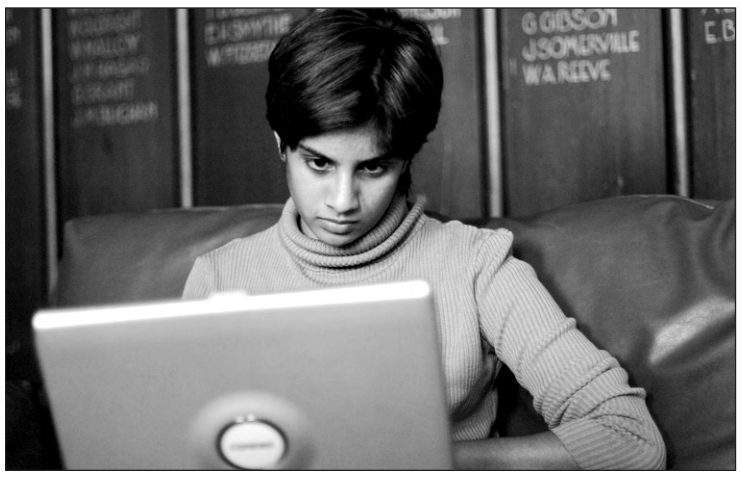

Online lectures are available for a number of UTSC courses.

A New Tool for School

By Brendan Dellandrea

GIVEN THE OPTION OF WATCHING lectures online, a significant percentage of students may never set foot in the lecture hall. What's more, most students like it that way.

Professor John Bassili of the University of Toronto at Scarborough presented his statistical findings on UTSC's WebOption program at a June 16 session of the Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education conference, held at U of T. He found that 80 per cent of students are "extremely happy" to have the option of watching lectures online and that in a particular course of 847 students, more than 250 watched all 25 lectures online.

"The reactions are very, very positive," Bassili said. "It's a very popular approach, to the point where the vice-principal of the Scarborough campus has asked me to try to apply this approach to more courses because students were putting pressure on him."

How does WebOption work? Lectures are videotaped and made available to students online within a few hours as a streaming video. This allows students to watch, pause, rewind and even fast forward the lecture at whim. "There's a lot of control over the flow of information using this approach," Bassili said. Students can also view slides from the lecture and print them for future reference. To prevent students from procrastinating, lectures are only stored online for a week.

"What's special about the approach and what makes it optional is that there is always room in the class," said Bassili. "Students on the web are invited to come to any class they want. They can see that there's lots of room in the lecture hall. There's total transparency with respect to migration between the web and the classroom."

According to his research, the overarching reason why students attend lectures in person is what social scientists call "neuroticism" — in this case, the fear and anxiety that one might miss something important by not attending the lecture.

However, for students comfortable with the online experience, the perceived benefits of watching online are numerous. Students cite tidier, more organized notes and greater productivity as major benefits. In one case, the student and her family would huddle around the computer to watch the lecture and then discuss it over dinner.

Bassili sees this process as an important part of adapting to the needs of students. "Our [teaching] strategies need to be in sync with the factors that drive students to watch online or not; to just deplore [the technology] is not at least a socially scientific way to approach the issue."

WebOption is currently in place for 13 courses at UTSC, with more to come.

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terms of a program. What are we doing in terms of our program? What's the connectedness between what the students are doing in one course with another course and what's the end product? We can't expect that in an individual course we're going to achieve A to Z, so it really helps if there's a co-ordinated approach."

In addition to using journaling to foster integrative learning, Sproule and Penny Light recommended using concept maps and creative projects to test knowledge. Both professors also use e-portfolios in their courses, which allow students to document their work, reflection and development over the term in an online, interactive format. Penny Light encourages students in her history course to record their reflections in blogs, audio files and on film, as well as their journals. Regardless of the activity, deep learning yields positive results, especially in the area of student engagement, she said.

As U of T focuses on enhancing the student experience, the potential of deep learning to increase student engagement appeals to many professors. Professor Clare Hasenkampf, who teaches biology to more than 800 students at U of T at Scarborough, was inspired by the lecturers' use of reflective assignments in large classes. "I would have thought that reflective writing would just not really work in big courses… But I find it encouraging and so I might try this," she said.

