



Engagement in Cross-Cultural Large Lecture Classrooms: Using Top Hat Technology to Include Students in the Discussion

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A criticism of cross-cultural course requirements at the collegiate level is just how effective these courses are in promoting multiculturalism among students (Miller-Spillman, Michelman, & Huffman, 2012). An additional challenge is that many of these courses are often taught in large lecture format, cultivating an environment in which students are passive receivers of information rather than active participants in open interactions with the instructor and their peers. This results in a missed opportunity for engagement and discussion among a diverse body of students which could facilitate achievement of course objectives (e.g., adopting a multicultural worldview). What's more, a distinction exists in the classroom environment of cross-cultural courses in that active involvement by students is crucial for them to effectively retain knowledge (i.e., constructivist approach) and further, to internalize the learned information and employ it in shaping their world view (Fox-Turnbull & Snape, 2011). Because cross-cultural courses typically encompass content that can be sensitive in nature (e.g., religion, race), facilitating meaningful student interaction can be even more of a challenge. Many courses that fulfill university cross-cultural requirements are housed in family and consumer sciences units. Therefore, these issues and how to mediate them, are valuable areas of research exploration.

Clickers are a useful pedagogical tool in large lecture courses. Substantial developments in functionality have transformed simple clicker systems into web-based student response systems (SRS) that students can access from their own devices (i.e., mobile apps, tablets). Instructors can now immediately share anonymous student response data with their classes. This connectivity could be especially useful in cross-cultural large lecture courses, creating an opportunity to highlight the collective responses of the class without singling out individual students. Furthermore, viewing the class's results allows students to observe the diverging viewpoints on cross-cultural issues within the class and can be supported by instruction from the professor encouraging students to reflect on and think critically about their positions on cross-cultural issues. Incorporating an SRS into a cross-cultural large lecture course could facilitate the active involvement and engagement necessary for students to be open to adopting more pluralistic perspectives over the span of the course.

A gap in the literature exists related to the anonymity of SRS and its potential impact on students' learning experiences in cross-cultural large lecture courses. This study addresses this gap by exploring whether the anonymity of an SRS impacts students' a) level of comfort in responding to sensitive questions, b) propensity to answer questions of sensitive content honestly, c) feelings of engagement with peers, and d) whether using an SRS contributes to students' achievement of course objectives (e.g., multicultural learning).

This study was conducted in a large lecture course at a university in the Midwestern United States. Students in an Introduction to Fashion and Culture course that fills the university's cross-cultural requirement, represented diverse student enrollment (e.g., major, year in school), and whose instructor used an SRS called Top Hat to support course instruction represented the convenience sample. Participation was voluntary. Fox-Turnbull and Snape's (2011) constructivist approach to the acquisition of technological knowledge and Brown's (2004) framework for employing instructional management tools in cultural diversity courses to elicit changes in student awareness shaped the study's theoretical foundation and informed development of the survey instrument. The survey utilized both quantitative (i.e., 20 questions using a five-point Likert scale and 10 demographic items) and qualitative (i.e., five open-ended questions) methods. Data collection took place during the final week of the semester via an online survey (i.e., Qualtrics) and yielded a sample size of 171 respondents.

Survey results revealed that respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that Top Hat was important to their level of engagement with their peers (67.2%) and with course content (78.4%) and that Top Hat's anonymity prompted them to respond honestly to sensitive questions (88.9%). Respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that viewing question results increased their awareness of the cultural diversity of the classroom (67.8%), prompted them to think critically about their position on cross-cultural issues (59.6%), and contributed to their cross-cultural learning (59.6%). Content analysis on open-ended questions revealed three emergent themes (i.e., honest answering, anonymity, cross-cultural learning) related to Top Hat use. Responses were very positive and consistently suggested that anonymous student engagement increased honest participation, leading to more relevant instruction from the instructor. For example, one student discussed the importance of both participation and cross-cultural learning, stating "I think it made the course more successful because more people participated and there for payed [sic] attention. It heightened the awareness of cross-cultural perspectives because it showed the diversity between the class."

Result from the study provide initial support for the use of SRS systems as a pedagogical tool to increase engagement in cross-cultural large lectures and further, to elicit honest responses on sensitive course content. This research study contributes to the growing body of pedagogical research on improving the student learning environment in cross-cultural large lecture courses through the use of student response systems (SRS) and provides a foundation for further exploration by the researchers.

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