The Use of Clickers in the Law School Classroom

By Darlene Cardillo, Albany Law School

In the past several years, much has been written about the positive impact of integrating technology into teaching. The dilemma is how to incorporate technology in a way that is consistent with a law professor’s teaching style and with his/her technological skills, and at the same time enhance student learning.

During the spring semester of 2007, one of the veteran professors at my law school, Daniel Moriarty, experimented with the use of “clickers” as part of teaching his 1L Criminal law class.

Professor Moriarty’s teaching style is Socratic. Normally his students read the assigned material and respond to questions in class. Professor Moriarty explains difficult or complicated concepts and introduces new ideas.

One of the problems with Socratic teaching is that only a limited number of students can actively participate during a given class. A professor talks to a single student at a time. In principal, all the students should be trying to answer the professor’s questions even when the questions are not addressed to them, but there is no way to know for sure that they are doing so without calling on them. Consequently, with a class of almost seventy students, a majority of the students (especially the shy ones) will remain unnoticed.

A laptop with wireless Internet access in front of each student poses an additional distraction. Even if the students are not checking their e-mail or surfing the web and are actually using their computer to take class notes, they are not interacting with the professor or with each other.

The use of “clickers” has the ability to overcome these obstacles. It allows more students to actively participate during class and gives the professor the opportunity to evaluate all the students’ comprehension of the material. The clickers also engage the students and focus their attention since they all must respond to each question.

Several of the professors at this Albany Law School used eInstruction’s Classroom Performance System (referred to as “clickers” or CPS). At the end of the semester, the students in these classes responded to a survey and gave very favorable feedback regarding the use of the CPS system.

One student commented: “It has enhanced my learning. The questions are used to guide us along and I think the professor does a great job of forming them, and making them work with our class. Since we started using them I really feel as though I’m learning a lot more.” Another stated: “It encourages participation where one might otherwise be too shy or hesitant to stick their neck out in front of the entire class. By actually participating and committing to an answer I can see how well I actually know the material compared to how well I think I know it. Plus, it’s a good gauge for me to see how well I understand the material compared to other people in the class.”

A third replied: “I hope that the school sticks with it and encourages more professors to use it.”

The professors who used the clicker system first semester also use PowerPoint on a regular basis as part of their teaching and are fairly comfortable with technology. This was not the case with Professor Moriarty. He is adept at uploading documents to his TWEN (The Westlaw Education Network) web site for his students. But in the classroom, his technology use was minimal. I am the Instructional Technologist at the law school and was confident that we could find a way to use the clicker system in Professor Moriarty’s Criminal Law class.

We abandoned the idea of using eInstruction’s CPS with PowerPoint (which had worked for the other professors) and decided to have Professor Moriarty upload multiple choice or True/False questions for each class to his TWEN site and assign them to students for homework. I set up his Criminal Law class in CPSOnline and on his laptop. Professor Moriarty only had to learn how to connect his laptop to the LCD projector and to start up the CPS system on his laptop at the beginning of each class.

To make sure that the students took the CPS experience seriously, Professor Moriarty announced to the Criminal Law class that the number of correct answers that each student recorded would be totaled and at the end of the semester, this score would count for 10% of each student’s grade.

Professor Moriarty began most of his classes by having the students use the “clickers” to record their responses to the questions (on the TWEN site) that they

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Figure 1
had answered for homework. Professor Moriarty would then project on the screen a graphical representation of the class’ responses and indicate the correct answer. (See figure 1) A discussion ensued following each question/answer.

When Professor Moriarty started using the clickers, I was present in his classroom to make sure there were no technical glitches. My physical presence evolved into merely providing moral support. After several months, I didn’t need to be in the classroom at all and was there often as a casual observer of the process.

The CPS system encouraged more class discussion, prodding even shy students to get involved as responses were debated. Another advantage of this technology is how it allows the professor to assess his own teaching. The report below shows that 88% of the students got question 1 correct, 73% questions 2 and 75% question 3. Looking this data, a professor is able to quickly correct any misconceptions that students may have (see figure 2).

The CPS reports also enable the professor to keep tabs on individual students’ daily progress (see figure 3). A student who consistently receives low scores is either not doing the reading or is having difficulty with the material. The latter can then be corrected through remediation before the student fails an exam.

Surveys completed by Professor Moriarty’s students posted positive reviews on the CPS system. When asked on how it enhanced their learning, one student said: “The professor is able to provide an alternate means of grading students by assessing understanding daily, and discuss certain issues more closely when there is misunderstanding.” Another added: “It’s much faster than a paper quiz. Less quiz time allows for more lecture time. We learn more.”

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Further reading on “clickers”
Jane E. Caldwell, Clickers in the Large Classroom: Current Research and Best Practice Tips, 6 CBE-Life Sciences Educ. 9 (2007).
Ralph W. Preszler et al., Assessment of the Effects of Student Response Systems on Student Learning and Attitudes Over a Broad Range of Biology Courses, 6 CBE-Life Sciences Educ. 29 (2007).