Thursday, September 22, 2011
IU professor launches pioneering social network for classrooms

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
Sept. 22, 2011

INDIANAPOLIS -- If it were an idea for a movie, it might be pitched as the social network meets the global classroom. And should all go according to script, this new online learning environment would soon be showcased at a college, university and high school near you.

The latest brainchild of Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis computer scientist and serial entrepreneur Ali Jafari, CourseNetworking (CN) is a free, online platform that connects teachers and students from around the world based on shared interests and class subjects. It combines the social component of popular networks such as Facebook and Twitter with similar functionality of existing learning management systems (LMS) used at many colleges and universities.

Unlike existing learning systems, though, which typically limit access to members of a single course, CN creates an active, large-scale learning environment that is completely open to any user, nationally and internationally.

Owned in part by IU, and headquartered in Indianapolis, the CN Company will invite 40 academic institutions -- including 20 from the U.S. and 20 from other countries around the world -- to invest in and become equity owners in the company and to intellectually contribute to refining the software environment. CN will offer its platform to all users free of charge, Jafari said, and it will generate revenue through targeted advertising that is relevant and of benefit to the system's users. Advertising might include information about degree programs at educational institutions and upcoming conferences and events.

After two decades of introducing several highly successful learning management systems -- including ANGEL Learning, created with an initial $130,000 IU investment and purchased in 2009 by Blackboard Inc. for $100 million -- Jafari believes the new venture has the potential for high success both as a return on investment and the creation of a totally new learning model in today's social networking world.

"Many students and teachers have tried to leverage existing social networks for learning with little success," said Jafari, a professor of computer and information technology and director of the CyberLab at the IUPUI School of Engineering and Technology. "Platforms such as Facebook and Twitter are designed for much broader socializing and information sharing, whereas the sole focus of CN is improved learning through learning collaboration and networking. All functionality within the system is designed with that goal in mind and strives to make shared learning as easy as possible for all its users."

CN's software platform, which is expected to be available next spring as an SaaS (software-as-a-service) solution, is intended to complement existing learning management systems widely used in higher education. Those LMS systems include IU's homegrown Oncourse system. Oncourse enables students and faculty in a particular course to access syllabi and grades, communicate via course mail, chat rooms and discussion forums, access online quizzes and surveys, and store electronic files.

The primary purpose of CN, Jafari insists, is not course "management," but networking beyond the walls of the classroom that is open and free to everyone throughout the world. Once they're in the CN environment, users can share notes, reading materials and articles, collaborate on homework assignments and socialize with other virtual classmates around the world studying the same subject.

"One of the biggest advantages of this new model for learning is it transforms the regular classroom into a global classroom," Jafari said. "No longer is it just you, your classmates and your teacher. Now it's you, your classmates, your teacher and your virtual classmates and teachers from all over the world. CN

introduces the intercultural learning experience and offers more opportunities for educational collaboration with international universities. With this, the CN is expected to invent and introduce a totally new pedagogical framework for online learning."

Jafari has envisioned, created and commercialized three major software systems, which today compete among a dozen nationally known LMS and ePortfolio products. His projects include Oncourse, ANGEL Learning and Epsilen Environment, the latter of which is majority-owned by the New York Times Co.

"This exciting new venture is an extension of the strategic investments colleges and universities, including Indiana University, have made in open-source learning management systems for more than a decade," said IU President Michael A. McRobbie. "IU is proud to have taken a leadership role in the creation of several of these networks, which have made a transformational difference in the way students learn and professors teach. Dr. Jafari's new concept and system promises to encourage even more active learning and engagement, ultimately producing better educated, more culturally aware students who are prepared to compete and thrive in today's increasingly competitive global marketplace."

"This new and innovative business model allows academic institutions to have input in the design and commercialization of the product they use, creating a system that is truly designed and led by educators for educators," said IU Vice President for Engagement Bill Stephan. "It's a business model that's unique to the academic world, but has proven successful to several social networks to date."

Tony Armstrong, IU associate vice president and president and CEO of the IU Research and Technology Corp., added, "Professor Jafari's project represents a dedication to innovation that has made IU a recognized leader in creating networking solutions for higher education and a key contributor to the state of Indiana emerging as a major force in the global economy."

To make CN user-friendly and familiar, Jafari said he has incorporated features similar to those of popular social networks.

To participate, users only need Internet access and an e-mail address, and it will take instructors only minutes to set up course sites for their students. CN will also feature a "reward" system, Jafari said, to incentivize use by students and create a healthy, fun competition similar to tools such as Foursquare.

Unlike other popular social networks, CN gives users complete privacy control over the flow of information, allowing them to decide how open or restricted access to information should be. Users can restrict access to information to registered classmates or connections, or make it visible to the entire global community. The CN will also offer a self-policing environment that discourages inappropriate, unaccepted or improper posting of content and files.

"Many instructors have been uncomfortable promoting Facebook as a complement to classroom activity because of the openness of that network," Jafari said. "We are putting parts of Facebook and Twitter into one packet, but very purposefully designing it for academic use and making sure academic requirements such as FERPA (the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act) are built into it. If an instructor doesn't want certain information to be seen by other classes, it won't happen."

Visit the CourseNetworking company site at http://CourseNetworking.com. To learn more about Ali Jafari, visit http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ali_Jafari.

For more information on IU economic development and engagement initiatives, go to http://innovate.indiana.edu.