Talent for talking makes technician voice of IT Express

People hear of Derrik Arenal even before they meet him. That is, they hear his voice—and like it.

For five years, Arenal has recorded all the voice messages for IT Express, the campus tech help desk. That’s not why UC Davis hired him, but he has a talent for it, backed by stints in radio, film and TV when he was growing up.

Arenal graduated from Southern Illinois University in 1999 with a degree in avionics technology. He was hired by Information and Educational Technol-

ogy in 2000 as a Data Center operator and webmaster, and still works in its operations unit. His duties include over-seeing operations in the center’s ma-chine room, developing and changing Web-site content, and handling service requests from system administrators and other campus clients.

His skills on the phone gained him the unofficial title of “voice of IT Express” from his previous boss, Mark Stinson, now client services manager for IET’s Data Center and Client Ser-

vices. Stinson tapped Arenal because callers who had talked to Arenal had liked his voice. They appreciated his messages. They praised his engaging voice and succinct delivery.

Arenal’s decision wasn’t the first time Arenal had been singled out for his vocal skills. When Arenal was studying at Pasadena Community Col-

lege, he worked at a local radio station, KPCC. He was the show engineer for a live broadcast that included local events and had interviews, and often read public service announcements when the regular hosts were away.

And he has worked in Hollywood. A Pasadena native, he was an extra in The Stunt Junkies, a Discovery Channel show. He also lived near the Gyllenhaals (a family with famous ac-

tors), and occasionally baby-sat Maggie Gyllenhaal’s younger brother, Jake Gyllenhaal, while he was studying at Pasadena College.

Roger McDonald, who uses SmartSite, teaches his “Nutrition and Aging” class. ( comprehension and interest in opening the first dedicated section for CI during the 2008-2009 academic year. A priority, according to the campus, is to build more CI throughout campus. The CI agencies that serv-

ie the campus, including deans and the CI oversight team. The group will help ad-

dress needs for more CI throughout campus. The CI agencies that participate in the workshop are eager to help us too,” Schmitt said. “The work has just begun. You can expect to read about more progress in the months ahead.”

Several instructors have told their stu-

dents to use the wiki to write shared reports or journals. “The wiki is an engaging tool in a whole range of disciplines,” said SmartSite program manager Kirk Alexander. “Faculty are finding they can do a lot with it.”

Versions 2.4 brings two major sets of improvements to the campus. It adds more choices to the menu of tools and it overhauls the underpinnings of SmartSite, improving the way it interacts with the Banner student registration system. The Tests and Quizzes features will gain more upgrades later this year, including a better display for students.

Campus moves ahead, adding more high-tech firepower

It’s transition time: SmartSite debuts as full-fledged system this fall

SmartSite goes mainstream in three months, supercharging the possibilities for using online tech to teach and work together on campus. So if you ignored this new course-management and staff-communication system during its now-ending pilot phase, figuring you’d check back later—well, that moment has arrived.

• Thousands of your colleagues are using it, or at least trying it. SmartSite has attracted 8,364 unique users, mostly students and faculty so far. A year ago, at the end of SmartSite’s first full quarter as a pilot, the number of users totaled just 91.

• Gradebook and the other course-man-

agement tools in MyUCDavis, used by about one-fifth of campus faculty, are going to have received major updates in years, and are difficult to expand. They will be replaced by the better range of tools in SmartSite start-

ing in fall 2008.

• SmartSite continues to develop. This month SmartSite (known as CERE in the School of Veterinary Medicine) moves up to version 2.4, which will revamp the basic foundation of the system and add more features and tools, including a course-management module for handling courses with multiple sections.

• It’s becoming easier to deploy. Begin-

ning this summer, instructors, staff and students won’t need approval from the program managers to create a site. They will be able to create a site them-

selves by following the instructions at smartsite.ucdavis.edu

• The support services have expanded. IET-Mediaworks now offers more than a dozen short classes per quarter on various aspects of SmartSite, and the IT Express help desk has added two SmartSite specialists. Two faculty trainers who joined the SmartSite group last winter continue to add courses on different ways to teach with and use the system.

