WIRED CAMPUS
The latest news on tech and education.

Popular Pearson Tutoring Programs Revamp by Offering 'Adaptive Learning'

November 1, 2011, 7:00 am

By Josh Fischman

MyLabs and Mastering, tutoring software packages from Pearson Education that are used in hundreds of college courses, are getting their guts ripped out and replaced.

The company announced today that it was replacing its own software with new adaptive-learning programs that adjust the course to the student. The new software, from a company called Knewton, has interactive tutors that lead students through mastery of each skill, giving short quizzes and offering additional help, such as explanatory text or videos, tailored to each student's needs. In large classes, students get such help—or can skip concepts they know well—without asking the instructor to intervene. And instructors get constant feedback on how particular students are doing compared to the rest of the class, or even similar classes at other institutions.

Pearson provides the content, and Knewton's program will control how it is delivered. (Instructors have the ability to set their own priorities and add their own material.) The two companies plan to begin beta testing this fall and to have programs ready for the fall semester of 2012.

Instructors greeted the news with a mix of enthusiasm and concern that changes would harm a product that they already like. "I've been very pleased with MyWritingLab," said David A. Webster, coordinator of development education at Marion Technical College, in Ohio. "I hope they don't break it!"

He teaches a course called "Preparation for College Writing" and says his students do much better after working with the software. But he also said that Knewton's ability to customize help choices sounded like a real improvement over the existing product.

Gary S. Buckley, a professor of physical sciences at Cameron University, in Oklahoma, uses Pearson's Mastering Chemistry and Mastering Physics in introductory courses, and said that "now the software doesn't really pay attention to the individual student. Everyone gets the same problems. So this sounds like a good change."

David Liu, chief operating officer of Knewton, said that "right now MyLabs just tests students at the beginning of a course and at the end." Not only will Knewton adapt the material at every step along the way, he said, but the vast number of students using Pearson products will provide a lot

more data about what works and what doesn't, because Knewton will be able to aggregate it. "We'll have better outcomes, and better results," he said.