A New Tool for School

By Brendan Dellandrea

G
gen 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 Bassil of the
University of Toronto at
Scarborough presented his
statistical findings on UTSC’s
WebOptron 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 230 watched all 25
lectures online.

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

How does WebOptron 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,” Bassil 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 Bassil.
“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
are attending the lecture
is that’s just the beginning — students
shared their experiences with attendees
at the recent Society for Teaching,
and Learning in Higher Education
conference, held at U of T.

Bassil sees this process as
an important part of adapting to
the needs of students. “Our
strategies need to be in
sync with the factors that drive
students to watch online or not,
just to deplete [the technology]
is not at least a statistically
way to approach the issue.”

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

Online lectures are available for a number of UTSC courses.

Blogs Can Transform Education

By Brendan Dellandrea

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blogs are poised to radically
transform how students access
and experience their edu-
cation, 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 every-
thing) with an online community,
whether it be a group of friends,
classmates and professors or the
wider world.

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
downs barriers between students
and faculty. When the students
realized faculty were truly inter-
ested 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 Kiesel, 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 feed-
back, 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.

Kiesel’s SMT was able to suggest
a new ranking 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,” Gordon 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.”

Mazar felt SMTs will become
a part of the university’s
culture. “This is a new idea
in the idea of introducing blogs 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 student’s blogs.
Others are concerned that blog-
centred education might replace
conventional pedagogy. “There’s a
fear that if we bring in this
technology then we will 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.metaphotica.net for
more information.

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
decisions 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 Cord, Cindy 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 Cord, a senior
lecturer in biology.