Heralding a Digital Curriculum
at Chiang Mai University

Chiang Mai is a land of misty mountains and colorful hill tribes, a playground for seasoned travelers, a paradise for shoppers and a delight for adventurers. It is also the home of Chiang Mai University (CMU)—one of Thailand's foremost institutions of higher education, where nature nurtures intelligence.

Taking A Digital First Approach

CMU is on a mission to provide world-class education powered by technology and supported by a digital campus. Driving this change is Assoc. Prof. Dr. Thanomporn Laohajaratsang whose vision as IT Director is to enable students to not only access technology but also to make it an integral part of the curriculum.

Dr. Laohajaratsang is passionate about technology. So much so, she believes asking students to leave their digital devices outside the classroom is akin to asking them to stop breathing. " Today, students are prepared to try, explore and innovate. They learn by doing and can swipe or type faster than they can write. These are essential skills for the 21st century. If we are not preparing the students for a digital life, we are reversing their growth," Dr. Laohajaratsang says.

From Midnight Learning to Virtual Learning

When the water rises, hurry to get some – an old Thai proverb that perfectly describes Dr. Laohajaratsang situation with technology. She realized early that a smart network is the single most important enabler of fast and efficient response towards the needs of staff and students. This realization occurred when she initiated her first virtual learning classroom at CMU, after finishing her doctorate in designing the future of learning with technology in 1999.

" I started the class and the network would not work. This happened not once, but on several occasions. The network was slow and patchy, and one of my students remarked that the initiative was not virtual learning but midnight learning—since the only time we could access the network was at midnight," she recalls.

However, Dr. Laohajaratsang persisted—albeit very slowly and painfully—to incorporate technology into the curriculum through midnight learning. "As we struggled with the poor network, a persistent thought that ran through my mind was, no matter what insights I have, no matter what knowledge I have gained, no matter how willing my students are to learn, if we do not have a strong network that supports this, it all falls apart," she reminisces.

A Network to Power the Vision

A vision without action is merely a dream.Today, CMU is leading the way with a 10-Gigabit Ethernet network solution that provides highly secure wireless access to students and staff. This pervasive and secure wireless network has 2,700 access points. Each works together to provide internet speeds of up to 5 gigabits per second, and can handle at least 100,000 devices at any given time.

" Now that every area of the university is connected, we are getting closer to our vision. With a good network, we are able to incorporate innovative approaches to differentiate our institution and attract students by incorporating technology into teaching and learning. Faculty and student can now focus on what they can do best—teaching and learning," adds Dr. Laohajaratsang.

With the base infrastructure in place, Dr. Laohajaratsang can create a digital force that moves CMU towards its vision." This force constitutes of five key areas: digital infrastructure, digital learning, digital administration, digital students and staff, and digital security," she adds.

Inspired by Ubiquitous Connectivity

Dr. Laohajaratsang observed that while most of her students walk into the classroom with their mobile phones, they are not able to use their devices for learning. Dr. Laohajaratsang however, sees an opportunity she feels is too good to pass up.

 "My students love social media. They have access to devices outside the classroom. This is an opportunity to create a rich, collaborative learning experience focused around authentic, project-based learning," she says excitedly. Dr. Laohajaratsang's dream is to create learning experiences that can occur almost anywhere and at any time.

"If we want to meet our vision to be ranked in the top 50 universities in Asia Pacific in the next five to ten years, we have to give our students 21st century skills. If we want to give them 21st century skills, something has to enable that or else we will still talk about everything but not be able to achieve anything," she remarks with strong conviction.

For the current generation of students, most of these experiences are digital by nature.

"We have students from different countries in this university. We cannot make them feel that they don't have access to a smart life when other universities are doing so. They also need to be connected to their family and friends despite being in Chiang Mai. The increasing number of international students in our campus reassures us that we are providing the infrastructure that will set the foundation for becoming a digital university," says Dr. Laohajaratsang.

Savoring the High

While creating a more dynamic learning environment may seem challenging, Dr. Laohajaratsang savors the many successes on this journey.

"A few months ago, we organized an orientation for new students. I arrived at the auditorium filled with 3000 students. After welcoming them to CMU, I showed them a video on 'Digital Life @ CMU'. The video ran for around nine minutes and took the students through their digital life not just in the classroom but in the campus. As the video ended, I was thrilled to see the students clap, and cheer with broad smiles on their face. It was like a concert in the auditorium. Now, that is what I call creating experiences. These experiences are also my happiest moments," she said contently.

Education is a complex process. It demands the very best from parents, teachers, students, and administrators. However, a great platform can greatly accelerate them towards reaping the benefits of their hard work. With the right foundations (a fast, secure, reliable, and integrated network) you get a platform that not only allows them to fulfill their potential, but also allows them to reach their end goals – a quality education.