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A class anytime you wish

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Imagine college life where students get to take classes at 2 a.m., in their dorm room, while eating a pizza and listening to music.

It may sound like a dream, but it’s reality for a group of Northwestern University students. They are among the first in the country to use high-speed Internet connections and their personal computers to take French, German and Spanish from the comfort of their dorm room. More than 300 students are taking advantage of the upgraded technology to skip two classroom meetings a week and, instead, do the class work in their residence halls or apartments.

The students still meet in class twice a week to be able to practice their conversational skills and take exams, but they work on skills such as pronunciation on their own, by imitating speakers on video clips.

“I’m a really visual learner, so this is great for me,” said Tanya Colburn, a freshman from Philadelphia, who was scrolling through a French class recently on her computer in her residence hall, Willard Residential College.

Instead of watching a professor in class, Colburn, 18, watched a video clip of a man describing fishing in Normandy, all in French. She finished the lesson as her roommate browsed the Web on her own computer a few feet away.

“The only downside is that, having this ability to get online and do the work whenever you want, means I always tend to put it off till the last minute,” Colburn said. “Then everyone’s online at midnight, and if the network crashes, we’re in trouble.”

But Colburn’s roommate, Cynthia Wang, 18, sounded a little envious as she talked about the online French class.

“That’s really cool,” said Wang of Thousand Oaks, Calif. “Although I don’t mind going to class that much, it would be nice not to have to go and be able to do some of it on the computer.”

The students using a high-speed Internet connection, called switched Ethernet, see and hear film clips for their classes on computers.
“It's still intensive class work, because they're focusing and speaking, practicing their pronunciation, and learning about culture at the same time,” said Janine Spencer, a French professor.

Professors are able to check what time students are online doing their work and how long they were doing class work.

Students have passwords to log in to the class. Professors tell students not to tell anyone else their password, and trust them to do their own work, Spencer said.

Northwestern will be studying the impact of technology on how students learn.

The students in the classes took a test the first day of class, and will take another test at the end of class, measuring what they learned. Those results will be compared with test results from students in traditional foreign language classes, Spencer said.

Students in American Studies and political science also are using the network to access “The Video Encyclopedia of the 20th Century,” which includes more than 5,500 video clips from 1893 to 1985, showcasing the social and political history of the United States.

For students who grew up using computers, taking classes online seems natural.

“Sometimes when my roommate and I want to give each other some information, like a phone number or message, we just e-mail each other, even though we're sitting right across the room from each other,” Colburn said.

“I think it's fabulous we’re able to do some of the class work on our own computers,” she said. “We're really lucky to have this.”

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