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Communicator Staff

Emily Hambidge
Shane Rubeck
Micah L. Howard

Adviser:
Jane Gibson Natt

New technology makes teaching 'a breeze' for professors on the go

By Micah Leigh Howard
Journalism senior

Oct. 25 began a typical week of classes for Assistant Professor Jian Wang's Integrated Marketing Communication students, with one major exception: their professor delivered his lectures live from China.

Using Breeze, the next generation of collaboration software from Macromedia, Wang and others in the department are testing advanced technology in their classrooms and changing how they handle being away from campus.

"I don't need to miss any classes," said Wang, who recently returned from China, where he and Department Head Howard Sypher lectured at Peking University in Beijing and Fudan University in Shanghai.

"It basically makes distance irrelevant."

Requiring only an updated browser, like Internet Explorer 8.0, Macromedia's Flash Player (to show videos and presentations), and a high-speed Internet connection, anyone with Breeze software can conduct meetings or discussions online.

And with an option to use a Web cam and microphone for visual and audio exchange, those virtual sessions can easily become something like the "live via satellite" news correspondences often seen on television.

An employee of Information Technology at Purdue (ITAP) ran the program for students in Wang's classroom, while the professor said he was able to access the software and use the Web cam and microphone from his hotel room.

But take out just one of those necessary components, and Breeze can be more of a hindrance than a helpful tool of instruction.



Assistant Professor Jay Wang and Tsinghua University student Wang Qian.



Shanghai street scene

Sypher also chaired a session of the Tsinghua Forum (hosted by Tsinghua University in Beijing), an invitation-only meeting of the top communication and journalism programs in the United States, Europe, Asia and China. He had also planned to use Breeze to teach his course at Purdue. But a last-minute hotel switch left him without a high-speed connection and forced him to cancel his class.

Even though Wang said he expects to use Breeze in the future, he also said that he would like to do more research about Breeze and hear more feedback from his students and peers before trying the program again.

Despite his successful transmissions from China, Wang said that he missed the reactions from his students, and he doesn't foresee Breeze replacing the traditional lecture anytime soon.

"It's actually a supplement," he said. "Certain types of discussions or lectures would be more conducive to using this tool. I will think about how to make it more effective in the nature of the course."

Assistant Professor Toby Arquette used Breeze in that manner to conduct chatroom-like review sessions for his Communication 435, Communication and Emerging Technologies, course and to hold virtual office hours while he was in Chicago.

Annette Kent, a senior in COM435, said it was interesting to actually use a type of technology that students were learning about, but she missed the ease of exchange that face-to-face conversation brings to the classroom.

Wang said despite all the unknowns, collaboration software such as Breeze presents exciting possibilities.

"It creates a global classroom," Wang said. "That is the significance of this technology."

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