You can’t smell the chalk dust. You can’t hear classmates turning the pages of their books. But you know learning is taking place in the fully online master’s degree programs at the San José State University School of Library and Information Science. You can see it when students use their mobile devices to download instructor lectures. You can hear it when students gather in online forums to discuss emerging trends or collaborate on assignments.

Many students choose online learning because it’s convenient, giving them the flexibility they need to fit coursework around other responsibilities, regardless of where they live or work. Yet is it inspirational? Engaging? Relevant? “I believe it all depends on the caliber of the online experience,” said Dr. Michael Stephens, an assistant professor at SJSU SLIS, who teaches courses on transformative learning for students in the School’s Master of Library and Information Science (MLIS) program.

“I work to create an online learning environment that fosters rich interaction between students and encourages them to interact with me,” explained Stephens, who recently shared his insights during the School’s annual faculty institute, where nearly 100 instructors met to share exemplary practices in online teaching. Although SLIS provides access to cutting edge tools to deliver class content, along with instructor training and support to streamline implementation, “the best teachers understand that technology use in coursework is not just for the sake of technology but to extend and enhance the learning process,” said Stephens.

What technology tools does Stephens implement in his courses to create an engaging, inspiring learning environment? Students interact on blogs, wikis, and other social media. “On the go and from anywhere, my students can participate via their smartphone or tablet,” said Stephens. “Posting a picture, a link, or just a brief thought about class content can happen anywhere.”

Stephens delivers recorded lectures that combine slides, text, and video into a rich, media-based web experience. He also records short video updates for his students using his smartphone, which he uploads to YouTube for easy student access.
Students also use emerging technology to complete assignments. They still write traditional papers and essays, but they also use tools like desktop video capture and web-based multimedia programs to share their work with instructors and peers. Additionally, class assignments may involve developing a web page, an online tutorial, or an application for a mobile device. “I believe a focus on play and experimentation is needed for 21st century learning success,” said Stephens, echoing the perspective of other SLIS faculty, who recognize the need to prepare students for the world they will work in after graduation.

SLIS instructors continuously explore new ways to use emerging technology to create an engaging learning environment, and many courses have a specific focus on technology. For example, some of the School’s newest electives cover data mining, web analytics, information visualization, technology forecasting, tablet programming, curation of new digital media, and use of mobile devices in information environments.

Before they dive into their first courses, all SLIS students are introduced to the School’s technology in a guided learning experience. According to student Adele Reid, this low-stress and highly supported exposure to the technology required to succeed in the program makes all the difference to new students. In addition to instructors, the sessions are supported by current students, who serve as teaching assistants. These peer mentors help new students practice using the technology embedded in SLIS courses. “Access to peer mentors also gives new students the opportunity to discuss concerns, frustrations, and hesitations experienced by some students new to online learning,” said Reid. “I’ve experienced similar levels of support throughout the program, including access to a multitude of online tutorials, as well as personal support via discussion forums, email, and phone calls.”

SLIS student Kate Tasker values a learning environment where she’s introduced to a range of communication tools and diverse learning experiences. “I have the opportunity to learn from people across the country and around the world,” said Tasker. “Although my instructors and classmates may live in different time zones or on different continents, we exchange ideas and perspectives via live web conferences, recorded audio lectures, screencasts, email, discussion forums, instant messaging, and social networks. Using these communication technologies in the learning environment is fun, and it’s also part of my training as a real-world information professional.”

“Let the learning begin: slisweb.sjsu.edu