IPFW program allows students to learn on the go

By VALERIE CAVIGLIA
vcaviglia@kpcnews.net

It took computers 20 years to become widely used in American classrooms — from 1971, when mainframe and minicomputer-based instructional programs were developed, to the late 1980s, when schools could choose between the Apple Macintosh or DOS-based clones.

So who would have thought that after all that time establishing themselves as a mainstay in classrooms, computers would take the learning experience out of the building.

It’s happening at Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne. Since August, IPFW’s first faculty group to engage in Project #mobileEDU has been exploring the potential of mobile learning through the use of Apple iPads. The initiative was made possible by an internal grant from IPFW’s Office of Research, Engagement and Sponsored Programs.

Six months later, one-third of the university’s faculty are using iPads in their classrooms and research projects.

“Over the course of the next semester, what we’re asking our faculty to do is to take a critical look at these
mobile devices,” Samantha Birk, associate director for instructional technologies, said at a press conference. “This is really part of an experiment to help the institution make critical decisions as to how they will move forward with these devices.”

This semester, IPFW transitioned to Blackboard Learn, a learning management system which has a mobile application.

Jim Brown, account executive for Blackboard Mobile, demonstrated the ease of mobility by virtually attending the press conference on an iPad via Skype.

“When you look at some of the more recent surveys, it’s really not a surprise that we are beginning to try to stretch that amount of (student study) time using the devices they love,” Brown said.

This is a concept that excited Mark Masters, chair of IPFW’s physics department, who has been using an iPad in his classes since Project #mobileEDU launched.

“The fact that all the faculty have them now, that’s so that people can get more ideas within the department,” Masters said. “But it’s got to go beyond just content delivery. It has to be engaging, it has to get the student interested in the material.”

To do that, he envisions mobile devices creating a more seamless process between his classroom and the lab: Students would complete course activities, share their work and other documents with the class, and make corrections to their peers’ work, all in real time from an iPad. Instead of lab computers storing data, students would enter their data and write entire reports directly on the iPad.

Masters said the whole idea is to get rid of the traditional textbook, a costly and inflexible instructional tool. E-textbooks on the iPad can actually ask students questions, and vice-versa. Students can share notes with their peers, have discussions, rate their peers’ answers to questions— it eliminates many of the previous boundaries, according to Masters.

“It’s trying to extend the classroom from just within the classroom,” he said.

But there is a lot to be done before Masters’ vision can become reality. Right now, iPads have only been distributed to faculty members as part of the pilot program. Masters and his colleagues are writing a proposal requesting National Science Foundation funding to distribute iPads to 60 students in the physics department. But before iPads can arrive, a key issue must be addressed.

“The problem that we’ve had is that the apps that we need don’t exist, so we have to invent them,” Masters said. Luckily, Masters and his colleagues have programming backgrounds and plan to develop the department’s apps in house.

The idea of mobile learning has reached past the confines of the pilot project, according to Bill McKinney, IPFW vice chancellor of academic affairs.

“Our students have formed clubs for the development of apps. We have had some of our own faculty begin to develop instructional apps,” he said. “These wonderful mobile devices are tools that allow for IPFW to become a more innovative and a more creative university.”