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Monday, October 29, 2007

## Byte-size classes growing

Michigan Tech, other universities post lectures to iTunes U, for use from Houghton to China.

**Marisa Schultz / The Detroit News**

With 10 minutes to kill before another class, Aaron McPhall cracks out a video iPod.

But instead of "Family Guy" or "Futurama," the Michigan Technological University student watches "Physics 1600."

Since the school partnered with Apple to make college lectures as easily downloadable as Britney Spears' "Gimme More," students like McPhall can watch or listen to lectures on their own time.

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"I wish I could pause and rewind other courses I've taken," said McPhall, a





senior from Mount Pleasant who earned an 'A' his recent "Intro to Astronomy" video course. "It's a great model to have for the class. It allows the student to control the lectures."

About 250 schools around the nation use Apple's iTunes U service to manage their audio and video academic content, but Michigan Tech is one of just 28 -- and the only one in Michigan -- that have made all their content public and free on Apple's iTunes Store, where millions of people worldwide already get their music, movies and TV shows.

On average, a half-dozen Michigan Tech professors per semester choose to offer their courses through Apple's iTunes U. About 1,300 lectures are downloaded each week by students enrolled in the course and by curious learners from as far away as China.

The service has been a great marketing tool for the university in Houghton. Professors say iTunes U has helped boost students' grades, and students who still go to class like reviewing the recorded lectures.

"Many students are very familiar and comfortable with the iTunes interface," said Patty Lins, director of education technology and online learning at Michigan Tech. "They get their music, their games, their TV that way. And this was just a way to get their coursework as well."

Professors, with microphones clipped to their shirts, hold iTunes classes in studios on campus, sitting behind what looks like a TV anchor desk and saying things like "we are on the air now" or "welcome back."

Steady cameras toggle seamlessly from head shots to PowerPoint presentations and professors' lecture notes.

"I always have to be aware of what the students are seeing," said Christopher Cischke, a lecturer in electrical and computer engineering, who teaches three audio and one video course.

Cischke trades in his typical cargo pants and untucked shirt for dressier clothes when he'll be on camera. After all, he's representing the university to

the viewers around world, he says.

"It's been a very positive experience," Cischke said. "It requires very little extra work on my part but it seems like it's made an overall impact on grades."

Students still have to take quizzes and exams in class, so attendance hasn't dropped too much, he said.

Cischke's podcast lectures have been helpful to John van der Laan, a 20-year-old junior on the football team who often misses lectures for game travel.

"In most classes, this means I need to talk with the professors about what I missed and generally I need to teach myself the material," van der Laan said. "(Now) I am able to listen to the podcasts at home, or on the road in a hotel room, and receive almost all the instruction that I missed."

Apple partnered in 2005 with six pilot universities -- Duke, Brown, the University of Michigan's Dental School, Stanford, the University of Missouri School of Journalism and University of Wisconsin-Madison -- to test iTunes in the academic world.

Last year, iTunes opened up the service to other colleges, and Michigan Tech was one of the early adopters. In May Apple added iTunes U to its online store, the wildly popular digital window to Apple's six million songs, 600 television shows and 500 movies. Many colleges have hesitated to make all their material available in the store for a variety of reasons, including intellectual property concerns.

But physics professor Robert Nemiroff is happy Michigan Tech is one of the few that have, as sharing the educational material with as many people as possible is important, he says.

Nemiroff, whose astronomy course has been among the top iTunes U downloads, just received an e-mail from a college student in China curious about astronomy.

Nemiroff teaches two sections of "Intro to Astronomy." One is billed as an online-only course, and the other is a traditional class. Yet he treats them exactly the same, doing only one live lecture, rich with pictures of comets, eclipses and planets. All assignments and quizzes are online, and students can send questions electronically.

Asked if he misses students, Nemiroff said "a little bit, but I think it's kind of cool to be on the cutting edge to



Aaron McPhall can watch or listen to lectures at Michigan Technological University any time since the school joined with Apple to make the lectures a snap to download.

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