iPod: Not just to tune out classes anymore

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For The South End

Next time you’re walking across Gulien Mall or through the halls of Old Main, take a look around you — chances are that the majority of people will be listening to an iPod. They could be enjoying their favorite CD, listening to the new Radiohead download-only album, or they might be listening to their professor lecture about what the next class would be focusing on.

In the coming semesters, more professors will be using podcasts, both audio and video, within their classes. This is due largely to the Foreign Language Technology Center (FLTC), located on the third floor of Manoogian. Their job is to help integrate technology into the classroom with the professor’s style of teaching. FLTC program director Sangeetha Gopalakrishnan took a chance and tried to help to encourage the use of new technology in classrooms. She began the program of Mini-Grants.

The Mini-Grants that are awarded to faculty are not like large research grants; they are small grants, no more than $2000 and are intended to help the professor hire a student assistant or two. The student assistants are expected to do the work that the professor doesn’t have the time to do or the technical know-how to complete.

In the winter 2007 semester, classics professor Jennifer Sheridan-Moss’ Greek mythology class had the opportunity to be the first class at Wayne State to use video podcasts in their classroom. Moss was awarded a mini-grant through the FLTC in the fall of 2006 for her project, iMythology. Her goal was to create a series of video podcasts — an audio track accompanied by a slideshow of images — for her honors mythology course.

Moss’ curiosity was piqued when she heard of the mini-grants. “Partially I’m intrigued by the novelty [of podcasts] and I thought that students would be too,” she said. “Podcasts can be shared, unlike lecture notes, which are often just keywords, and this is good for educating the broader community. It also gives the professor more latitude for showing what they know.”

She worked with Gopalakrishnan to form a plan of operation: a detailed description of exactly what her project would cover. Part of the Mini-Grant agenda is several very personalized one-on-one interactions and planning sessions. Gopalakrishnan thinks that a large portion of the success of this program is due to that personalized care.

“I believe that it is very important to work closely with the professors to come up with a very detailed description of what they are setting out to do.” Gopalakrishnan said. “Many professors are intrigued by the technology, but intimidated by it too. They attempt to take on too much and don’t know how to organize it. This is what we help with.”

The possibilities for podcasts — audio or visual — are endless. They enrich the learning experience and give students another option outside of a textbook for ways to acquire information. Christopher Lajeunesse, a student in Moss’ class, thought that the podcasts were a great medium for learning as well as a good way to hear a lecture over again to better absorb the lesson.

“It's like going home and reading the lecture notes on PowerPoint, but better, because the voice of the professor makes it more interesting.” Lajeunesse said. “I found them useful. You could be walking around campus, driving in your car, waiting in line at Tim Horton’s or whatever, all while listening and learning.”

As well as the convenience of being able to listen to homework wherever and whenever it’s easiest, it is also very helpful for students to be able to hear the same lecture several times. Not even the best professor can do that for a student. The students can download the podcasts onto their loaned 30-gigabyte video iPod that is theirs to use for the semester. Alternatively, the podcasts will also play on any other computer through iTunes or any other equivalent program.

“I believe that podcasts would work great for history, art/music and definitely science classes (biology and chemistry especially),” Lajeunesse continued. “Classes that would be considered harder would benefit from such technology because it gives the students another tool for learning.”

Gopalakrishnan expects that with the growing popularity of the Mini-Grants, other departments and other disciplines will start experimenting with the technology as well. So, keep a look out for professors and classes that are trying to utilize podcasts in their curriculum, you may find yourself with a loaner iPod for a semester and a class that you’ll never forget.