• Every year, more students arrive on campus fluent in advanced online technology. Using SmartSite can help faculty both meet students’ expecta-

tions and take advantage of their skills. All in all, SmartSite has emerged from the ground like a plant in the spring. There’s more growth to come, but a year of feedback and development has earned SmartSite a serious look from all faculty and staff—not just the technologically ad-

venturous—as a resource that can help them work.

“A year of feedback and development has earned SmartSite a serious look from all faculty and staff—not just the technologically adventurous?”

Engaged by the wiki

SmartSite runs on Sakai, an open-

source software developed by a group of about 100 universities and similar institu-

tions. They create products specifically useful for colleges. SmartSite offers users two basic types of sites—for classes or for projects—plus technological tools that help faculty, staff and students share ideas, access and organize their work. Staffers have used it to coordinate committee work, track projects, post announcements, and do similar tasks.

The most popular features so far (see chart, inside) include the chat, resources and class wiki tools. The chat tool supports on-

line group discussions; the resource features are used for storing, collecting or distribut-

ing messages and documents; and the wiki is a shared online document that anyone with permission can edit.

For a campus ambitious to explore the

human brain or understand the region’s “ecosystem more deeply, this is good news. The drive to expand the cyber-infrastruc-

ture of UC Davis is gaining traction.

A signature research project should be

named soon, a group of faculty advisers is coming together to help create a campus cyber-infrastructure roadmap, and the Data Center has added enough new air condi-

tions to meeting the growing demand for servers—the machines throw off heat like a stove—and still withstand the usually withering Davis summer.

These gains are part of the effort to iden-

tify and obtain the computing power, cool-

ing, data storage, network speed and support that the campus needs to enable advanced research in areas ranging from medicine and scientific computing to the humanities. Those needs are collectively called cyber-infrastructure, or CI. It is as crucial to high-end research as airports are to jets, and demand is soaring as research grows more complex.

The process follows a two-day work-

shop in April, where leading faculty researchers and others talked about the state of campus CI and what to do next. The workshop was cosponsored by Information and Educational Technol-

ogy, Pete Swiel and Vice Chancellor for Research Barry Klein.

Notes from the workshop have circu-

lated among some faculty members for their comments, said Babette Schmitt, IET direc-

tor for strategic planning and communica-

tions. “We’re making progress,” she said, “exploring the options, and taking steps to start addressing some of the needs.”

Choosing a signature project will draw attention to what advanced CI can achieve here. Candidates include projects involving the Genome Center, atmospheric sciences, and several other disciplines.

The campus is also exploring the pos-

sibility of boosting the Genome Center link to the huge, ultrafast Internet connection owned by the Corporation for Education Network Initiatives in California (CENIC). “We’re working with the Genome Center to determine interest in opening the first dedi-

eated CENIC network link for the campus,” Schmitt said. This would be a big step for-

ward in helping researchers send and access amazingly complex sets of data. A dedicated link would let the center avoid the interrup-
tions natural in a shared connection.

Faculty members Louise Kellogg, Mani Tripathi, Ken Joy, Bernt Hamann, S.J. Ben You, Susam Ustun, Bertram Ludowicher and Dawan Lin have volunteered for the campus CI oversight team. The group will help ad-

dress needs for more CI throughout campus.

“With doing this partnership with the campus, including deans and the research community. The CI agencies that participated in the workshop are eager to help us too,” Schmitt said. “The work has just begun. You can expect to read about more progress in the months ahead.”

READ MORE:

Read “How much do we need?” and other archived stories on UC at technews.ucdavis.
edu. For workshop presentations and follow-up materials, go to vpiet.ucdavis.edu/notesfromtheworkshop.htm.
What do you use SmartSite for?

Mainly to increase student interaction. I recently began creating a new site for my dissertation research.

When did you start using it?

