

Internet Access Is Only Prerequisite For More and More College Classes

By Susan Kinzie
Washington Post Staff Writer
December 31, 2007

Berkeley's on YouTube. American University's hoping to get on iTunes. George Mason professors have created an online research tool, a virtual filing cabinet for scholars. And with a few clicks on Yale's Web site, anyone can watch one of the school's most popular philosophy professors sitting cross-legged on his desk, talking about death.

Studying on YouTube won't get you a college degree, but many universities are using technology to offer online classes and open up archives. Sure, some schools have been charging for distance-learning classes for a long time, but this is different: These classes are free. At a time when many top schools are expensive and difficult to get into, some say it's a return to the broader mission of higher education: to offer knowledge to everyone.

And tens of millions are reaching for it.

For schools, the courses can bring benefits, luring applicants, spreading the university's name, impressing donors, keeping alumni engaged. Virginia Tech, for example, offers some online classes free to its graduates.

As the technology evolves, the classes are becoming far more engaging to a broader public. (Think a class on "Bioinformatics and Computational Biology Solutions Using R and Bioconductor" sounds a little dry? Try reading the lecture notes, alone, on a computer screen.) With better, faster technology such as video, what once was bare-bones and hard-core -- lecture notes aimed at grad students and colleagues -- is now more ambitious and far more accessible.

With video, you can watch Shelly Kagan, the well-known Yale philosopher, asking students about existence and what makes someone's life worthwhile.

"If death is the end, is death bad?"

The focus is sharp enough to see the sticks of chalk at the blackboard, the laces on his Converse All-Stars. You can watch his black eyebrows fly up and down as he makes points. You can see which books are on the syllabus and get the assignments online.

Just don't ask him to grade the papers.

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Some professors try this on their own, on a small scale. Schools are feeling their way, experimenting with different technologies; some use Utah State University's eduCommons on the Web; some post to free sites such as YouTube and the Apple university site iTunes U. Other schools have plunged right in: MIT has 1,800 classes online, virtually the entire curriculum free and open to all.

"The idea was to have a broad impact on education worldwide and make a statement at a time when many schools were launching for-profit distance-learning ventures," Steve Carson of MIT OpenCourseWare said, "trying to redefine the role of the institution in the digital age."

MIT is working with more than 150 other colleges and universities interested in open classes, Carson said, and more than 5,000 classes are online at an international site.

Less than a week into Yale's video launch of seven introductory courses, Kagan had gotten enthusiastic, inquisitive e-mail messages from people who had watched his classes. He had started to wonder whether it was just the first sign of a deluge of armchair philosophers trying to reach him.

It is, after all, out there. For anyone.

About 35 million people have tried MIT's online courses, Carson said. The biggest surprise has been that almost half who use the site aren't students or teachers but people just curious to learn.

"Wow now I can go to an Ivy League college . . . for free," someone wrote in the comments section of one of Berkeley's YouTube videos.

"UC Berkeley isn't Ivy League," someone else wrote, but whatever. There it is on YouTube, the third lecture of Chemistry 3B, Electronic Spectroscopy, just as it was taught at Berkeley.

The first lecture of Berkeley's Physics 10, on atoms and heat, was watched almost 115,000 times in its first four months online.

The second lecture has been reached only about 8,100 times.

And people have watched Beaker from the Muppets singing (or beeping?) "Feelings" more than 2 million times over the past year and a half.

Still.

MIT gets e-mail messages all the time from such people as Kunle Adejumo, a student in Nigeria. He would print out pages from a metallurgical engineering class online and bring them to his classmates to supplement what they were learning. They kept asking for more. Finally he downloaded the entire course, printed it and brought it in. The class burst into applause.

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Johns Hopkins professors have posted lecture notes from public health courses on their Web site, available to anyone. George Mason's open online research tool and archive Zotero aims to get scholars around the world to share their research. At American, "the university is still trying to figure out, like any university, its way in a technologically and legally changed environment," said Patrick Thaddeus Jackson, director of general education.

"There are intellectual property issues to be worked out here," Jackson said. "There are, frankly, revenue things to be worked out here. There are cultural considerations: What kinds of things are appropriate to what audiences?"

Many school officials have concerns about intellectual property issues -- what's okay to talk about or show in a classroom with a small group might not be appropriate for mass broadcast -- and about ongoing costs. MIT spends \$4 million a year and keeps updating, adding video and, recently, a portal for high school students and teachers.

Professors have another set of worries. At Yale, psychology professor Paul Bloom's first thought after agreeing to let his class be filmed was, "Oh, God, this is a terrible mistake."

He wondered whether he would teach differently, inhibited by the camera. He imagined careless comments being immortalized forever or random snippets winding up who knows where.

Some professors worried that students would just sleep in and catch the lecture on a laptop another time. (Jackson makes classroom discussions a big chunk of the final grade to head that off.)

It couldn't replace the real thing, many professors said -- especially not for seminars, in which the discussion and the papers are so important. Students can't earn credit. And yet, Bloom said, he didn't want to say no when he was asked to do it. "I'm very much behind it for moral reasons. . . . There are a lot of people who won't have a chance to go to Yale and won't have a chance to go to university. . . . [But] anyone with access to a computer can hear these brilliant lectures on physics or ethics or the Old Testament."

It's not a solution, he said, to the inequities in education.

But it's a step.

“It’s part of this movement in higher education to open up,” George Mason professor Dan Cohen said, “to share the products of our research, to be here for the public good.”

Besides, Jackson said: “The thing any academic most wants is for people to read their stuff, listen to what they’re saying.”