat of empty lecture halls is not the only reason to be wary of coursecasting, some professors say.

Richard Smith, a lecturer in instructional technology at the University of Houston-Clear Lake, hosts a weekly podcast on scholarship and education. But he is not convinced that the technology can revitalize pedagogy — because, he says, there is little evidence that recorded lectures will hold students' interest.

"Podcasts are basically just radio shows, and like radio shows, they have to be entertaining to get people to keep coming back," Mr. Smith says. "I don't think most professors, no matter how good they are in the classroom, can avoid being boring as hell when they're recorded."

And some professors could not care less about whether they have star quality outside the lecture hall, according to Mr. Loudon, of Purdue. "There's a group of faculty who feel like the class itself should be the kernel of what students should know," he says, "and they want their lectures to begin and end in that environment."

But that, according to Mr. Jackson, is a shortsighted view.

Students reared on iPods and the Internet do not come to class expecting to sit through an hourlong lecture, he says. Instead, they want to gather information on their own terms and spend their class time in discussion, not rapt attention.

"The 'sage on the stage' is dying, if not dead already," Mr. Jackson says. "Faculty members are no longer

privileged sources of knowledge, so our job should be to get people to think critically and independently about things."

Coursecasting, he says, can help that process along. In Mr. Jackson's own courses, he has put lectures online as podcasts and asked students to listen to them before they come to class, a technique he refers to as "distance learning with a twist."

"Think about how much classroom time you would save if you didn't have to lecture anymore," Mr. Jackson says. "You free up all this interactive personal space between you and your students. It changes the classroom experience."

The "decentered classroom," as Mr. Jackson calls it, can be unsettling for students who are not eager to let the lecture-hall experience bleed into their free time. But, say a handful of professors, it saves valuable classroom time. Richard Edwards, an assistant professor of communication at St. Mary's College, is building a course around a series of 30-minute podcasts about film-noir classics that he and a colleague had made. Students will listen to the podcasts and then elaborate on Mr. Edwards's talking points in class.

"Instead of having to run through all of our thoughts on *Double Indemnity*," Mr. Edwards says, "we can actually start our discussion in the 31st minute, *in media res*, without setting up the movie for everyone."

Podcasts and Property

Mr. Edwards has made the podcasts that will anchor his film-noir course available to the public free through a license from Creative Commons, a group dedicated to making scholarly and artistic material widely available online. "I want people to download this stuff so they can feel free to engage with it," he says.

Some other professors are less enthusiastic about putting their lectures out in the open. Michigan's dentistry school, for example, keeps its coursecasts locked behind a firewall so that only students can listen.

And at Purdue, faculty members have begun to debate whether BoilerCast should stay open to the public, as it is now. "When Purdue said the podcasts would be open to everybody, a few faculty came to my office and started screaming, saying 'They can't do this,'" says Mr. Loudon, the chemistry professor.

Administrators received enough complaints that they formed a faculty committee that is now examining BoilerCast's intellectual-property implications. "The fundamental question is who owns a faculty member's lectures," Mr. Loudon says. "If these classes have intellectual value beyond the classroom, who owns that?"

He says the specter of a pay-for-podcast venture galvanized professors' concerns about their lectures

spreading around the Web. "Pick-A-Prof got me kind of fired up about this," Mr. Loudon says. "Whether the public gets to see this free of charge or not is a big issue, and frankly, I think they shouldn't."

But whether or not the university keeps the service open to all, it has been useful on campus, he says. Not only have coursecasts helped his students, he says, but they have also helped him. The professor regularly listens to recordings of his own lecture-hall performances, checking for moments where he may speak too quickly for students or run a bit too far off message.

"I've learned a lot just from listening to my own podcasts," he says. "They're really great for self-critique — if you've got the guts to listen."

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