Using Polling and Smartphones to Keep Students Engaged

By John Orlando, PhD

It's an age-old problem. You want to make the most of every minute you have with your students, but it's been proven that most people can only retain about 20 minutes of content in our short-term memory before we have to reflect on it in order to move it to our long-term memory or it will be lost. Add to this the violently condensed attention span of the general population and anyone hoping to provide a content-rich education in the time slots of traditional classes faces an uphill battle.

Polling provides an ideal way to both keep a class' attention and provide a reflective activity to move information into long-term memory. Plus, it's remarkably easy. Free websites allow you to set up polls that students take by submitting their answers via text message or on the Web. These polls are a wonderful way to engage students in the material and keep their interest. Best of all, the results appear in real time so students can see changes as they come in.

One good use of polls is to gather information about a subject before it is covered. This is especially helpful when the subject concerns information that students might not want to make public with a show of hands. For instance, a teacher could introduce a discussion of cheating on exams by asking students in a large lecture to indicate if they have every cheated on an exam. This could be used to demonstrate that cheating is more common than people think. A science instructor can ask students to guess the results of an experiment before it is conducted to generate thought and interest in the outcome. Forcing students to take a position not only creates reflection, but also commitment to results. Everyone wants their position affirmed.

Another option is to ask students for their opinions and use the results as a way of initiating a discussion on the issue. Or you could ask a simple factual question that you know most people will get wrong in order to demonstrate a widespread misconception.

Polls also can be used after content is presented as a means of generating reflection on the issue. These can be simple factual questions that demonstrate whether the students understood the material, or higher level questions that will help them to retain the material.

Using smartphones to conduct polls

While many instructors consider smartphones the bane of teaching—causing distraction and even cheating during a test—polling turns the technology into a teacher's advantage by engaging students with the content.

In this screencast, I demonstrate how easy it is to use polling software. Watch it here »

Links

Poll Everywhere (http://www.polleverywhere.com) - Unlimited polls with up to 30 respondents on the free plan.

Flisti (http://flisti.com) - Super easy polling system. No signup required.

MicroPoll (http://www.micropoll.com) - Good for creating a poll to embed in a blog or some other website.

Vorbeo (http://vorbeo.com) - Another system for creating a poll to embed in your website.

Polldaddy (http://www.polldaddy.com) - Free and paid plans available.

TextTheMob (http://textthemob.com) - Free plan allows for up to three questions with 50 responses.

John Orlando, PhD, is the program director for the online Master of Science in Business Continuity Management and Master of Science in Information Assurance programs at Norwich University. John develops faculty training in online education and is available for consulting at jorlando@norwich.edu.