



The Intersection of Ethical Decision-Making Modules and Classroom Response Systems in Business Education

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Abstract

This paper supports the idea that cutting-edge classroom technology tools can blend seamlessly with “old school” teaching techniques, and produce a higher quality of student learning. More specifically, it discusses how Classroom Response Systems (CRS) provide the crucial classroom ingredient for frank ethical discussions in business courses: Anonymity. To teach ethics in business, I use a module entitled Ethical Decision-Making in Contract Negotiations (business scenarios fraught with ethical dilemmas), and ask questions which challenge students’ moral codes and levels of empathy. With an old school “raise your hand” feedback method, there is a high probability that students will not provide candid responses (or they may not respond at all), for fear of what peers and/or the professor may think. Alternatively, by utilizing CRS, I get anonymous feedback and 100% class participation. However, there is an ongoing debate in academia on whether Clicker (Hardware) Technologies should be utilized or the emerging Free Application Technologies. The former is an effective tool, yet it is expensive for students to purchase and their professors may use different devices in class. On the other hand, all of my students bring a smartphone, tablet, or laptop to class, thus permitting the use of free CRS apps. These apps are easy to use and are equipped with multiple choice, short answer, and true/false questions/polling features. The results of each question are instantly viewable by students on the classroom projection screen, whether the professor uses a computer or a document camera to project data from a smartphone or tablet. In sum, this paper details my model to teach ethics, which is adaptable across the curriculum. The model is divided into three sections: (1) CRS student reaction multiple choice questions on ethics, leverage, and empathy, prior to discussing the Ethical Decision-Making in Contract Negotiations module; (2) Introduction and discussion of the module; and (3) CRS post-module reinforcement multiple choice questions which assess what students learned about themselves. Finally, this paper addresses the classroom limitations of merging traditional teaching methods with app technology, most particularly when the technology fails.

1. Introduction

I would trade all of my technology for an afternoon with Socrates. Steve Jobs, 2001

As excitement over MOOCs is all the rage in higher education, [1] there is a growing resistance from some professors to maintain the status quo of “old school” teaching techniques:

[T]here is a dynamic in a traditional classroom that MOOCs simply can’t provide. In small, in-seat courses and workshops, students discover that they are part of a community, in which each person has a responsibility to contribute and the reward of personal interaction. Such courses allow for flexibility, Socratic questioning, and serendipity. [2]

As business schools worldwide assess the need to reshape the modes of delivering content to an increasingly mobile and technologically demanding student audience, [3] such colleges must respect and remain sensitive to the angst that evolving technology is creating for seasoned professors. If the cutting-edge use of technology is a higher education “runaway freight train,” it is incumbent on each university to first educate professors on how novel technology actually enhances student engagement and learning, even in the traditional classroom setting. Once there is established “buy in” for these tools, I believe that many technology resistant professors will become more open to stretching the boundaries and definition of their classroom walls.

Techno-savvy educators are always on the lookout for the next “killer application,” or “killer app.” [4] This paper proposes that Classroom Response Systems (“CRS”) are underutilized classroom killer apps which should excite professors teaching with traditional techniques. These devices and applications can test learning on the spot, engage 100% of students, capture student data, or most importantly for me, maintain student anonymity when seeking candid responses to uncomfortable business ethics questions.



This paper will demonstrate a series of classroom exercises using CRS, identify the benefits and challenges of using CRS, and briefly compare the options of using computer hardware or software apps for laptops, tablets, and smartphones.

2. Teaching Business Ethics in the Classroom: CRS versus the Raised Hand

In the Robinson College of Business's required MBA law course (Legal Environment: Ethics and Corporate Governance) and the college's required undergraduate law course (Legal and Ethical Environment of Business), business ethics is obviously an essential learning objective and outcome. As stated in the MBA syllabus:

This course offers an understanding of how businesses can comply with the law and use an ethical culture as a positive strategy for making successful decisions. Law is often misconceived as a hindrance to business growth, a limitation on creative practices, and an issue to be avoided until absolutely necessary. This misconception has been highlighted in recent corporate scandals where many executives have assumed that speed and a lack of transparency are critical to financial success, and that law and ethics only get in the way of that success. On the contrary, ignoring the law and ethical obligations to owners, customers, and consumers exposes the company to legal and financial liability. When incorporated properly into managerial decision-making, law and ethics can become an affirmative strategic tool that functions to facilitate growth, creativity and competitive advantage.

