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Students can get lectures by podcast

UC Berkeley, Stanford classes taking part in innovative MP3 program

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Inside Bay Area

Starting this school year, some California college students have been able to carry around course lectures and materials stored in their portable MP3 players.

It is a move that is raising concerns about possible empty lecture halls and an impersonal education that is not worth the high price. But busy students find the technology appealing.

"Being able to download MP3s anytime I want and not just at the scheduled times of lectures makes things a lot easier," said Linda Liu, 18, a freshman at University of California, Berkeley.

With lectures available at her convenience, she can attend internship fairs and stay in bed after all-night studying instead of worrying about missing class, Liu said.

Liu is participating in one of several new programs at Stanford University and UC Berkeley. The two schools are integrating MP3 technology into the curriculum by having students either download individual files or subscribe to podcasts that automatically put new files on their computers.

As the technology rapidly expands — the universities expect to go from a few trial courses to as many as 75 courses next year — academics are trying to figure out just how this technology will affect learning.

"Before I podcasted, I worried about whether I would be able to have the full experience of a lecture," said UC Berkeley sophomore Paul Cho, 19. But his skepticism has melted. "As I listen to the podcast I write down notes, and it keeps me on target without being distracted," he said.

Students and the public can access UC Berkeley's digital lectures for free through a university Web site or iTunes.

Stanford joined with Apple this year to create a custom store on iTunes, but much of the course material is password protected. Alumni and the public are allowed to access a separate component that contains recorded guest lectures and sporting events.

While UC Berkeley is moving toward being "more open" with the technology, said the school's podcast manager, Obadiah Greenberg, Stanford is being more reserved.

"Some faculty are concerned with intellectual property. There are also faculty concerns about students coming to class," said Victoria Szabo, Stanford's academic technology manager.

Stanford is considered a "residential school" and does not want to take students out of the classroom, Szabo said. She also said the school needs to be able to justify the cost of tuition, which is \$31,200 this year.

UC Berkeley lecturer Americ Azevedo said attendance has dropped in his Introduction to Computers course since incorporating podcasting. But he supports podcasts as a study aid and said technology actually can increase student participation in large lecture classes.

"I noticed lecture halls weren't very good places for dialogue. Five hundred people in a room is intimidating. There was more interaction between me and my students by using a Web discussion system," said Azevedo.

Portability is one of the most exciting things about the ability to download class information, said Szabo.

"We're excited students can multitask or replay and rewind. Also, alumni (can be) lifelong members of the Stanford community," she said.

But she said the goal is to give students convenience while maintaining the instructor's peace of mind.

Instructor support is necessary if podcasting is going to take off in California schools, Greenberg said.

in a phone interview.

Fortunately for Stanford and UC Berkeley, schools like Duke University have addressed many of these issues by using podcasting since it became available last year.

Solutions to keeping students in class have included requiring students to record assignments using MP3 players with special microphones, said Lynn O'Brien, director of instructional technology at Duke.

"We've shifted to a more student focused active learning, instead of just having students listen to what faculty give them," she said.

Faculty interest has been addressed through orientations about MP3 possibilities, and now interest outweighs Duke's podcasting resources, said O'Brien.

One of the biggest issues has been how fast more advanced technology becomes available, O'Brien said.

While students were content to listen to recorded lectures last year, newer iPods offer image and video technology.

Champions of the technology in California schools are not dismayed by the rapid changes. In fact, some see opportunities in it.

"We're planning to come out as a leader not only in terms of volume of content but we have plans to do video-podcasting as well," said Greenberg.

But students say it will be tough to achieve a balance between the benefits and drawbacks of the technology.

"In a way, podcasts really help students get caught up with one or two lectures, but they also help procrastinators procrastinate even more," said Liu.