

**How Am I Doing? Anonymity, Feedback, Contingent Teaching, and Discussion
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**Overview of the Course for Which Clickers Were Used: Introduction to
Communication**

Introduction to Communication is a freshman-level course. We offer this instructional TV (ITV) course at the University of Southern Maine, with approximately 40 students in the classroom and 15 or so more at a distance. The course is open to all students as a social science option that is part of our core curriculum.

I now incorporate clickers and use PowerPoint extensively in lecture. In addition, I use Blackboard for a significant online portion of the course.

Motivation for Using Clickers

One of the weakest areas in teaching at many universities is the traditional lecture format, especially when used with large sections. The common diagnosis of what is weak in this method is the lack of interactivity. Teachers (i.e., lecturers) experience this as an inability to initiate a two-way discussion with students. They often feel they can't accurately determine how well the material is being received and understood (Draper & Brown, 2004).

As a veteran teacher with approximately 35 years of classroom teaching experience, I have seen that both student and teacher behaviors are fairly consistent and predictable. In my ITV Introduction to Communication course, reticence is a key student characteristic, semester after semester. Student reticence is all the more noticeable to me, as I pride myself on being easy to talk to and I typically enjoy dialogue with students in a relaxed classroom climate. So, I regularly strive to get the students to say *something*. I present PowerPoint aided presentations each week, while imploring the students to jump in and contribute to the discussion. They rarely do. One of my primary motivations in adding

the use of a classroom response system in the course is therefore to engage students and encourage increased participation in class.

Implementation

Out of this desire to encourage my ITV students to participate more, I have incorporated both clickers and Blackboard's Virtual Classroom. I use the clickers regularly in class and Blackboard's Virtual Classroom at least once per term. (The Blackboard Virtual Classroom is a live chat room that enables us to participate in real time.) Both tools have enabled students to participate more openly in class; students perceive that their contributions with both media are anonymous (at least to their peers).

I use clickers at the start of every ITV lecture and recognize that how the students respond to my clicker questions about a theory under discussion then influences how I go on to explain the theory (contingent teaching). In discourse analysis terms, the feedback from the clicker responses serves an *alignment function*. The feedback from students provides me with ongoing formative assessment in lecture, helps me determine whether or not we are on the same page.

For instance, below is a slide I use at the beginning of my lecture on elaboration likelihood model theory:

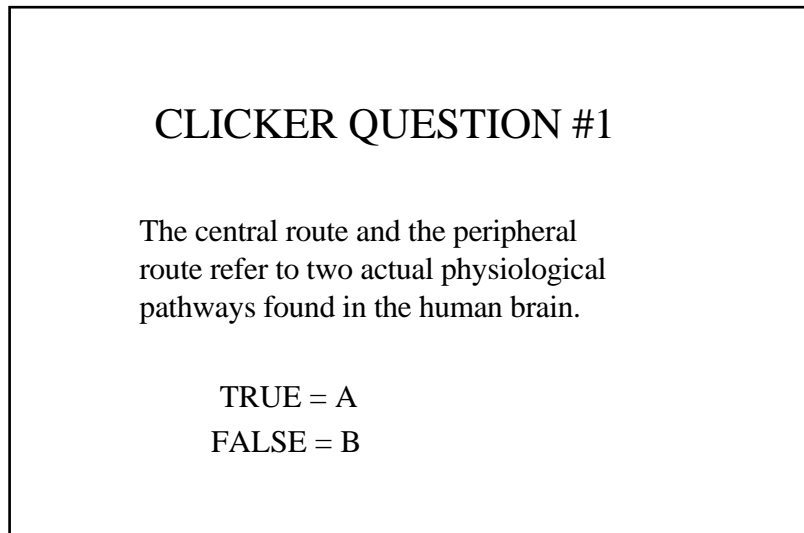


Figure 1: i>clicker question on elaboration likelihood theory.

Grading Policy and Frequency of Clicker Use

I do not grade clicker responses; I use them before I begin to present a PowerPoint impromptu talk on a theory. My questions address concepts and understanding of the theory. I do not call upon students but tell the class that I use the clicker responses to take attendance and to gauge what we need to cover to make sure they understand the theories we study.

Clickers and the Traditional Lecture: Conclusions and Caveats

I do want to address the role of clickers in the classroom as a tool for fostering discussion. I do not believe clickers are a “magic bullet” to transform student-teacher interaction. In my own research on classroom discussion as well my own observations with the technologies I use to facilitate discussion, I do not believe that any one gizmo or rule or trick is going to answer the question: “How can the teacher create great discussions?”

Rather, I propose that we consider the role(s) that ongoing formative feedback serves for both the teacher and the student and how teachers can use this to facilitate discussion. Below we will explore classroom reticence (Richmond & McCroskey, 1989), student response to clickers, the teacher's response to student clicker responses, anonymity in the virtual classroom, and the quest for discussion. Specifically:

- What purpose does the clicker serve for the teacher?
- What do we really mean by anonymity, interaction, and discussion?
- What it is we really want--both students and teachers?
- Why do we want students to say something?
- What can we do to further our goals?

After a lively virtual classroom discussion (via Blackboard), students tell me that the anonymity is what enabled them to feel comfortable "speaking." Oddly, student names are displayed each time they post to the virtual classroom. The obvious contradiction is puzzling. Conversely, the use of i>clickers for the purpose of increasing interactivity is often met by skeptical colleagues who see the clicker as a tool enabling classes to maintain the lack of genuine dialogue. What purpose(s) are i>clickers serving to further the communication event?

Discussion Board Approaches

Treating discussion on a discussion board can be approached in a variety of ways.

