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CAMPUS TECHNOLOGY FOCUS

American University Innovates with New Cameras from Sony

After a lifetime of first-hand experience reporting news from the field, Larry Engel, associate professor of communications at American University (DC), was convinced that reliable and lightweight technology was critical to the experience.

It's no wonder, then, that Engel was at the forefront of a recent effort to standardize the institution's School of Communication on a series of new tools from Sony (www.sony.com/education).

The new tools, a grand total of 12 handheld PMW-EX1 and PMW-EX3 HD cameras, are smaller than traditional cameras but a vast improvement over the old way of doing things. American officials made the purchase as part of an overarching effort to modernize the studios, where students learn the basics of television and film production in classes such as "Advanced Documentary" and "Narrative Production."

"These new cameras are tapeless, there are much fewer moving parts and they draw less energy from the batteries," says Engel, who doubles as the associate director of the school's Center for Environmental Filmmaking. "I look to this as the kind of equipment that can expedite convergence and reduce replacement costs over time."

The first batch of cameras—nine EX1s—arrived last summer, and were put into use immediately through a series of institution-funded field trips.

Through a Center for Environmental Filmmaking program called "Classroom in the Wild," Engel took 12 students to Alaska, where they put together a documentary about survivability training.

In the spring, a second "Classroom in the Wild" adventure landed different students in the Galapagos Islands, where they used the cameras to put together narrative work. One group chose to produce a short film on the

issue of shark-finning. Another group made a documentary on how outside pressures impact animal behavior. A third group highlighted species encroachment.

"In both cases, the cameras made capturing information easier than it would have been on larger and heavier cameras we've used in the past," Engel explains. "Beside: what we got was in HD."

Prof. Bill Gentile even took two of the cameras with him to Afghanistan on assignment for PBS titled "Afghanistan: The Forgotten War." The cameras performed masterfully; Gentile's piece is up for a national Emmy this year.

Nowadays, the EX1s are

used mainly in the production studio, resting on tripods so they are not damaged. The cameras also recently were complemented by three EX3s, which will be used as replacements for old and dying standard-definition studio cameras that American has had since the 1980s.

Financing this technology certainly wasn't easy. The school opted to pay out of pocket, purchasing the equipment outright instead of leasing it.

Another challenge: resistance. Engel says that while students liked the new cameras instantly, a number of faculty members were skeptical to make jump into a new format (HD) and new cameras at a time when budget concerns ran rampant.

"Once they experienced the images and the technology up close, they were much more comfortable and we felt it was the right way to go," Engel notes.

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