

When iPod goes collegiate

By Elizabeth Armstrong Moore

Correspondent of The Christian Science Monitor

When Kenneth Rogerson walked into his newspaper journalism class on the first day of the school year, the professor could barely contain his excitement.

After a quick introduction he broke the big news: "We got the grant," he told his class. "You all get iPods."

As if on cue, the students exhaled an audible "whoa" and exchanged elated glances. Duke University in Durham, N.C., had already made many a headline as the first school ever to provide all incoming freshmen with their own 20-gigabyte iPods - enough space to store up to 5,000 songs.

Now, thanks to a grant program set up within Duke, some upperclassmen were overjoyed to also become recipients of the slim white gadgets.

But by this spring, the school had already announced its intention to scale back the iPod giveaway, which initially had cost Duke \$500,000. Next fall, only students enrolled in courses such as music and language instruction, where the iPod has direct application as a learning tool, will receive the devices.

The iPod's debut in college classrooms seems to be provoking an odd mix of euphoria and bafflement.

There are many - faculty and students alike - who rave about the iPod's potential. But there are also a considerable number who scratch their heads and say that the excitement over use of the device in classrooms reminds them of the fable of the emperor's new (and nonexistent) clothes.

At Duke, the school's internal review of the success of the iPod's first foray into academics indicated mixed results.

On the one hand, about 75 percent of freshmen surveyed said they used the iPods for their academic work. Half the time, they said, they used them in ways recommended by professors, but for the rest they devised uses of their own.

Some of the most popular student uses included recording lectures, taking oral notes, and even using the devices to create electronic flash cards.

Professors reported that students seemed more engaged in classes where they could use the iPods. They also cited strong student use of the audio capabilities of the iPod in their presentations, and more accuracy in quoting from interviews they did using the iPods.

But at the same time, some of the students said that while the iPods have potential in the classroom, they are still underutilized.

An editorial in the student newspaper "The Chronicle" even urged Duke to dismantle the program.

In the survey both students and faculty said more specific ideas of iPod use in the classroom were needed. Some also complained of the inability to share files from iPod to iPod.

Those unfamiliar with the iPod may be wondering how a well-marketed MP3 player got so wrapped up with the learning experience in the first place.

The thing to remember is size. A 20-gig hard drive is like having a laptop in the palm of your hand.

It doesn't shuffle through thousands of playlists - it can record audio files, capture images, store documents, and then organize them. The iPod isn't just changing the way students take notes - it's turning college into a realm of perpetual connectivity.

"We want students to be able to take the professor with them wherever they go," says William Lynch, director of Drexel University's school of education in Philadelphia, which will hand out iPods to faculty and freshmen this fall.

Drexel's iPod initiative has been more clearly thought out than Duke's trial run. Professors can upload class assignments, readings, audio files, and other material to a secure server where the students access the information, download it to their iPods, and take it to class, the library, the gym - wherever.

(Students can also communicate with one another through "podcasting," the newest type of blogging in the form of audio files, as opposed to those in text.)

Yet, in what can only be described as a twist of irony, some educators worry that through this perpetual connectivity iPods will actually encourage isolation. Why strike up a conversation on the way to class when you can choose from thousands of songs in your headphones?

In fact, why use an iPod for class at all when those gigabytes can also be filled with anything from Beethoven to Britney Spears?

Some professors insist that they have no problem with use of the iPod for personal recreation - as long as at least part of the time it helps connect kids to course work.

"The iPods used for my class - well, it's a 20-gig hard drive for goodness sake," Rogerson concedes. "It's holding 90 percent music and 10 percent course content, no question, but I'm so grateful for that 10 percent."

In his class, students use their iPods to record lectures and interviews for their assignments.

Rogerson calls the gadgets "glorified tape recorders," but the advantages are clear: Audio files can be assigned titles and organized into folders; students can skip to the exact instant of an interview from which they want to quote; and in a matter of seconds interviews can be uploaded to a personal computer for future storage.

Apple, the maker of the iPod, lists the ways it sees its invention being used by schools.

"Institutions such as Duke, Georgia College & State University, and others are using the iPod as a portable learning tool for listening to recorded lectures, foreign language study, research notes, storing files and photos, and listening to audio books and podcasts," says Greg Joswiak, Apple's vice president of iPod product marketing.

"The iPod has been a very useful and effective way for interviews to be recorded for our journalism class," says Carla Ranno, a sophomore sociology/political science major from Briarcliff Manor, N.Y. (She swears she uses it for music only when she goes to the gym.)

But all this collecting and dispersing of audio files raises two red flags: First, how many words and actions will be captured unwittingly and used for unknown purposes, and second, when and where is copyright being infringed when students and faculty make their own recordings?

Rogerson says that as far as his lectures are concerned, his students are free to record anything that comes out of his mouth and use it for their own purposes, so long as they don't profit from it.

But not all professors or institutions are so free with their spoken intellectual property.

"Do they have permission from the person who wrote the lectures to share it?" asks Alan Albright, managing principal and specialist in intellectual property litigation at the law firm of Fish & Richardson in Austin, Texas. "That would be the copyright concern. The school wouldn't be liable anymore than Kmart is liable for selling me the iPod; giving me the storage capability isn't the bad thing. But I can't imagine, having been a student myself, that it won't be widely abused."

This concern exists at any school where students have iPods, whether they were gifts or not. Professors should be aware, Mr. Albright says, of how easy it is today for students to record lectures or any downloadable class materials and broadcast them over the Internet.

But even as such discussions persist, it seems clear that iPods are in classrooms to stay.

Duke may have been the first university to hand them out to its students, but it certainly won't be the last. In addition to Drexel's program, iPods have already spawned enthusiastic followings at Georgia College & State University in Milledgeville, which will use the players for two of its courses, and at Stillman College in Tuscaloosa, Ala., which is handing out iPods to students who fill out financial aid and registration forms on time.

Providing students with iPods is not an inexpensive venture. The market value of a 20-gig iPod is \$300 (although schools generally get discounts by buying in bulk).

But officials at Duke insist that their decision to limit iPod distribution was based not on finances but on curricular concerns. The school remains committed to finding creative uses for the gadget in the classroom.

"The direct effect of iPods is they learn better in the classroom," says Peter Lange, Duke's provost.

But the value of the gadgets goes beyond the classroom, he insists. "Obviously if you learn that there are creative ways to do things that you hadn't thought of before, and ... that new technologies may provide opportunities you hadn't thought of, that's part of learning, too."