

NEW MEDIA, NEW LEARNING

A GRAPHICS DESIGN PROFESSOR AT GEORGE BROWN TEAMS UP WITH APPLE TO RETHINK HOW TO TEACH.

Graphic design professor Jim Kinney's involvement in a software-testing project with Apple Canada gave him a prime opportunity to secure his curriculum, his teaching—and his students—at the cutting edge of learning and applied research.

Kinney was already four years into his new teaching model at the School of Design when the school's director, Luigi Ferrara, connected Kinney with Apple technicians interested in further development of the company's new Podcast Server and Podcast Producer software. Funding allocated to Apple, through the Consortium on New Media, Creative and Entertainment R&D in the Toronto Region (CONCERT), enabled Kinney and four students to work on the research.

Kinney himself was an early entry into the new era in graphic design, computer graphics. But even his predisposition to anticipate and embrace change didn't prepare him for the proliferation, complexity and rapid obsolescence of software-program versions. As a result, Kinney moved from what he calls a top-down teaching model to distributed teaching and learning. Now he leverages the critical mass of students in the classroom and their familiarity with and orientation toward technology. Working in groups with Kinney as facilitator and guide, students research software changes and upgrades and revise technical software guidelines for their own use in the classroom.

Kinney was inspired by a conversation with the director of the Media Lab at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). Kinney realized that the standard model in college teaching—the professor as skilled master and the student as apprentice—was ingraining the problem he wanted to overcome: all knowledge was funnelling through, and dependent on, the teacher.

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-JIM KINNEY



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But it was the Apple applied-research project that gave Kinney and four of his students a unique opportunity to get in on the ground floor of new software development, to formally develop their newfound research capabilities, and to tackle the time-lag problem.

Apple wanted a means of testing the utility of its Podcast Producer technology in a new marketplace, education. Working with technicians at the college, at Apple and with Kinney, in fall 2008 the students installed, configured and learned the podcast technology as a test-case education client. They envisioned and evaluated how it could be used as a teaching tool to support students' collaborations in learning graphic-design computer programs. Students conceptualized, wrote, storyboarded, produced, published, critiqued and revised diverse online learning modules that were targeted to their peers. They collected data and experiential information and tracked the whole process through a wiki-powered website they built. They named it "mycelium" for its allusion to a richly interwoven and interdependent, living, organic network. They even developed a podcast on how to make a podcast.

"Many students today," says Kinney, "use technology as just-in-time learners. They intuitively understand the rapid pace of innovation and obsolescence. They also learn in a 'networked' way, because they pull information online from many sources. The four students on the Apple project brought all this to bear in using the podcast tool—not as a static broadcast medium, but as a means to learn and create knowledge."

What's more, the project brought together a graphic-design student from each year in the three-year program, along with a part-time student, to distribute the roles and tasks more flexibly and effectively. Apple is delighted with a pilot project that has exceeded its expectations, and that Kinney believes has presented a compelling argument for using George Brown College as a source of qualified applied researchers. Ongoing dialogue with the industry partner has contributed valuable anecdotal evidence to help ground Apple's technology in frontline user needs. The research team will also assist Apple in identifying potential commercial opportunities for the technology.

Meanwhile, the project was brought live into the classroom in January 2009, and Kinney continues to document and promote the value of RISK-based learning to the broader educational community through upcoming conferences, such as the University of Montreal's CANHEIT in June, 2009.



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