Education

High-tech teaching

Software, applications transform the learning and academic experience

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Jason Ball was at an educational showcase in October when he saw the future of learning in American classrooms – and how that future would be managed.

Older, more traditional learning management systems were offering vast, new features. New, open-source services were emerging to compete with the old guard. And social media services were migrating from general use into the classroom.

“A lot of the old way of doing online learning was almost like correspondence,” said Ball, CIO and associate VP of information resource management at Florida Atlantic University. “When you look at how courses are put together and the rubric that establishes what a traditional or online course is, it’s come a long way.”

The classroom isn’t what it used to be. In fact, in many ways, often it’s not a room at all. Education has moved, in many cases, from the classroom to the online world. Some schools and professors are implementing a blended model that incorporates both in-class and online learning environments.

The market for online and digital collaboration technology is growing. Boca Raton-based VoiceThread.com allows educators and students to host secure conversations around almost any type of media, videos, documents, images, or presentations. FYI Online in Miami has worked with the University of Miami to deliver upward of 40 online courses from certificates to graduate-level work – atop the 130 grade-school online courses the company offers, founder and CEO Christopher Gentile said.

‘A huge culture shift’

With the growing demand for assessment and standards improvement, some applications help schools prove accountability and earn accreditation, said Andrew Davies, VP of client services with Think Education Solutions LLC in Coral Springs. The company’s products help grade
school and higher education automate the strategic planning, assessment and accreditation approval process.

“Online courseware and management applications are a strong market,” Davies said. “It increases interaction and accountability for the school and the instructor. It’s a huge culture shift right now toward continuous improvement.”

One of the biggest such toolsets in the category is Blackboard. The technology serves various aspects of education, including campus management, financial services, educational delivery and student and instructor collaboration. Online classroom applications often feature all the services and functionality in one location and on one dashboard. This keeps students engaged in the tool – and less likely to venture from the learning interaction, said Sherry Olsen, VP for Keiser University’s online division in Fort Lauderdale, which uses the eCollege application for distance learning.

“It’s like the professor is standing in front of the student and they can work on a problem together,” Olsen said. “It makes our online classes very hands-on.”

Open-source and freely available Internet applications are quickly finding traction in the classroom setting. Among the largest providers in the space are products like Sakai and Moodle. These free, open-source course management systems help educators create online courses and collaborate on projects.

Students and faculty use Google Apps to write and create documents and spreadsheets, study and collaborate in real time. Other tools include MindMeister, a free online “mind mapping” application that allows users to simultaneously and remotely work with peers or colleagues and see and map changes as they happen. Many teachers believe such collaborative applications improve the student learning process.

In a marketplace where traditional applications have been “slow to evolve” and meet the needs of the user community, free and open-source tools open new possibilities for users, added Leo Irakliotis, a professor and dean at Nova Southeastern University’s Graduate School of Computer & Information Sciences.

For example, some of the largest tools – like Blackboard – offer little to no calendar as functional as Google Calendar for sharing and updating, Irakliotis said. Today, Google Apps serve the majority of academic collaborative needs, he said. Such limitations by the legacy providers only frustrate users and send them looking for better solutions, he said.

“You don’t use the same tool to open cans as to cut your grass,” said Irakliotis, noting that Google lacks the level of secure access control found with more traditional products. “We begin to realize we need diversification of applications.”
Google isn’t alone in its move into the classroom. Social networking and bookmarking applications are gaining favor. Blogging and “wiki” applications allow students and professors to create, organize, post and share thoughts and content. Services like Delicious and Diigo.com enable users to research and share knowledge by highlighting content, creating digital sticky notes and bookmarking content. Some are also using Xtranormal.com, a text-to-speech application that creates animated movies based on scripts typed into the service. Last year, Voltier Creative, a marketing firm in Delray Beach, launched a now-defunct program experimenting with Twitter in select University of Miami classrooms.

Many schools have few to no restrictions on use of free, open-source or social media tools in the classroom or learning environment. That may create nightmares for IT managers tasked with overseeing application use, Irakliotis said.

“I want to see this balkanization of services for the best of every world,” he said. But, he noted, “it’s going to be hell to manage, because after so many years of IT innovation, we still don’t have established protocols and methodology to manage a single view and ID for our customer. It’s not impossible, but do you want us to commit 95 percent of our resources managing this? This is the single most formidable challenge facing this.”