



Clickers and Learner Engagement

Universities challenged with engaging today's students are using Student Response Systems, like those used by audiences in TV game shows, to boost interaction

Learner engagement is becoming a hot topic in universities as students shy away from classes, multitask during lectures and vote with their feet if something does not stimulate. Attendances are low and students are alienated in large lecture halls with poor atmosphere.

Trainers have to keep learners attentive for eight hours while university lectures rarely go beyond two. One of my challenges on joining the university was to convince the Academic Council that it was possible to engage students for a full day's activity in one sitting. The corporate world could not afford the 'inefficiency' of the university system and so corporate trainers had to learn how to teach in lengthy sessions. And teach well they did, and still do.

But now the shoe may be on the other foot and corporate trainers may be able to learn something from their academic colleagues. Lecturers are fighting back with a new tool – clickers. Clickers, also known as student response systems (SRS), will be familiar to anyone who has watched the TV show, *Who Wants to be a Millionaire*. Basically each person gets a handset and can interact with a set of questions on the screen, allowing the tutor to pose alternatives and to engage

students in a game like atmosphere in the classroom.

Most of the literature has welcomed the use of SRS in classrooms saying that it leads to greater learner engagement. There is evidence to show that it leads to better attendance, performance and involvement of students. There is some caution, however, in that some researchers complain that little is known how about how clickers work in practice and what social infrastructure is needed to support them. What seems clear however is that students like them as long as they are used for learning purposes and not for grading or for complying attendance.

Recently we conducted some research at NUI Maynooth to examine how clickers are so successful in fostering student engagement (Heaslip, Donovan & Cullen, 2014). 120 students used clickers in their university classes engaging with their subject using the new technology. Each student had their own personal handset. Data was gathered through surveys at three points, pre- clicker, midpoint, and post clicker situations. There was also some qualitative collection of data.

The results were unanimously positive. Survey data showed strong increases in involvement and interactivity between the non clicker and clicker situations. Students commented on how much fun the clickers were to use. They agreed that it increased their involvement in the classes and yet they liked the anonymity provided when putting forward 'risky' answers. In a focus group discussion, students anticipated the fun of having group scores compared between groups

and this was acceded to by lecturers leading to even more student approval.

Clickers are in widespread use in universities today but they are used much less so in corporate situations – an imbalance which perhaps should be remedied. The research carried out in Ireland by Heaslip et al shows that learners become more involved with the use of clickers than they were in the non clicker state. Learners appreciate the fun element of the tool and they like being able to try out answers to questions without fear of humiliation. In group settings they are motivated by the competition between groups and encourage their lecturers to organise this feature.

Clickers are inexpensive to purchase, need no maintenance and are quite easy to use. The final implementation is up to the creativity of the trainer / user. They provide a different 'angle', look modern and give the event an 'edgy' feel. Tutors should beware that putting up lists for simple polling will get boring even at the best of times so trainers need to learn different schemes of use. One example is to pose a question and to allow group discussion in small group and group discussion in the larger group before reverting to individual choice using the clicker. Such variations keep the students guessing as to how the tool is going to be used and keep the initiative fresh.

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