A decade ago, the Ethics Education Task Force of the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business ("AACSB") stated that "[a]ll of us in business education need to think more deeply and creatively about how to advance ethical awareness, ethical reasoning skills, and core ethical principles that will help to guide business leaders as they respond to a changing legal and compliance environment as well as complex, conflicting, and sometimes highly problematic interests and opportunities." [5]

Years ago, in my MBA and undergraduate classes, I introduced a series of business ethics classroom modules and corresponding active learning questions loosely entitled: "What Would You Do?" After briefly discussing the modules with students, I would ask for a show of hands on what students would do if they faced specific ethical dilemmas in a business setting. While most students participated in the exercises, I noticed that a number of students were reluctant to raise their hands on many questions, possibly in fear of what peers and/or the professor may think of their ethical choices.

In 2011, I explored ways to enhance higher order thinking modules with classroom technology. In 2012, I experimented with an education software app, Socrative, [6] and was determined to integrate its use into my ethics exercises for a Professional MBA ("PMBA") law course.

The typical PMBA class has 30-40 students. Each person is given a tablet upon entering the program, and professors are encouraged to innovate in and out of the classroom with meaningful student engagement on the tablets. Using Socrative's free app, I presented a series of questions in a yes/no or multiple choice format, and students responded anonymously on their tablets. Then, I displayed the results on the classroom document camera and sought student reactions and follow up comments.

To use Socrative, a professor needs to search for and download the "Teacher App" on a tablet, smartphone, or computer. Students must do the same thing for the "Student App." In class, the professor logs in and shows students what classroom number is listed. Students then are able to log on to that classroom, as the professor selects an activity (such as multiple choice questions), and controls the flow of questions and activities. Student responses appear only on that professor's device. Below is an abridged version of questions within select ethics modules [7] that students responded to anonymously via Socrative. The questions spurred provocative discussions on ethics, leverage, and empathy, ultimately leading to moral reflection. Thereafter, post-exercise questions reinforced what students learned about ethics and themselves.

2.1 Ethics Module: Non-Compete Agreements

1. You are the head of a company which does not have any employee non-compete agreements [8] in place. You just visited with outside counsel, who advises that your business is vulnerable to employees leaving the company to work for competitors, without such agreements for all employees.

- Would you require all new employees to sign a non-compete?
- Would you require all existing employees to sign a non-compete?



2. You are a middle manager who signed a non-compete agreement at your current place of employment, yet you have an interview tomorrow for a job with a competitor. The job description falls within the parameters of your non-compete.

- Do you inform the competitor at the job interview about your existing non-compete agreement?
- Does your response differ if you quit your place of employment and then went on the interview?
- Does your response differ if you were laid off by your employer and then went on the interview?
- Once you have the job with that competitor, do you ever inform the principals that you are subject to a non-compete? (In this scenario, there is a 50% chance that your prior employer will find out about your new place of employment.)
- Does your response differ if there was a 25% chance?
- How about a 0% chance?
- Now assume that an attorney advised you that the non-compete you signed likely will not be enforceable if you are taken to court by your former employer. Does that fact change any of your previous responses?

2.2 Ethics Module: Sale of a Business

You are the owner of a successful pharmacy on a busy street corner for the past ten years. Through your contacts, you learn that a large pharmacy chain will start breaking ground on a new store which is three blocks away from your store. You fear that the large chain will drain revenue from your business, and thus, the time is right to put the store and inventory up for sale.

- After three months of seeking a buyer, someone makes a reasonable offer for your business, which you accept. Assume that you know that the pharmacy chain will be breaking ground on the new store a mere three weeks after your sale closes. Also, assume that the contract executed by the buyer and seller makes no reference to you, the seller, having a duty to disclose any material facts you know of which could impact the value of the business. Before you close the deal, would you inform the buyer about the pharmacy chain?
- Does your response differ if the contract references the seller's "duty to disclose material facts"?

After the success of using these modules in a small group setting, I decided to use Socrative in my undergraduate business law class with 120 students. Unlike the PMBA students, these individuals do not receive a tablet upon entering the college. However, most of my students bring an array of electronic devices to class, including tablets, laptop computers, and smartphones. On my test run, I asked these students to download the Socrative student app. Some expected and unexpected events occurred.

