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Hand-Held Classroom

A new hand-held device being tested at USF St. Petersburg could revolutionize learning around the world. The device, a portable media center similar to the popular iPod with the added benefit of video, enables students from around the world to take classes anytime, anywhere.

In the spring, USF St. Petersburg offered students a pilot course on autism using the hand-held Microsoft Windows' Creative Zen Portable Media Center. Just released in September 2004, the device can show videos and TV programs as well as play music.

Psychology professor and autism expert V. Mark Durand, who recently was named vice chancellor of USF St. Petersburg, converted his autism course to Windows Media Video files for students to access and watch regardless of their time or location.

"To my knowledge, we are the first in the world to use this new technology for teaching," says Durand. "Here at USF St. Petersburg we are exploring new and innovative ways to bring the classroom to the student. For parents of autistic children, who can rarely get away for classroom time, that's particularly beneficial."

Durand, an acknowledged "technology geek," says he has long been interested in how to implement video programming that is high quality and accessible to students. Since 1999, more than 1,000 students have taken his 45-hour autism course on CD. But, like the web, CDs have limitations. The new video device addresses those limitations.

"We're very focused here on educating—on finding



innovative ways to teach and reach students who are technologically sophisticated, 21st century students," says Durand.

Durand's pilot course covers autism, a biological disorder, in great detail. Students, typically parents of autistic children as well as teachers, psychologists and school administrators, learn about what causes autism, current research, treatments and the unique challenges autistic children face. This fall, Durand will additionally offer an abnormal psychology course using the portable media device.

"Using this type of technology for distance-learning for classes on autism is a great example of how we can help not only our traditional students, but teachers and parents

with autistic children to learn additional methods to help children," Durand says.

For Stacey Solar, the pilot course was a new opportunity to learn. "I didn't think it was going to be this simple," she says. "The device is much more portable than my laptop and gives me greatly increased availability for my coursework."

To enroll, students must first have access to the portable media device, currently selling for about \$450. Durand expects the cost to come down significantly as the device grows in popularity. Enrolled students are directed to download course files onto the portable media center, which Durand says has the capacity to hold an entire semester of classes, in addition to movies, programming and music.

Earlier this year, Durand presented his pilot course at the annual conference of the National Institute on the Teaching of Psychology. His colleagues from around the country were excited. "I expect that universities around the world will be copying us in the next few years," says Durand. "I'm a kid of the 60's," Durand adds. "If you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem."

STUDENTS ENROLLED IN V. MARK DURAND'S COURSE ON AUTISM CAN NOW ACCESS THE COURSE USING A PORTABLE MEDIA DEVICE.

