

Published Friday, February 25, 2005

Sakai offers new classes server option

BY JEFF MUSKUS

Staff Reporter

Like many Yalies, Tyler Guth '08 and his peers in "Introductory Statistics" do their homework together. But unlike the small groups that frequently gather at Au Bon Pain or Koffee Too?, Guth said virtually his entire class chats about their assignments without ever leaving their rooms.

Guth is one of nearly 100 Yale students currently registered on Sakai, an open-source computer program designed to offer a more streamlined and user-friendly version of the University's classes server, Academic Media and Technology Director Charles Powell said Thursday. The software's pilot program at Yale, which began in January, includes 11 faculty members and seven courses in departments from Statistics to Chinese. Originally coded by developers from Stanford University, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the University of Michigan and Indiana University, Sakai is now in place at 66 institutions.

While the program is still relatively new at Yale, Powell said the response from students and faculty has been encouraging.

"The feedback, while not universally positive, has been fairly positive," Powell said. "So far the people we've talked to in detail have been quite pleased. It's a more feature-rich interface."

Powell said the pilot program marks an attempt by Yale Information Technology Services to synthesize the University's disparate online administrative services. In future builds, Sakai will be able to combine the course records found on the classes server with the financial statements and library account information currently found at the Student Information Services Web site, he said.

Statistics professor John Emerson said the software is in some ways an improvement for teachers as well as students.

"The ability to post announcements on the site and send e-mails to students at the same time has been tremendously useful," Emerson said. "To be fair, the class materials part is serving the same function as the classes server, but it's a much cleaner interface and it does a better job."

Still, Emerson said the beta version of Sakai, though a step forward from existing systems, is not without flaws.

"I'm hoping the grade book's capabilities will be improved within the next year," he said. "It seems to be designed to work with the electronic submission of homework, which is not fine for this course."

Powell said other complaints have included problems with RSS feeds – which syndicate news and the content of Web logs and other sites – and occasional formatting errors when using Microsoft's Internet Explorer. But the Yale pilot program is running Sakai version 1.0, and the software is constantly changing thanks to input from 66 universities worldwide, Sakai spokesman Jim Farmer said.

Among a dozen projects at individual partner universities, Farmer said, an enhanced grade book program is currently in development at the University of California at Berkeley, and programmers at Oxford, York and Hull universities are working to develop a search engine to comb the electronic libraries of participating institutions.

Regardless, some students said that for their needs, Sakai and classes will be functionally identical.

"I honestly don't notice much of a difference," Jessica Blick '07 said. "I look at my syllabus and that's about it."

Farmer said Sakai version 1.5 will be released next week, and Powell said he expects to run version 2.0 in the fall, when Sakai will be available for roughly half of all Yale courses. Yale became a Sakai partner last February, pledging \$10,000 annually with a three-year commitment.

Powell said the move towards Sakai does not mean the classes server will be gone anytime soon. He estimated it will take two years before ITS has the hardware to support a University-wide move to the new software, and said the final decision has not yet been made. But he said adopting Sakai would save considerable time and money.

"All the versions of classes were developed by faculty and people here, and it's been wonderful, but it's been around for a while," Powell said. "There's some sense that any product that's been on the market for five years like classes is in need of a major overhaul. Why do all that work ourselves?"