In the winter quarter of 2007.

What’s your advice to new users?

Choose one goal, either for instruction or research, and use SmartSite to help you achieve it. Having a clear idea about what you want to accomplish beforehand will help guide you as you create your site. It also helps to have your own site in place if you attend the training workshop, so you can begin working on your site right away.

How do you see yourself using it in two years?

I see myself reworking my existing courses for teaching and research. My current use of SmartSite has opened my eyes to new possibilities that I would like to explore in the future.

What is your advice to new users?

Much of it is intuitive, but new users should start playing with it, then keep a list of questions and go for help once in a while. It has a lot of neat features, and the builders have tried hard to make it functional.

How do you see yourself using it in two years?

I hope to keep using the drop box and Web-site features, and to expand to some of the other features. We plan to use it with a new large-enrollment course we are offering next year.
Sakai chair takes stock of educational tech

The words might startle, coming from a world expert in the field, but John Norman thinks “it’s a noticeable weakness of educational technology” that it hasn’t made a better case for itself. That’s not to say the technology isn’t useful—it is, he said, particularly for long-distance learning, to make classroom instruction more engaging, for administrative convenience, in large classes, and to help students of varying skill levels come up to standard.

But there’s more to do to, said Norman, director of the Centre for Applied Research in Educational Technologies and “head of e-learning” at the University of Cambridge in England. He has a background as an engineer and medical devices entrepreneur.

His comment on the image of educational technology, he said, is him “speaking from a Cambridge perspective.” Norman also chairs the board of the Sakai Foundation, the international group of colleges and other institutions that created the open-source software underlying SmartSite. UC Davis’ new online course-management system. And in that role, he visited Davis one day in April. He felt good about the competence and enthusiasm of people at UC Davis involved with SmartSite, and saw significant political and financial commitment by the campus to the program. “I’d be pretty confident you’ll be successful,” he said.

He is interested that UC Davis has adopted more than one version of Sakai for use here. “We’ve had that pressure at Cambridge,” he said. UC Davis has one version of SmartSite each for the main campus, School of Veterinary Medicine (where it’s known as CERE, for Collaborative Educational Research Environment), and the School of Medicine. Norman has made a mental note to see how this setup works, and whether UC Davis will conclude it was the best approach.

He also likes the SmartSite faculty-to-faculty training model, plus the student training.

As for faculty who have looked at SmartSite and decided to pass, Norman said “it’s not unreasonable to ask hard questions” about how people use Sakai and what good it does them. “I’m not a technology evangelist in that sense.” Educational technology offers clear benefits for distance learning and large classes, he said. The benefits are less obvious outside those scenarios, but Cambridge has concluded that the right use of technology can:

- Enhance face-to-face instruction. For instance, an impressive digital display of large molecules, one a student couldn’t manipulate, can help the student understand the molecules better.
- Make managing a class more convenient, by creating a handy place to store papers, handle communications, and so on.
- Serve “an increasingly variable intake of students.” Diagnostic systems coupled with individual self-paced learning, for example, can help students prepare for university entry and start on par with their peers.
- Student expectations are also driving the spread of educational technology—and their expectations, Norman said, continue to climb. 

What's your advice to new users?

What do you see yourself using it in two years?

I'm interested in exploring the tutorial function. This would be a good resource for the students, but seems to be quite a bit of work on the front end to enable.

What do you use SmartSite for?

To post lectures and previous exams.

When did you start using it?

I started using SmartSite in earnest in winter 2007 for Bio- sciences 1C, specifically to use the quiz feature. I wanted the students to have access to online multiple-choice quizzes consisting of eight questions drawing from a large pool of questions. After finishing the quiz, the students would get a score and item-level feedback for each answer they chose. Unfortunately, the first quiz version of SmartSite was not designed to allow for practice quizzes, and I had to use an older version of the same approach.

What’s your advice to new users?

Might as well start using it now!

How do you see yourself using it in two years?

