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Hopkins students take course to design Facebook apps

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Andrew Ratner | On Blogs
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The Johns Hopkins University students formed a frenzied hive around classmate Linmiao Xu and his Facebook page, but they weren't checking out the latest gossip on the Homewood campus.

They were marveling last week at "Mosayick," a new Facebook application that potentially could create mosaic pictures made up of thousands of an individual's online photographs. Xu, of Albany, N.Y., developed it with another student, Billy Prin, in a January term course that just concluded at Hopkins. Students aimed to develop new, and perhaps profitable, tools for the popular social-networking site that Mark Zuckerberg launched as an undergrad at Harvard University five years ago. Facebook now has 150 million users, and its growth beyond the college set is helping it become one of the top dozen busiest Web sites in the U.S.

The Hopkins' two-credit course was formally titled "Developing Photo and Video Applications for Online Social Network," but informally it was "Facebook 101."

Other projects from the class were equally intriguing. "TextTrade" was designed to help students get a better deal when they sell textbooks they no longer need. "Admirer" was an effective way to sort photos of friends. And "FaceMerge" would show what two people might look like merged together as a third person. You wouldn't have to procreate to see how your child might look all grown up (which might do more for abstinence than all the billboard campaigns).

Andrew Ratner
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"Me and my friends are on Facebook every other hour," said one of the FaceMerge creators, Minhaj Chowdhury, showing off his work in the university's computer lab as students passed outside on Decker Quad. "It's the most useful platform of our generation."

Whether the students will have success marketing their creations is uncertain, but developers of the top uses for networks like Facebook and MySpace or Apple's iPhone are attracting major investment. Slide of San Francisco, a leading maker of Facebook apps and widgets, attracted $50 million last year from investors. Rockyou, another app developer, raised $35 million. By Facebook's own estimate, 140 new applications are launched each day.

Carol Reiley, who taught the course with fellow graduate student Daniel Mirota, said the students can market their new apps by using their own network of friends to spread their work. If they build a large base of users, they might earn money through advertising or by getting a percentage from companies like Amazon or Ticketmaster that get sent customers from a particular application.

"It used to be the vision of an engineer was someone sitting in an office, anti-social maybe, a nerd, but the new engineer, you need marketing skills, sociology, entrepreneurial skills; you have to learn how to get funding. This course could encompass all those skills. That was our motivation for teaching it," Reiley said.

The course had two preconditions: Students had to use the "open-source" platform that Facebook makes available to anyone to design new applications, and no "sex or violence." Simplicity, the instructors advised the budding designers, was key.

Charles Duyk, a Hopkins freshman from Sonoma, Calif., explained the impetus behind "Photo Search," an app he developed with Scott Morse and Larry Walters. While many people have hundreds of "friends" on Facebook, in truth most people have maybe a few dozen real friends, he explained. The Photo Search tool would allow people to automatically sort through all the photos on any of their friends' pages for all shots that include the same group of a few of them.

Computer-science sophomores Paul Martin of Rehoboth, Mass., and Spencer Powell of Doylestown, Pa., showed off TextTrade, which works with Amazon.com's market for used

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textbooks. The benefit, they said, was that it made it easier to find local people who might want to buy or sell textbooks. That meant, potentially, the transaction could happen faster, maybe at less cost and for cold hard cash.

Mirota, the co-instructor, chuckled at the thought of the last day of class when Chowdhury, Fawaz Nasser Ahmed and Yu "Charlie" Ouyang projected a photo at the front of the class of their FaceMerge app. It showed the two instructors as if they had merged into one, less-than-flattering, androgynous-looking person. Fortunately for the students, their teachers had a sense of humor - and they didn't have to decide on a letter grade. The class was given on a "pass-or-fail" basis.

"We wanted them to develop something to use not just for the Hopkins community, but that someone could use anywhere in the world," said Reiley, who wasn't sure what to expect for a first-time course that only lasted three weeks. "It completely blew my mind."

Other facebook apps for students

Organization
Box files: 1GB account of free online storage for uploading audio, documents and photos.

Calendar: A calendar application by 30 Boxes. Helps you get organized and easily share all or parts of your schedule.

Productivity
To Do List: Helps you organize.

Docs: An easy way of uploading and storing your docs (homework, research papers, etc.) online and on Facebook.

Finance
Jobster: An app for finding a job after college. Get personalized job alerts based on your career interests. Post your resume online and search for jobs across the Web.

Roomster: The housing finder for college students. Post and search apartments, roommates and sublets.

Communication
SkypeMe: Using this app, students can call each other for free (over the Internet) with a Skype account.

Social
I am Hungry: A way to connect with other friends/students and make plans for lunch and dinner. Post when you're hungry and what you're craving, and check out what your friends are craving, too.

Bar Book: A Facebook app that allows you to find and browse bars and clubs and add your favorites to display on your profile. You can view your friends' favorite hangouts and find other people who are bar regulars.

Superwall: A wall that your whole college can add to and see (example: The Great Wall of Stanford).

College Football: For students and fans who attend college football games, see which of your friends are going to the game and let them know what games you're attending.

Source: CampusGrotto.com

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