

# “Clicker” Technology: Actively Engaging Students in Orientation

*Jessica Hale*

Keeping students engaged during orientation presentations and activities is a constant challenge to orientation professionals. In an effort to combat disengagement in Orientation, Washtenaw Community College (WCC) decided to borrow an instructional tool from the college classroom: clicker technology. Clicker technology (also called student response systems, classroom response systems, or audience response systems) is a classroom communication tool designed to solicit and report feedback from students during presentations. To use clicker technology, instructors pose a question to students using presentation software (usually built around PowerPoint) and students submit responses using a remote control that somewhat resembles the one you might use to change channels on your television (hence the name “clicker”) (Bruff, 2007). These responses are then beamed via radio or infrared signal to a receiver on the instructor’s computer and compiled and displayed graphically in the presentation (Bruff, 2007). By using this technology, orientation presentations at WCC have become more interactive as well as dynamic. This brief article explores why WCC chose to explore this new technology, how we use it, and how students and parents have responded to it.

The decision to explore clicker technology in Orientation was driven by three main factors: mission, theory, and practical application. The mission of WCC’s orientation program is to help students integrate into the community both academically and socially—two critical components in retention (Tinto, 1975). As higher education practitioners, we know that this can be a complex process and that the methods that have helped us do this in the past may not be the methods best suited for today. The literature related to active learning (Astin, 1999) and learning styles (Dunn & Dunn, 1992; Oblinger, 2003; Oblinger, 2004) has important implications for how we help students engage in their own learning.

Active learning, a concept originally introduced by Astin (1999), involves engaging students physically and psychologically in the academic and social aspects of collegiate experience to enhance learning outcomes. However, many researchers believe that the learning process is mediated by a student’s preferred learning style. Learning style is the way in which individuals begin to construct knowledge (Dunn & Dunn, 1992). Of specific interest to us was how to incorporate different preferences for learning modalities, the student’s preference for visual, auditory, kinesthetic, or tactile learning (Dunn & Dunn, 1992) as well

---

Jessica Hale (jhale15@wccnet.edu) is a Student Services Advisor at Washtenaw Community College.

as generational learning characteristics, preferences held by Millennials, Gen-Xers, and Boomers (Oblinger, 2003; Oblinger, 2004) into our orientation presentations. Rather than reinvent the wheel, WCC turned to an instructional tool recognized for increasing engagement and knowledge retention (Kaleta & Jooster, 2007), as well as for creating a fun and interactive environment (Beatty, 2004; Graham, Tripp, Seawright, & Joeckel, 2007).

We introduced clicker technology into our orientation sessions in January 2008. By June, we were using clickers in our traditional orientation programs for ages 21 and under, non-traditional orientation programs for ages 22 and over, and parent orientation program. We use clickers to track teams and individuals throughout the orientation, to assess students' knowledge using multiple choice as well as true and false questions (e.g., "True or False: Registration at WCC is a completely online process"), to ask exploratory questions to learn more about our students and parents (e.g., "Why would you see a counselor or advisor?"), and to evaluate the orientation program as a whole (e.g., "I believe the topics presented during Orientation will help me be successful in college"). This technology has enabled us to tailor our presentations to the audience during orientation programs via immediate response reports and between orientation sessions via end of session reports. In addition, we have been able to track and compile student responses of a term with relative ease.

Some of the most interesting data we have compiled relate to the technology itself. As part of our ongoing evaluation efforts, each student and parent who participated in a fall in-person orientation was asked to respond to the following statements using a 5-point Likert scale:

- 1) I believe the clickers helped me stay engaged during orientation presentations.
- 2) The clickers helped me learn.

The results have been encouraging, to say the least (see Table 1). Taken in concert, more than 83% of responders (traditional, non-traditional, and parent;  $N = 2,457$ ) agreed or strongly agreed that the clickers helped them stay engaged. Subgroup breakdowns for agreement with Question One are as follows: traditional 81.07% ( $n = 1,865$ ), non-traditional 88.98% ( $n = 490$ ), and parent 90.20% ( $n = 102$ ).

The results for Statement Two are somewhat lower, with roughly 64% of respondents indicating that they either agreed or strongly agreed (see Table 2). The breakdown by subgroup indicated that 63.20% of traditional students were in agreement ( $n = 1,878$ ), 66.14% of non-traditional students were in agreement ( $n = 502$ ), and 80.81% of parents in agreement ( $n = 99$ ).