For sure, the improved quiz feature will be useful as soon as it is available, and the wiki might be valuable for classes that involve collaborative writing.

For more information, plus more user profiles, go to smartsite.ucdavis.edu.
Geckomail, the campus email system, to meet users’ needs. Working with Microsoft or Google would let UC Davis redirect more of its resources into upgrading other critical information technology programs while improving its services to users.

Both companies have expansive email systems, and work hard to keep them competitive. Their size helps them get the latest and greatest features faster than are available through Geckomail. Also, about 5,100 campus-email users already redirect their campus email to Google, Homestead, and other services—that’s less than the 64,000 total UCD email accounts, but the number is growing.

March, the campus surveyed students on potential email changes. Concerns centered on storage, keeping their “ucdavis.edu” email tag with lifetime access, plus virus protection and email filtering. In a real, representative sample from Microsoft and Google discussed their services with about a dozen students in an information session on campus. Based on the survey and the session, students lean toward Gmail. IET will continue to consult students, faculty, and staff members to ensure that any decisions are a true tryout. Find updates online at TechNews or vps.ucdavis.edu/student email clm.

HEAR IT SECURITY EXPERT THIS MONTH

The three-day 2007 UC Davis IT Security symposium starts June 20. 2007. Registration has closed, but people who haven’t registered can still listen to the keynote speech by proton firewaller Marcus Ranum. See信息安全symposium.ucdavis.edu/index.htm.

CAMPUS TO OFFER PODCASTS VIA ITunes U

An agreement between the University of California and Apple Inc. has opened the way for UC campuses to offer students access to widely popular and similar public events through iTunes U. At UC Davis, details about when and how are still being worked out. iTunes U is a service for colleges and universities that helps them offer listeners easy, constant access to campus-related podcasts, such as distinguished speaker series, course lectures and interviews. The files can be audio or video. The service works much like iTunes: Apple’s popular download service that sells songs for 99 cents each, but iTunes U downloads are free. The campus provides the people and equipment to produce the podcasts. Apple provides software and the servers to store and deliver them.

The UC Office of the President reached an agreement with Apple this spring that lets each campus in the system use ITunes U. Existing clients in Northern California include Stanford University and UC Berkeley.

“The campus has some questions about workload and how to make it work. We’re going to be looking at it over the summer.” The campus already provides the people and equipment to use ITunes U for recording service (podcast.ucdavis.edu) through IET-Mediaworks.Classroom Technology Services that helps instructors record their classes and post lectures. Forty-five classes offered podcast lectures last winter quarter. Present plans call for UC Davis to use ITunes U for recordings intended for a public audience, and Liz Gibson, Mediaworks/CTS director, in May. “We will discuss our thoughts on a recommendation for the campus, and obtain their feedback. When that is complete, we will have an announcement for the campus,” she promises, as soon as possible.

The two committees are the Technology Infrastructure Forum and the educational technology subcommittee of the Campus Council for Information Technology. All instructors and collaboration tools can be used for many different purposes,” Gibson said, in the areas of instruction, research, outreach and general business. Mediaworks is a UC campus entity, operating under a university-wide agreement with about a dozen students in an information session on campus. Based on the survey and the session, students lean toward Gmail. IET will continue to consult students, faculty, and staff members to ensure that any decisions are a true tryout. Find updates online at TechNews or vps.ucdavis.edu/student email clm.

When you’re tempted to use the word, identify and express the kind of solution you’re offering. A new program? An improved procedure? A different way of organizing the work?

Then talk about that program, procedure or new way of working. Tell your listener some of the important, defining details. Get specific, and unless you’re talking in a very broad sense, downplay the word “solution.”

On its own, it just doesn’t say enough. Bill Buchanan is a senior writer and editor in Information and Educational Technology, the main campus tech department. The views in this column, especially its editorial regard of “solution,” are entirely his own. If you need to contact him by writing to wrbuchanan@ucdavis.edu.

For real solutions, don’t use that blurry word.