Student-taught courses in experimental stage

By Lee Giguere

Three experimental student-taught subjects are being offered at MIT this term.

The classes are the first part of a one-year experiment, limited to five classes per term, being conducted by the Committee on Educational Policy to determine the feasibility of subjects "initiated and taught by students."

A joint student-faculty committee set up by the CEP is supervising the program and is charged to report to them at the end of the term.

This semester, classes in "American Folk Music," "Urban Problems and Actions," and "Political Development in Revolutionizing Societies: China and Cuba" are being taught by students. Robert Lidral '71 and Jeffrey Chasin '70 are conducting the folk music class, Susan Shirk G and Carol Bengel-dorf G, the political development class, and a group of the Urban Action Fellows the urban problems class.

Classes going well

According to Professor of Philosophy Richard Cartwright, chairman of the Committee on Student-Taught Courses, the courses have been going well so far, and he feels that "if the quality is as good next term, there is a strong possibility that the experiment will be recommended for continuation."

The courses were designed and are being carried out in different ways, but the student-teachers asserted that they found it a satisfying and interesting experience.

Robert Lidral said that his folk music class developed because he had wanted to take a similar subject but had found that none was taught. He felt that he learned a lot more than he had expected to. Most of the students in his class are very interested in the field, he said, and "don't really care where they get the information from."

The course is being graded A/B/F, with strict minimum requirements, based on either a paper, a short talk, or a record of information gathered during the courses, but Lidral did not foresee much difficulty in having to assign grades.

Result of discussions

Susan Shirk said that the class she is teaching with Carol Bengel-dorf grew out of discussions they had on Cuba and China. They felt that they had so much to say to each other that they wanted to teach a class in the subject. They originally attempted to set it up as a subject within the Political Science Department, but were unsuccessful until they contacted the CEP. Miss Shirk found that teaching the class has really motivated her to "understand the subject," and has left her feeling good about being productive.

She feels that people who are taking the course are enthusiastic about the material and that her class is more relaxed than the usual classes. She said that the class is "sort of a group effort, but the teachers are recognized as such."

Geoff Dean '70, one of the Urban Action Fellows, said that their course originated through information from Gary Gut, who is a Fellow and on the CEP. He noted that the course is "designed to introduce possible Urban Fellows to the problems we see," and how to deal with them. The course covers the areas of health, education, housing, welfare, and transportation, and each of the students is expected to do five hours of field work with some community agency. The field work, he said, provides input for the class and experience to back up discussion. Dean "is being a teacher and likes the fact that nobody has "absolute authority." The students, he feels, respond pretty well, and he said that they are having quite a different, the process of what goes on in the class does not differ very much from other classes.

Students more open

Gary Gut '70, another of the Urban Fellows teaching the class, said that "they don't quite lived up to my expectation in doing student-teacher distinctions."

Gut hopes, however, that he is learning a lot more himself. He also pointed out that the students have to take a lot more responsibility in the class and hence behave differently. He, like Susan Shirk, felt that students are more open in student-taught classes.

Both the political development and the urban action classes are being graded pass-fail.

The procedure for setting up a class involves the preparation of a written proposal of the syllabus. The charge of the committee calls on it to evaluate the intellectual value of the subject and the qualifications of the student teacher. Emphasis is given to the belief that a student should not endanger his own academic standing because he is teaching. The syllabus must include a "detailed statement of the content of the subject" and provide an outline of the material and the speed with which it will be covered.

Each class is required to have a faculty "monitor." This semester, the monitors have been suggested by the student-teachers and approved by the committee. The monitors sit in on the classes but do not participate. Associate Professor of Political Science Donald Blackman, director of the political development class, has been "helpful but not obtrusive," according to Susan Shirk. He had talked with them while they were formulating the subject, and now the tendency is for them to ask his advice rather than for him to feel he has to criticize. The Urban Fellows are "getting on" with their monitor, Louis Menard, Executive Officer of the Political Science Department. He lets them run the class pretty much on their own, but provides feedback on what happens in out-of-class meetings.

The Committee on Student-Taught Subjects is now seeking proposals for the fall term, which must be in by April 15 so that it will have sufficient time to evaluate them. Cartwright feels that his committee needs approximately six weeks to consider proposals and noted that there was insufficient time to set up this semester's program.

Students may teach any subject in which they are qualified, and Cartwright feels that this could result in the "development of legitimate subject matters which have not yet been incorporated in university curricu-lum."