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Technology in Practice. Click Here to Engage

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Classroom response systems ease discussion and assessment

by Meredith Farkas

Librarians who teach are always looking for ways to get patrons more actively engaged in instruction sessions. Research has shown that active learning can have positive effects on student learning and certainly helps to get students to reflect on the application of what they're learning. In large lecture classes, most active learning exercises simply aren't feasible, making it difficult to avoid the "sage on the stage" model of teaching. In addition to active learning, librarians also frequently seek simple ways to assess learning so they can improve their teaching.

Instructors are increasingly turning to classroom response systems as a way to get students actively engaged in class and collect useful feedback or assessment data. Classroom response technologies allow faculty to poll classes and get anonymous aggregate responses. Polling can be useful as formative assessment to tailor instruction to where students currently are, or as summative assessment to get a sense of how well the class learning outcomes were achieved. Librarians use classroom polling tools as ice-breakers, for pre- and post-tests, and for feedback on their teaching.

Most common is the clicker, a small remote control-like device that sends student responses wirelessly to the instructor's receiver and then displays them on a slide. Clickers are a popular option for collecting student feedback, but

they require a financial outlay that many libraries can't afford or may not want to make without knowing if they are a good fit. Fortunately, there are free tools for creating classroom response activities, capitalizing on technologies the students already have with them.

Poll Everywhere (polleverywhere.com) enables students to answer questions during class by text or a web form. The aggregated answers are updated in real time in PowerPoint or the website itself. Poll Everywhere can provide valuable feedback for the instructor and opportunities for student interactivity.

The librarians at Champlain College in Burlington, Vermont, experimented with Poll Everywhere and found that it opened up valuable opportunities for classroom discussion and that students were excited by the novelty. "People appreciate when they are asked for their opinion," Emerging Technologies Librarian and Information Tyrannosaur blogger Andy Burkhardt said, making class more than "someone telling them what to think."

However, polling doesn't enable students to give individualized feedback or ask questions. Some faculty use Twitter as a classroom backchannel for student comments or questions, but it's less than ideal;



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the confidence to share their ideas and ask questions discreetly.

many students don't want school-work on their personal Twitter accounts, or to broadcast their classroom responses to the world.

Wiffiti (wiffiti.com) is another free technology for capturing the classroom backchannel. It creates a digital pinboard to which

people can add comments anonymously via a web form, text message, or Twitter hashtag. All the comments show up on the board, which can be embedded on a website or digital display. Wiffiti can collect student feedback about a lecture as it occurs and gather answers to specific discussion questions and problem-based classroom activities on individual screens. Anonymous response systems like Wiffiti can give students who feel uncomfortable speaking publicly the confidence to share their ideas and ask questions discreetly.

Classroom response systems aren't the only way of incorporating active learning into instruction, but they can be useful in meeting certain pedagogical goals. Sounds pretty engaging! ■

MEREDITH FARKAS is head of instructional services at Portland (Oreg.) State University and part-time faculty at San José State University School of Library and Information Science. She blogs at *Information Wants to Be Free* and created *Library Success: A Best Practices Wiki*. Contact her at librarysuccess@gmail.com.