Rosedale Bible College faculty member Phil Barr is in the classroom, teaching Principles of Biblical Interpretation, a course he’s led many times before. His students sit at their tables, listening and taking notes on their laptops. Nothing unusual there.

And yet, something is different.

A small black camera with a techno-blue light stare at Barr from the back of the room, recording the lecture for his other class: eight students who live in five different states. This class – Barr’s online students – will sit down at their computers sometime after 5 p.m., at home or in the local coffee shop, to view his lecture and respond to questions about its content online.

These students are willing guinea pigs in RBC’s first foray into the world of online education. They are pastors, lay leaders, parents, and students who want to earn college credit without having to rearrange their lives for four months.

Why are they taking this course? Jeremy Lehman, associate pastor at Pond Bank Mennonite Church in Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, wants to complete his pastoral studies degree at Rosedale. Taking the course online makes it easier on his family, he says, “because we don’t need to uproot for the weeks or months that it would take to be in school full time.”

Bob Zachrich of London, Ohio, cites RBC’s affordability and the ability to transfer credits. This class will give him three more credit hours toward his degree at Urbana University at about half the cost.

Former RBC board member Roger Hazen, a longtime advocate of online education (and pastor of Pineview
Mennonite in Vassar, Michigan), is taking the class for two reasons. “I pushed hard every year I was on the board to get it going,” he says, “so I wanted to continue to support it. But I also like to work hard – once in a while! – to continue my education.”

Hazen isn’t the only person who’s been advocating online learning at RBC. Academic Dean Phil Weber has been a fan of taking classes online since the mid-nineties, when he lived and worked in Alabama. To qualify to teach at RBC, he explains, “I had to get a master’s degree while working full time and with three small children in the house.”

He began studying online with Asbury Theological Seminary in Kentucky and had a very positive experience. “I learned a great deal,” he says, “and it gave me the start I needed to be able to finish my degree at the University of Mobile.”

Weber arrived at RBC in January 2002, convinced that the college ought to do online learning. Now that he’s academic dean, he says, he wants to “put his energies where his words are.”

Taking classes online is a growing phenomenon, with some experts predicting as many as 25 million post-secondary students logging on by 2015 in the U.S. (Campus Technology, March 2011, p. 10). Weber is excited to see the college become a part of that educational trend.

To move ahead with the program, the school needed approval from its accrediting institution, the Association for Biblical Higher Education (ABHE). Phil Barr put together the substantive change request and submitted it to ABHE last September.

In November, ABHE approved the request. Once the school got the go-ahead, IT staff person Jesse Diller began to tackle the many technical challenges of delivering an education online: wiring the classroom, experimenting with cameras and audio, and straightening out technical glitches when they occur.

RBC offered this first course at a significant discount, knowing that the school would need to work out some technical issues over the semester. A few issues have come up with the video and audio portions of the course, but student Lehman says he’s “been impressed by the team there at Rosedale in their efforts to make the class as smooth and hassle-free as possible.”

Darrell Stevens of Fairlawn Mennonite in Apple Creek, Ohio, enjoys working with Moodle, the open-source (free) course management system that RBC uses to deliver the class online. “I download the lectures on MP3, listen to them, take notes and offer a lecture response.”

**Commenting on what he likes best about learning online, Stevens responds, “The class, Principles in Biblical Interpretation.” He teaches numerous Bible studies and says this class will strengthen his “biblical exegesis and hermeneutical skills.”**

Stevens adds that he appreciates Phil Barr’s “knowledge, wit and humor.” Lehman agrees, saying he values Barr’s “knowledge base and honesty.”

Barr himself is already thinking about ways he can improve the course in its online incarnation. Moodle allows teachers to design their courses, and he had to decide how he wanted to shape the material: topically, chronologically, or as programmed instruction.

He chose a chronological approach. “I’m trying to keep...”
the class as similar to the one we offer our resident students as possible,” he says. Once the course is over and students have provided feedback, he’ll have a better idea of how to structure it next time.

What’s it like to teach with a camera staring you down? “I’m used to it now,” he says, smiling, “but it was a little bit disconcerting at first.”

Although Barr’s in-class students tend to forget the camera, their online counterparts can still see them in the classroom, and some of them miss not being able to interact with classmates. “I can’t quite pick up on the personalities in the class, and I miss that,” says Stevens.

Hazen agrees. “I don’t get the interaction with the other students that I enjoyed while at RBC.” Zachrich adds, “It is a bit frustrating when I have a question regarding the material or have something to share. Posting to a forum is just not the same. As an extrovert, this is rough.”

Yet these students are positive about the process in general. “The flexibility is great, but the course itself is very interesting,” says Zachrich. “It’s a practical course for anyone interested in studying the Bible.”

That’s music to Phil Weber’s ears. He sees online education as a great way to help ministers and lay people increase their understanding of the Bible. “The things we teach here can benefit a whole range of people who can’t step outside of their . . . lives and become residential students,” he says.

Weber believes that Rosedale courses can help people better understand their Anabaptist faith heritage, and that this kind of learning can strengthen “their ability to minister in their world.”

Part of Weber’s motivation in advocating online learning has been his “desire to increase the ways in which the college serves the conference.” To that end, RBC conducted a survey last summer of CMC ministers to determine the level of interest in online education and to find out what courses people would like to take.

Based on the results of this survey, RBC will be offering three of its signature courses in the upcoming fall semester, including Principles of Biblical Interpretation, Romans and one course geared to pastoral leaders. Classes are open to all.

Steve Swartz, CMC’s general secretary, is delighted that RBC is going online and believes “it will be a tremendous resource to Conservative Mennonite Conference.”

Conference moderator Bob Yoder concurs: Long an advocate of education with an Anabaptist perspective, Yoder welcomes online learning at RBC. It will allow, he says, “all of our pastors coming in to receive that kind of perspective.”

Many of the “new pastors coming in vary substantially on our peace position,” he says. “This is changing our theological perspective.” There is a risk, he says, of “losing our identity.” Offering RBC courses online is “a good way to address that issue,” he says.