

Fairfield U. students find answers only a click away

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Fairfield University professor Robert Kelly doesn't watch a lick of television — save the Super Bowl and some college basketball.

So the idea to use a hand-held personal-response system in his economics courses didn't come from watching the game show "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire."

Instead, the notion to poll students on material via a hand-held clicker came a couple of years back, when he and Kurt Naser, a Fairfield philosophy professor, attended a seminar.

"One of the presenters from an engineering school used [the clickers]. I said, 'I could use that,' " said Kelly.

Students use the clickers to enter their responses to multiple-choice questions, and they're instantly displayed in graph form on a screen at the front of the classroom.

Kelly admits that too often in his 27 years at Fairfield, questions he's thrown out have been met with blank stares. Or, they were always answered by the same three students. Or even worse, they elicited responses that made Kelly's jaw drop.

The clickers allow students to respond to questions anonymously, without fear of embarrassment.

When Kelly remarks to the class that the one person who gave the wrong definition of a "private good" must be sleeping at the switch, no one's face turns red.

Part of a growing trend, personal-response systems like the ones Kelly and Naser use can be found on 600 or more college campuses around the nation, according to Rob Meissner, vice president of Interwrite, a Maryland company that makes the kind used in Fairfield.

Another maker of the devices, eInstruction, of Texas, claims to be on 700 campuses, including Central Connecticut State University in New Britain.

Most times the decision to use the tool is made on a college level. Kelly and Naser use them on their own in one of several high-tech classrooms on Fairfield's campus.

Students who take Kelly's introductory economics classes or Naser's philosophy classes buy the remotes at the campus bookstore. The devices are black, the size and shape of a computer

mouse, with a number pad.

Aimed at a red flashing light affixed to the wall at the front of the room, the clickers record the votes of each student anonymously on a screen, also in the front of the room.

Students have the option of labeling their picks with high, medium or low confidence.

With a few taps on his laptop, Kelly can convert the responses to a graph that shows how the class voted by percentage.

Naser uses the system to give quizzes. Kelly uses it primarily to generate participation and gauge how well students know the material.

"For me, it's a way to get everyone to join in," he said. "The kids seem to like it."

It seems to help them learn. A few years ago, Kelly converted all his lessons into PowerPoint presentations. He stopped after he realized that, although the material entertained students, they weren't doing well on tests.

In his 8 a.m. microeconomics class, the clickers came out after a discussion on distinguishing public and private goods, and their respective market demands. The largely silent class perked up when they started aiming their devices at the screen.

Some questions, like how to determine the market demand for a public good, elicited a flurry of fast responses that produced a single tall line over a clearly popular answer.

With another question, concerning how to determine the demand for a private good that some buyers wanted and others didn't, a minute went by before responses produced four stubby percentage bars.

"Boy, you're all over the ballpark on that one," said Kelly. Left to a show of hands, Kelly probably wouldn't have known he has to spend more time on the topic.

Tina Masciadrelli, a freshman marketing major from Westfield, Mass., loves the clickers.

"I have anxiety when I'm put under pressure. Now, I know if I got it wrong and no one else does," she said.

Chris Giroux, a freshman from Southbury, likes the anonymity, too, even though he isn't shy about sitting up front or raising his hand. "Lots of times it brings up discussion," he said.

"If you don't want to voice your opinion in front of everybody, it's a way to do it," added Gustavo Gregori, a student from Greenwich.

Fen Gardiner, a sophomore from Rhode Island, was less keen on the idea. A frequent hand-

raiser, Gardiner thinks the system cuts into class participation.

"You have to be able to verbalize your opinion in a lot of aspects of life, & especially in business," he said.

Kelly said evaluations at the end of the course indicate most students view the clickers as engaging, fun and different. If every professor used clickers, Kelly believes they'd be less effective.

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