

## eCAMPUS NEWS

Technology News for Today's Higher-Ed Leader

September 15, 2015

### iCE + iPad= curricular superstar

A new content-development and delivery platform at Thomas Jefferson University is encouraging the transition to more learner-centered instruction on campus.

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For several years now, higher ed visionaries have touted the potential of learner-centered instruction, flipped classrooms, mobile-optimized course materials, and cross-disciplinary collaboration. Now, rather than just talking about them, Thomas Jefferson University has decided to walk the walk.

Beta tested in fall 2014, its Interactive Curricula Experience Platform and App, or iCE, is a new content-development and delivery platform that aims to facilitate innovative approaches to teaching and learning – and optimize them for the iPads used by almost every TJU student.

Developed in partnership with Digital Wave, a web and mobile app developer headquartered in Philadelphia, iCE is a web-based tool that gives faculty an intuitive way to create a course, a module, a unit, or an object. Using a GUI interface, faculty simply click on icons representing everything from PDF files to videos and PowerPoint files. Students are then able to access these materials via a native iPad app or in a browser from any device.

A primary goal is to put students in control of how they interact with the content. “It provides the content in the context of what students need to learn,” said Martha Ankeny, director of learning initiatives in the university’s Center for Teaching and Learning, which steered development of the new platform. “In contrast, Blackboard [also used at TJU] is more learner-

centered on analytics, not on what students actually see when they look at the Blackboard interface.”

“The problem with Blackboard is that it’s very linear – you need to do this first, this second, this third,” added Nicholas Leon, an assistant professor of pharmacy practice in the College of Pharmacy. “Because of the way iCE is laid out, students can explore what they want, when they want, how they want. I like the students being in charge of their own learning experience.”

Plus, the new tool presents information in a vernacular that students already understand. “Students like the visual look of iCE, because it’s structured in a way that’s similar to the social tools they already use on their other devices,” said Anthony Frisby, director of the Center for Teaching and Learning and the Scott Memorial Library. “iCE gives you a really great platform to individualize instruction for students in a mass-creation way. If I were breaking down the components of a course at the lecture level, for example, I might have a primary area of the screen that talks about that content. Then, on the right-hand side, I’ve got the ability to add supporting content for students who might need remediation or for the occasional student who wants to go more in depth.”

A key benefit of iCE is that it requires a high level of organization and reflection on the part of faculty, which translates into a better learning experi-

ence for students, according to Ankeny. “The platform really encourages faculty to think about what they’re providing students in a contextual way,” she said. “Rather than just throwing PDF files into a file folder and saying, ‘Go find your stuff,’ they’re encouraged to think about how objects relate to each other to create a contextual learning experience. The real work for iCE is doing the organization of the materials so they make sense.”

During the winter and spring of 2015, TJU staged a variety of workshops to prepare faculty for the new platform. Given the traditional difficulty of implementing change in higher education, it’s no surprise that the iCE rollout at TJU’s six colleges has been uneven. The Sidney Kimmel Medical College – both faculty and students – has been one of the biggest supporters of the platform: Its new curriculum will be entirely managed through iCE when it launches in 2016.

However, iCE has probably received greatest traction among faculty who have embraced the concept of the flipped classroom. “The iCE platform allows students to explore things before class in a very structured way,” said Leon. “Then, in class, I can have a separate set of things for them to explore and use that give them instantaneous feedback.”

But instantaneous should not be confused with synchronous, he insists. “Typical clicker technology, for example, requires students to answer ques-

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tions in a specific time frame, whereas iCE really allows students to go at their own pace in the classroom – or outside the classroom,” he said. “That’s important, because some students may not be present in class that day. Other students may not be quite ready [to take the quiz], while still others may be itching to go a little faster.”

#### **Cross-Disciplinary Collaboration**

At TJU, certain subjects – such as global health and cultural humility – are not stand-alone courses but instead are woven into all university courses. To facilitate the sharing of this kind of material, iCE allows faculty to search a central content depository and incorporate what they want into their own courses. “There is so much information in the world of healthcare – a faculty member can’t be an expert on everything,” said Leon. “With the iCE platform, one of the key benefits is

that it allows an interdisciplinary way of sharing teaching material. Do I really need to reinvent the wheel?”

Faculty can share as much – or as little – of their course materials as they feel comfortable. In the view of Leon, the ability to borrow compelling content from colleagues is a major strength of the program. “I can take bits and pieces of what other people have done and then Frankenstein my own module together,” he explained. “The ability to have different multimedia and content within the app is key. I can post a traditional PowerPoint slide, but I can have that right next to a YouTube video. And, underneath that, I can add some type of interactive piece. All of that can be accessible to a student on the same screen.”

Although iCE handles some of the tasks traditionally associated with an LMS – it’s even tied into the univer-

sity’s Banner system for enrollment information – TJU continues to operate as a Blackboard shop. Even faculty who have transitioned entirely to iCE for developing and sharing course materials still rely on Blackboard for such features as the grade center and discussion boards. “Right now iCE is mostly used for delivering content in interesting ways, although we have had quite a few faculty requests to add a discussion board and grade center,” said Frisby. “There are courses that rarely use Blackboard now.”

While no one expects iCE to upend Blackboard in the higher education market anytime soon, TJU and Digital Wave are exploring the possibility of offering the tool commercially to other schools. “Once faculty sit down and see how easy it is to use the dashboard, they see the value of iCE,” said Ankeny. “It’s very user friendly.”

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