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Making things click in class

CU researchers investigate effectiveness of i-Clicker use in lectures

By Lance Vaillancourt (Contact) Sunday, January 4, 2009



Courtesy photo CU students use their clickers in class.

Could the same technology that popularized "America's Funniest Home Videos" also be used to help University of Colorado students do better in school?

It may sound strange, but the remote-control-styled audience feedback devices once used by Bob Saget to determine which home-blooper reel won the grand prize are now a staple in more than 135 classrooms at CU.

With 17,000 CU students currently using i-Clickers as educational aids in courses ranging from humanities to molecular biology, a recent study conducted by CU researchers sought to determine the devices' actual effectiveness in the learning process.

"We don't want to teach the same way for centuries," said Tin Tin Su, an associate professor in CU's molecular, cellular and developmental biology department. "We want to learn how to teach better."

For Su, who was initially skeptical about why the use of i-Clickers improved student scores, a system was needed to track whether students were actually learning new material based on i-Clicker feedback from their peers, or simply adjusting their answers to comply with the rest of the class.

"The clickers are a good way to get instant feedback, but do the students really learn from discussion or are they just changing their answers

because of peer pressure?" Su asked.

To find an answer, Su worked along side of other CU faculty, including fellows from the Science Education Initiative -- a five-year academic program started in the fall of 2006 by CU Nobel Laureate Carl Wieman to determine the effectiveness of various educational methods.

"We use all of the scientific methods from our Ph.D. programs and apply them to science education to see what changes we make in the classroom will actually help students learn," said SEI Fellow Michelle Smith, who corresponded with Su on the i-Clicker investigation.

Smith, Su, and the other researchers discovered that the simplest method of determining success was to ask two questions covering the same concepts. That way, the researchers could determine whether information learned from the first clicker discussion was being successfully applied to the next question.

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As concluded in a paper authored by Su, Smith, Wieman, and other CU researchers in the Jan. 2 issue of the journal Science, the team found that classroom discussions generated by using the i-Clicker improved student responses for both the first and second questions.

What's even more exciting for Su, however, is being a part of a team dedicated to fine-tuning the academic process.

"We are at forefront in applying the scientific method to understand how students are learning," Su said. "[SEI] is a really unique program that's going on at CU. Ultimately, it will be to the benefit of science professors around the world."

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