Additional feedback about the clickers has emerged from open-ended question data gathered at the conclusion of each orientation. Some responses from traditional students have included statements like "I loved the clickers, [they] helped me stay engaged" and "More clicking . . . it keeps people awake and involved." This trend was echoed in the open-ended responses provided by non-traditional students, several of whom indicated that the clickers were a "nice added feature," and encouraged them to "get involved."

While it is obvious that these results only encapsulate one orientation cycle,

we are optimistic that the trend will continue. Plans are already underway to incorporate clicker technology into other orientation programs, including those for international students and English as a Second Language students. In addition, we have begun regular orientation training meetings to discuss how to use the technology, how to troubleshoot problems, and what to do in case of a power outage or other technical malfunction. These planning opportunities have helped us to minimize the potential pitfalls of relying on technology in our orientation program. Our hope is that by sharing our story—including why we chose “clicker” technology, how we are using the technology, and what the response has been—we encourage other orientation programs to consider exploring clickers as a way to engage students in orientation presentations, and ultimately, their own success.

## References

- Astin, A. W. (1999). Student involvement: A developmental theory for higher education. *Journal of College Student Development, 40*(5), 518–529.
- Beatty, I. (2004). *Transforming student learning with classroom communication systems* [Research Bulletin, Issue 3]. Boulder, CO: EDUCAUSE Center for Applied Research. Retrieved August 18, 2008, from <http://net.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/ERB0403.pdf>
- Bruff, D. (2007). Clickers: A classroom innovation. *National Education Association Advocate, 25*(1), 5–8. Retrieved August 18, 2008, from <http://www2.nea.org/he/advo07/advo1007/feature.html>
- Dunn, R., & Dunn, K. (1992). *Teaching secondary students through their individual learning Styles: Practical approaches for grades 7–12*. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- Graham, C. R., Tripp, T. R., Seawright, L., & Joeckel, G. (2007). Empowering or compelling reluctant participators using audience response systems. *Active Learning in Higher Education, 8*(3), 233–258. Retrieved August 18, 2008, from <http://alh.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/8/3/233>
- Kaletka, R., & Joosten, T. (2007). *Student response systems: A University of Wisconsin system, Study of clickers* (Research Bulletin, Issue 10). Boulder, CO: EDUCAUSE Center for Applied Research. Retrieved August 18, 2008, from [http://www.blog.utoronto.ca/in\\_the\\_loop/files/ClickersERB0710.pdf](http://www.blog.utoronto.ca/in_the_loop/files/ClickersERB0710.pdf)
- Oblinger, D. (2003). Boomers, gen-Xers, millennials: Understanding the new students. *EDUCAUSE Review, 38*(4), 37–47.
- Oblinger, D. (2004). The next generation of educational engagement. *Journal of Interactive Media in Education, 8*, 1–18.
- Tinto, V. (1975). Dropout from higher education: A theoretical synthesis of recent research. *Review of Educational Research, 45*(1), 89–125.

**TABLE 1**

**Responses to Statement 1: I believe the clickers helped me stay engaged during the orientation presentation**

Group	Likert Scale Rating									
	Strongly Agree		Agree		Neutral		Disagree		Strongly Disagree	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
Traditional Responses (n=1,865)	962	51.58	550	29.49	224	12.01	39	2.09	90	4.83
Non-Traditional Responses (n=490)	291	59.39	145	29.59	42	8.57	7	1.43	5	1.02
Parent Responses (n=102)	70	68.63	22	21.57	8	7.84	1	0.98	1	0.98
All Responses (n=2,457)	1323	53.85	717	29.18	274	11.15	47	1.91	96	3.91

**TABLE 2**

**Reponses to Statement 2: The clickers helped me learn**

Group	Likert Scale Rating									
	Strongly Agree		Agree		Neutral		Disagree		Strongly Disagree	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
Traditional Responses (n=1,878)	691	36.79	496	26.41	377	20.07	100	5.32	214	11.40
Non-Traditional Responses (n=502)	179	35.66	153	30.48	125	24.90	27	5.38	18	3.59
Parent Responses (n=99)	55	55.56	25	25.25	17	17.17	1	1.01	1	1.01
All Responses (n=2,479)	925	37.31	674	27.19	519	20.94	128	5.16	233	9.40