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Robots, Computers And Education

Students assigned their own personal robots.

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By John Teresko

Microsoft's contribution to a new, more pervasive age of robotics also involves working closely with the goals of many top universities and research institutions. One example is Microsoft's sponsorship of The Personal Robots in Education initiative at the Georgia Institute of Technology in Atlanta.

Georgia Tech's goals, says associate professor Tucker Balch, initiative director, are to invigorate the school's computer science curriculum. And teaming students with computers and robots is doing it. For example, beginning in January, 30 students taking the mandatory introductory computer science course began to learn about computers by programming their individually assigned table-top robot. By the fall, participating students will increase to 1,000 per semester. By next year, Balch says the approach could involve hundreds of universities. Currently, Microsoft is also working with Bryn Mawr College and Carnegie Mellon University.



Microsoft table-top robot

By switching course focus from theoretical concepts to practical applications, Georgia Tech is targeting greater student enthusiasm, says Balch. He says Georgia Tech hopes to both reduce student failure rates and motivate greater interest in studying computer technology.

Balch says the declining number of computer science enrollments is becoming a national competitive issue. He estimates numbers have decreased almost 50% since the turn of the century.

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