

## WEB-BASED LEARNING GAINS POPULARITY AT PENN STATE

*By Caleb Sheaffer*

*For Blue*

Sitting in the comfort of his office, Lee **Grenci**, an instructor of Penn State's online meteorology 101 course, can teach 250 students with nothing more than a telephone line, a \$600 computer and two degrees' worth of meteorology knowledge.

The thing is, **Grenci** says he has more class participation, increased student interest and the ability to bridge spatial distance, just by teaching his course online -- a move that many instructors at Penn State have recently taken up. Many online classes fall under the heading of less-specific classes which are general education credits. Two more examples of these are INART 115 (Intro to Popular Music) and BI SC 004 (Human Body: Form and Function.) Most of these classes do not even have textbooks, and the teachers use chat rooms, interactive software, message boards and assigned readings so that students can grasp the information.

William Kelly, the head of Penn State's Integrative Arts Department, said the online format strengthens the Intro to Popular Music course. "The problem in the large lecture format was that you couldn't listen to the music," Kelly said. "With Napster, all the listening examples are available online."

Kelly, who has been teaching online courses since 1992, said he has seen dramatic changes in the past five years. "It's still an ongoing process. I think student interest has increased dramatically," Kelly said. "The primary reason students seem to take online courses is convenience in scheduling -- the ability to have a course to deal with on my schedule."

**Grenci** started teaching online classes in spring 2002, and for the past year has taught exclusively online. **Grenci** says there are big differences between online and traditional classroom or lecture-hall classes, mainly in terms of student and teacher participation. He checks his course's Web site about a dozen times a day to look for any new questions, course discussion or updates. "I'm checking into the course more frequently, but that doesn't mean I'm spending more time," **Grenci** said. "I dare not log on much over the weekend or my wife would kill me."

Meteorology 101 reaches University Park students, students at the commonwealth campuses and adult learners through Penn State's World Campus. **Grenci** said being able to teach the adult students is one of the biggest payoffs. Many of these students have full-time jobs, so taking face-to-face instruction could be hard to fit into their hectic schedules. "I get to help adult students who otherwise would not have the opportunity to learn. That's just a huge draw for me," **Grenci** said. "While I miss the classroom, the World Campus students are special."

**Grenci** said that although the success rate for his online class is high, online classes are stuck with a label that has many students trying to breeze through his class with a minimal amount of work. "Honestly, the reputation is that [online courses] are easier," **Grenci** said. He said he expects his students to be able to critically examine the concepts they learn in his class. "It's not a glorified high school course in which you just have to remember the material and regurgitate it on the exam," **Grenci** said.

But Penn State senior Edwin Shaw said he didn't really find his online class to be a great educational experience. Shaw, a philosophy major, ended up taking BI SC 004 in the fall. Shaw said he liked the fact that he didn't have to go to class and could fit the coursework to his daily schedule. Yet, he found he was not always doing the work when he needed to.

"If you're the type who lets things go, you tend to fall behind," Shaw said.

The BI SC class uses the Penn State intranet system, Angel. Tests are given in a large room in the Forum, which Shaw said was full when he took the exams -- averaging about 300 people. This is the only type of course Shaw said he would take online -- one in which the classes have a high number of students and in which discussion isn't the basis for students' learning.

Because BI SC 004 already is known as a less-specific general education course, Shaw said it was all right to

take it online, but he would never take a harder course in his major over the Web. "It's a real easy Gen Ed class to begin with," Shaw said. "Classwise, I didn't get a lot out of it."

Kelly said that while some classes are conducive to an online format, others would not work at all. "There's some stuff you cannot teach online," Kelley said. "The problem is we start to think about things in monolithic terms." Yet, both **Grenci** and Kelly said that online classes allow for fuller discussion than regular courses. "There are students who just don't want to speak in class. Online courses allow them to participate," Kelly said. "If I take any face-to-face course, usually 10 percent of the class does 90 percent of the contribution."

It's less likely that a few students will dominate discussion in an online class, **Grenci** said. "I interact more with students in online classes than in a traditional format. I'll go to my grave believing that," **Grenci** said. "With discussion boards, when you set that kind of environment, students start interacting. That would never happen in a traditional setting."

**Illustration:**CDT photo/Michelle Klein

William Kelly, head of Penn State's Department of Integrative Arts, has been teaching online courses since 1992.