

Penn State professor Jonathan Mathews travels a lot, both personally and professionally. He also teaches every semester, including in the summer. Consequently, he's always alert to making sure he can plug into the Internet and stay in touch with his students, whether they're at University Park or online with Penn State's World Campus.

Thanks to a university-wide course management system that enables resident instructors to use the World Wide Web and the Internet in their courses, Penn State students may not always know if their professor is down the hall or halfway around the world at a conference when he or she responds to a question or receives an assignment. You can almost do a take-off on the old public service announcement "It's 10 o'clock. Do you know where your children are?" only it would be "It's Tuesday. Do you know where your professor is?"

The course management system with the endearing acronym



ANGEL (A New Global Environment for Learning) was used by 3000 faculty members last spring in a total of 6000 courses. More than 52,000 individuals took those courses, with many enrolling in two courses at once, bringing the grand total enrollment figure to more than 102,000. Those figures show that online teaching and learning are here to stay. But adapting to traveling around the country and the world while teaching and learning online raise challenges for faculty and students.

One of those students is Amanda Bukata, 22, of Schwenksville, who spent spring semester in Rome taking residential art courses at American University. She

had to use expensive Internet connections not only for e-mail but to enroll in two World Campus courses for the summer, a comparative literature course and a basic communications course that I teach. (That's how I "met" Bukata.) After two weeks of online Penn State learning in Rome, she returned to an internship in New York City and immediately signed up for cable service at \$120 a month so she could continue her online studies. When she used an Internet café in Europe, she usually

paid a pricey 5 euros for 15 minutes, which is about \$6 a quarter-hour or about \$24 an hour. The expense of keeping in touch online, whether abroad or stateside, affects all users, but students particularly should plan on some extra costs in their travel budgets.

Besides expense, finding an Internet connection is not always easy, as Mathews, an assistant professor of energy and geo-environmental engineering, can attest. He wrote to me this summer from Johannesburg, South Africa, to report that he was getting online only from the occasional Internet café or his hotel's business office his hotel, which had only one computer for which he had to pay \$15 an hour to use.

Mathews got no warning that his time was nearly up and, as he put it, his access would be rudely interrupted and instantaneously removed, forcing him to go off to purchase another \$15 payment card. He also had monitor problems caused by a bad power cord, about which he said, "A swift jiggle breathed new life into the beast."

I have been using some variation of the Internet and the World Wide Web in my classes since the early 1990s, when I required my newswriting students to turn in their stories via e-mail and established an account for my advisees so I could send them information. Those were the days before e-mail accounts were automatic and ubiquitous. Now students have more e-mail accounts than credit cards.

With the arrival of one course management system and then a better one and with additional assignments of teaching for the World Campus, I have connected with my residence ed and distance ed students from both ends of Australia, all over China, various cities in Spain, not to mention the homes of my daughters and stepdaughters in California, Idaho, Nevada, New York and North Carolina.

The domestic connections have been good. All four daughters now have high-speed Internet access. The son-in-law in California set up a laptop in the guest bedroom and the stepdaughter in Nevada put in a wireless router so visitors with laptops could check in while languishing in the hot tub on the deck outside the guest bedroom.

The international scene is more problematic. When I travel by air, I have a two-hands policy: Never take more luggage than you can tote in two hands, including a carry-on bag. (I made the rule after almost forgetting my briefcase, a third item, on a shuttle bus in an airport shuttle in San Francisco.) If I can fit my camera equipment and laptop into one carry-on bag, I'm OK, except the weight of the laptop (8 pounds by itself; 20 pounds when fully packed) and computer issues at security checkpoints have made me until now rely on hotel business offices and friends.

I'm rethinking that philosophy after two weeks in Spain, where every hotel I stayed in had unadvertised in-room high-speed Internet connections and a mediocre or no business office where I could connect (and have the added advantage of being able to download photos from my digital camera to free up memory space). And then there are the

increasing number of wireless connections in airports, which allow processing of course work and e-mail between flights. In fact, the international air terminal in Hong Kong provides free computers.

The last time I was in China, I had to deal with unbearably slow dial-up connections (a problem another faculty member reported having in Barcelona). In Perth, Western Australia, I couldn't even get into Penn State's Webmail because the hotel's computers did not have high enough security. Because I had free e-mail via msn.com, I could send the Webmail people at University Park a note to find out what was going on. When John Kalbach, manager of the Networking and Advanced Systems Group, Academic Services and Emerging Technologies, explained the problem, I was able to upgrade a friend's computer at the next stop, Sydney, and get to my course work and e-mail.

Mathews and I don't worry about time differences. In fact, I specify in my syllabus that everything takes place on Penn State time and have set my distance ed course to open and close sections automatically on specific dates at specific times. (I used to do it manually, which became problematic when I moved after retiring and wasn't always in sync with the chimes of Old Main.)

One of my students had a time shift problem this summer. She visited a friend in another time zone, changed the clock on her laptop to reflect the local time and missed deadlines (and lost points). As a matter of practice, I keep my computers on Mountain Time (my home zone), but have set up my computer calendar to show me two time zones—the one I live in and the one I'm visiting or doing business with.

All in all, things could be worse. Any traveler could end up in the wrong Internet café, such as the one in Shanghai where, according to the South China Morning Post, two employees were stabbed to death by 10 angry customers who refused to buy membership cards, which would have enabled them to stay overnight at lower rates.

No matter how it may at first seem, those who travel and teach or learn online need to be prepared for the unexpected when they want to go online. Except for waiting in line, it won't be the same thing as going to a computer lab on campus and signing on. And it will probably come with an expense. An up-to-date lightweight laptop is a good investment for those who travel.

The bottom line is this: With the heavy use of a popular course management system at Penn State, faculty may find themselves on the other end of the question when receiving online assignments: "It's Friday. Do I know where my students are?" Turnabout, of course, is fair play, and even more so in cyberspace.

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Tips

Despite my heavy reliance on technology, I never assume it will work 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, or that it won't obey the law of unintended consequences. So here are some tips.

1. Always have a back-up person who has editing rights to your course. A friend of mine at University Park checks into my World Campus course just to make sure message boards have opened and closed as scheduled. When you're in another country, it's not always easy to get online as frequently as it is in the United States.
2. Be careful how you use e-mail systems. When I was in Spain, I set up an autoreply message telling correspondents I wouldn't be responding promptly. Every piece of spam got an autoreply which in turn got me an error message saying the autoreply couldn't be delivered. I was inundated with e-mail when I got back to the United States.
3. That was my fault because I had set Webmail to leave the mail on the server. I don't do that anymore and if I do get e-mail I want to keep, I forward it to another account outside of Penn State.
4. A laptop is a good investment and you can buy a fairly lightweight wireless one for about \$1000. Given the rapidly increasing number of hotels and airports with wireless routers, a laptop beats relying on hotel business offices and crude airport terminals.
5. On my first stop in Spain in March, I discovered the hotel's only computer hidden behind some plants. To log on, you swiped a credit card. The swiping device did not work the entire three days we were at the hotel. But the hotel provided hard-wired connections in each room. If only I had lugged my laptop ...
6. If all you need to do is write, consider a QuickPAD, which has a 4-line screen, holds about 100 pages, weighs 2 pounds and runs on four AA batteries. I wrote two articles on mine while in Spain. Unfortunately, the QuickPAD can't connect to the Internet or store digital photos so its use is limited.