- **The "Rubrics" approach** involves telling students what you want and then defining a set of discussion board rules. The rationale to this approach: students don't know what you expect or what a good discussion is, so you need to inform them. They also need a set of rules, such as how often to respond and expected responses. I am very skeptical of this approach (Duphorne & Gunawardena, 2005). To me, genuine discussion is not encumbered by strict guidelines or limitations. It is characterized by a desire to engage and to take part in the discussion for its own sake.
- An adapted Socratic dialogue approach involves the teacher at the core. The teacher asks individual students questions to encourage response.

- Broad/open approach allows students to post responses to the questions the teacher has raised, without any defined set of guidelines or rules for posting.

As you know, the typical pattern in entire-class discussions is that the teacher asks questions and most responses go through the teacher (Heckman & Annabi, 2005). If you are lucky, *someone* will respond. In my experience with entire-class discussions, a few students will volunteer to say something, again, to the teacher, so this produces a teacher-centered discussion. Alternatively, you can break the class into small groups and let them talk which, in my experience, is fairly successful in getting students to speak to one another.

I don't think we want to value one kind of discussion over another in absolute terms. Like communicating in different media, each approach has its strengths and weaknesses, depending upon your preferences and your objectives. Some students enjoy listening to a teacher-centered discussion and are content to observe. Others are frustrated that they are so often the one to volunteer to speak. You can also call on students but that introduces another set of risks/benefits and alters the classroom climate yet again. Regardless, it still reinforces the teacher-centeredness of the "discussion."

If the teacher stays out of the discussion—such as an online discussion—then there may be individual student posts I call "post and flee." That is, the student posts a statement and it stands alone. No one responds to it. Another student posts a different statement. Even if posted on a discussion board, I wouldn't call it a discussion; it really is just a series of monologues. Every so often, you still may see a genuine discussion actually happens—students interact. I've observed this in my own classes. My hypothesis regarding "post and flee:" I believe the student is thinking, "I have answered the question. I did my homework." Each post is essentially the student handing in their homework. Those times, though, when genuine discussion seems to occur, are instances when the students find something that is personally relevant for them—something that motivates them share thoughts, learn more, and/or get feedback (a student-centered discussion). Especially online, we are likely to see some self-disclosure in these discussions. By

largely removing themselves from the discussion, the teacher may be enhancing the possibility for students to share personal experiences and engage in a discussion with each other. Of course, the teacher might wish to join in and disclose personal experiences as well. Examples from my own courses can be found at http://media.usm.maine.edu/~lenny/discussion_patterns.ppt

Let's compare this spontaneous discussion with its self-disclosure and personal relevance to the Socratic dialogue type of discussion mentioned above. I think that we will find a trade off between the two. In the teacher-centered discussion, the level of critical thinking may be slightly higher because the teacher is pushing for a higher level of analysis. In the student-centered discussion, the level of critical thinking may be lower but the level of interest is quite high, and the willingness to participate is high.

So, this is where we need to ask ourselves, what is it we really want to happen in discussion, what is it we seek as an ideal outcome? What is a discussion? What are the variables that influence discussion?

I will propose what I think are key components of the overall equation for discussion. Also, if you wish to look at synopses of some related research, you can find that at: http://media.usm.maine.edu/~lenny/what_we_know.doc

- 1. discussion**
- 2. conflict**
- 3. autonomy**
- 4. motivation**
- 5. interaction, interactivity, transaction**
- 6. participation**
- 7. feedback**
- 8. transactional distance**
- 9. outcomes**

We could add trust and confidence to the list. The main point is that we need to think about qualitative issues. We need to take care that we not get too caught up in tricks, technology, or rules. While the clicker is a tool to further our objectives, we need to remember that humans are at the center of the project and that the key variables are qualitative. We need to think about what goes through the student's mind, what matters to them, what motivates them, what frightens them.

In this light, we can return to issues of anonymity and see that what students are telling us about the anonymity afforded by the i>clicker is the psychological safety from being judged negatively by others, especially peers, and especially the pain of taking in that negativity. If the reasoning is that you think poorly of me as a person because of what I say, then that is painful, especially for a person who is in the process of developing a sense of self, a belief in their value, and their right to take a stand on ideas.

Conclusions and Results

Why use a clicker? Using a clicker allows the student who is reticent to begin to safely engage in saying what they think and hearing what others think. It can also offer students an opportunity to speak to people who would not otherwise speak up.

The significance of anonymity for the student may be linked to the student's conception of education, learning, and knowledge—as well as the student's place in the educational process. If the student regards education as the acquisition of knowledge and s/he believes that s/he does not possess much of that knowledge, s/he is likely to refrain from speaking, even to ask questions, for fear of showing ignorance. If a student thinks of education as a dynamic pursuit of meaning, a game in which we offer ideas and modify them as we go along, then the student is likely to be more relaxed about speaking up in class.

A second argument for using the clicker is that, even with the reticent student, it gives the teacher ongoing feedback on what the students understand about the topic being

presented/discussed. The teacher can then adjust his/her lecture and approach to address student misconceptions or learning needs. It gives the teacher some feedback on how the student is doing and also how the teacher is doing.

Feedback from Students

In 2006 when I asked students what they thought about the clickers, here is what some wrote:

“I find the clickers interesting and a valuable tool for the class, because it gives you an anonymous way to answer a question that you may not be sure of. “

Another student wrote: “It also allows students to answer how they feel without having an audience or being afraid to answer in a certain way because they don’t want to be made fun of.”

And here is the same idea again: “It is nice to not be picked out of a big group to try and answer a question, versus being able to give your opinion, but somewhat secretive, in case you really don’t know what the answer is, or if you’re alone in what you think.”

A number of resources and advice on student engagement can also be found on my web site. I encourage you to visit the site for additional tips and data:

<http://www.usm.maine.edu/com/lenny.htm>

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