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Carnegie Mellon India

on 10 January 2001, 22:00
by Niall McKay

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At an Internet cafe in Delhi, India, up to 80 students sit pensively studying their computer screens. For some, it's just like any other Internet cafe, but for others it's a virtual university where they can take computer science courses offered by Pittsburgh's Carnegie Mellon University (CMU).

The new educational initiative is a collaboration between Sterling Infotech, an Indian Internet service provider, and Carnegie Technology Education, a subsidiary of the university, and is part of an ambitious program to train more than 100,000 Indian computer programmers at 100 locations over the next three years.

It also gives us a glimpse of the changes rippling through education. Universities with expertise in one area can now prepare, monitor, and grade courses given under local supervision in an entirely different location.

"The education model is more like, say, a Microsoft, Novell, or Cisco certification program than a traditional university course," says Allan Fisher, president and CEO of Carnegie Technology Education. "We build computer-based training courses drawing on the intellectual resources of the university, but local instructors [in India] monitor, administer, and assist the students."

The courses offered range from the basic, like software engineering, to the advanced, like object-oriented programming. "However, unlike software vendor training programs that would offer courses in Visual Basic or Java, we teach students how to work with any object-orientated language," says Mr. Fisher.

And why not? After all, Carnegie Mellon University has a global reputation as a center for excellence in computer science, and few would disagree that India turns out more than its fair share of talented computer programmers.

MODEL STUDENTS

Sterling Infotech is just one of about two dozen Carnegie Technology Education partners that range from City University in Hong Kong to Bellarmine University in Louisville, Kentucky, to the Sierra Nevada College at the ski resort town of Incline Village, Nevada.
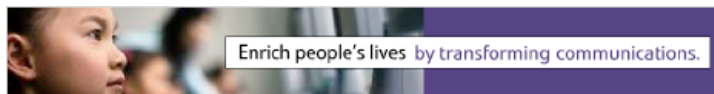
Mr. Fisher believes that many universities and community colleges will embrace the CMU model in the near future. One could imagine, for example, students at Carnegie Mellon taking an arts or humanities course prepared by, say, the University of California at Berkeley in exchange for a course offered by Carnegie Mellon in robotics.

So what about the technology? Well, mostly it's plain vanilla Web-based software, but the university is working on new technologies that will assist Mr. Fisher and his colleagues in their tasks.

For example, a branch of CMU's computer science department that specializes in developing advanced user interfaces called the Human-Computer Interaction Institute has developed artificial intelligence software that acts as an electronic tutor. It alerts students if they make a mistake and offers hints to help them if they are stuck. Furthermore, the university's media center is working on "synthetic interviews," which use automated cameras to capture the many hours of lectures given by famous professors. The lectures are stored in a huge database and indexed so that students can ask a question and have a video clip answer delivered to their desktop.

For the present, Mr. Fisher has decided Carnegie Technology Education should concentrate on Chinese- and Spanish-language versions and wait for broadband technologies before adding more complexity, such as video conference and multimedia, to the courses. From there, it will begin offering mid-career professionals online courses in topics like e-business.

DESIGNER COURSES

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Peripheral Madness
The living room is a jungle of plastic and wires – I say enough already.

Unlike many online education institutions, Carnegie Technology Education not only designs the course but also trains and certifies the instructors and monitors both the teachers' and students' progress.

Carnegie Mellon computer-science faculty members design the courses and personally select and train the local tutors who will teach the students at the partner institution. "The tutors then go back to the partner institution and teach the courses; we monitor their progress, and they have access to our computer-science faculty member to assist them with any difficulties," says Mr. Fisher.

If the student completes five courses successfully, they get a Carnegie Technology Education certificate in computer programming; if they complete ten courses, they get a certificate in software engineering.

But it's not cheap. Each course module costs the Indian student $180, nearly three months' earnings for those on minimum wage. However, Sterling Infotech offers students their money back if they do not get a job within three months of completing the course.

Still, in a country like India, where less than 3 percent of the 100,000 applicants each year are accepted to the six universities that offer computer science degrees, such new educational approaches offer the way and the means for people to gain valuable skills that will enable them to participate in the global workplace.

Topics: Carnegie, India, Mellon

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One company is feeling the love because of Nintendo's Wii storage solution: Telltale's Strong Bad.

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GDC 09 Keynote: What About Wii?
Satoru Itawa's keynote touched on both systems, but it seems like the Wii got the short end of the stick.

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