UTM Tries Student Teams

By W.D. Lighthall

TWO BIOLOGY COURSES AT THE University of Toronto at Mississauga have served as test cases for a concept known as a student management team (SMT).

An SMT is typically a group of four to 10 students who volunteer to meet on a weekly basis with an instructor or professor to provide ongoing dialogue on course design and delivery. The instructor or professor can then choose to make changes to the course based on the feedback received. At the recent Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education conference held at U of T, UTM's Anne Cordon, Mindy Thuna and two of their students shared the positives and negatives of putting SMTs into practice.

The idea behind an SMT is to connect the faculty perspective and the student perspective and improve the communication between the two, said Cordon, a senior lecturer in biology. Participation is strictly voluntary; students get no extra credit, just the satisfaction of making a difference.

Cordon used an SMT in Introduction to Cell and Molecular Biology, a second-year course with approximately 380 students; she and Thuna, UTM's AstraZeneca science liaison librarian, also introduced an SMT in Biology Behind the News, a course with 80 students.

Thuna said SMTs helped break down barriers between students and faculty. When the students realized faculty were truly interested in hearing what changes or improvements they could suggest, that had an unexpected impact in the classroom.

The students from the SMT "were more willing to participate and once you have some students participating, then others are more willing participants. So it actually took itself out of the SMT and into the classroom in a way we hadn't anticipated," Thuna said.

UTM undergraduate student Lesley Wilton said the members of her SMT felt they made a difference. "Most of the members said it was rewarding because they felt it helped make the class better and therefore they felt it helped the other students," Wilton said.

Marta Kisiel, who led the SMT for Cell and Molecular Biology, said though there were challenges along the way, the SMT did succeed in opening up the lines of communication. "There was feedback, although not always what Professor Cordon wanted to hear and sometimes not what the students wanted to hear, but at least we were getting our ideas out there," she said.

Kisiel's SMT was able to suggest a new marking criteria applying to the course's tutorials and to a course presentation. "It was certainly cleared and vetted through me but it was their initiative," Cordon said. "They actually had a say in something to do with their marks. They saw it as more objective and it made them feel heard."

PHOTOS: PASCAL PAQUETTE

Blogs Can Transform Education

By Brendan Dellandrea

BLOGS ARE POISED TO RADICALLY transform how students access and experience their education, say Rochelle Mazar, a librarian at the University of Toronto at Mississauga (UTM), and Professor Jason Nolan of Ryerson University.

The pair is working to create a large-scale institutional blogging system that will enhance the learning experience by shifting the focus from the classroom to the individual student. They shared their experiences with attendees at the recent Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education conference, held at U of T.

The word "blog" is actually short for "web log" and refers to any journal posted on the Internet. By virtue of being online, blogs enable people to easily share anything (or everything) with an online community, whether it be a group of friends, classmates and professors or the wider world.

Universities can harness the power of the blog, said Mazar and Nolan, by giving every student a university blog that would be associated with their name and student number. In addition to class lists, teachers would be supplied with a website connecting them to all their students' blogs, allowing them to view at a glance any recent posts about the course.

From there, student participation could be assessed by whether or not they are blogging on the weekly readings or lectures. But that's just the beginning — students could be required to read and comment on a certain number of their peers' blogs each week, encouraging critical thinking and healthy debate. Ultimately, blogs would provide teachers with a way to determine how students are engaging with the course material.

Most important, blogs could provide universities with the tool to better foster and serve the student experience. Lectures and tutorials are only one piece of the educational puzzle, according to Mazar. A lot of the actual learning takes place outside of these settings, with students making important connections or discoveries on their own time.

Blogs provide the space for students to reflect on their lectures, grapple with the issues and engage their peers in critical discussion. "It's empowering for the student," Mazar said, "it's their space to control."

Not everyone is keen on the idea of introducing blogging to the classroom. Concerns for privacy rank high on the list of cons, followed closely by the practical worry that no professor or group of TAs could humanly sift through all their students' blogs.

Others are concerned that blog-centred education might replace conventional pedagogy. "There's a fear there that if we bring in this technology then we take the faculty member out. [But] the faculty member is crucial to the process. We're just trying to find other means to engage the student," Mazar said.

Visit www.metaphorica.net for more information.

Jason Nolan and Rochelle Mazar believe blogs will transform education.