I explained to the students that the free student app had a limit on the number of participants in a given classroom session. Thus, I asked students to double up with a classmate on one device. Regardless, I was unable to conduct the session due to user error (not app error), possibly because I failed to log off from an old Socrative session and back on in the new physical classroom. In an ironic twist on technology, I attempted to use the old school "raised hands" method, determined quickly that it wasn't working in a class of 120 people, and shifted the discussion mode in a different direction.

3. CRS App Technology versus Clicker (Hardware) Technology

Socrative is a free software app technology. Many similar apps are getting attention, including Top Hat Monocle, [9] which is a fee-based service with the capacity to handle large classroom sections. [10] However, the great debate over which CRS that professors should adopt (software or hardware clickers) begins with an issue other than cost or even functionality.

Rather, the initial discussion needs to center around whether professors should permit students in a college classroom to access a laptop, tablet, or smartphone. As one professor noted, smartphone use "got to the point of being distracting, not only to the person using it but to multiple people in the classroom." [11]

Hardware clickers solve this dilemma. These CRS require software loaded onto a classroom computer or a professor's laptop, and each student must purchase clicker devices. A professor utilizing clickers observed that the devices "have altered, perhaps irrevocably, the nap schedules of anyone who might have hoped to catch a few winks in the back row, and made it harder for them to respond to text messages, e-mail and other distractions." [12]

On the other hand, hardware clickers are an added expense to the student and if a university does not have a uniform clicker policy, it is conceivable that students must pay for several clickers to keep pace



with which device a particular professor uses. Clickers are also creating new challenges, as students are figuring out novel ways to avoid attendance through clicker policies in large classes. One day in class, a professor made this unfortunate discovery: Several student clicker “owners had skipped class, but their clickers had made it!” [13]

For a list of hardware clicker and software app web sites, see the References section of this paper. [14]

4. Conclusion

A professor recently offered this balanced perspective on classroom software apps: "As with any new technology, there are good and bad sides. It's not all bad - young people's connectivity means they are more likely to engage with professors. [We should] use these technologies [with students] for good instead of yelling at them because it isn't going to work." [15]

CRS, whether through apps or clickers, have benefits and pitfalls in the classroom. It is up to professors to determine any pedagogical advantages of these devices and decide when to expand their personal technology comfort zones. Ultimately, business schools should take a leadership role in testing CSR and recommending one device or app to faculty. In turn, the university should move to adopt a uniform CRS campus policy, [16] while ensuring sufficient technical support for faculty and students.

References

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- [2] Carolyn Foster Siegel, *MOOCs R Us*, Inside Higher Ed (Mar. 7, 2013), <http://www.insidehighered.com/views/2013/03/07/thomas-friedman-wrong-about-moocs-essay>.
- [3] Geoff Gloeckler, *The Best Business Schools 2012*, Bloomberg Business Week (Nov. 15, 2012), <http://www.businessweek.com/articles/2012-11-15/the-best-business-schools-2012>.
- [4] Mary Harrsch, *RSS: The Next Killer App for Education*, The Technology Source (July/Aug. 2003), <http://technologysource.org/article/rss/>.
- [5] *Ethics Education in Business Schools*, Report of the Ethics Education Task Force to AACSB International Board of Directors, June 2004, cited in Linda A. Reid and Curt M. Weber, *Using Technology-Enabled Active Learning Tools to Introduce Business Ethics Topics in Business Law Courses: A Few Practical Examples*, 25:2 Journal of Legal Studies Education 283, 285 (2008), <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1744-1722.2008.00054.x/pdf>.
- [6] “Socrative is a smart student response system that empowers teachers to engage their classrooms through a series of educational exercises and games via smartphones, laptops, and tablets.” Socrative, <http://socrative.com>.
- [7] The ethics modules include ethical dilemmas relating to Non-Competes, the Sale of a Business, Inducing a Business to Breach a Contract for Financial Gain, and the Terms of a Severance Agreement. In the interest of brevity, this paper only treats the first two topics listed.
- [8] For a brief discussion of non-compete agreements, see Richard Tuschman, *Employee Non-Compete Agreements: One Size Doesn't Fit All*, Forbes (Feb. 18, 2013), <http://www.forbes.com/sites/richardtuschman/2013/02/18/employee-non-compete-agreements-one-size-doesnt-fit-all/>.
- [9] Top Hat Monocle, <https://www.tophatmonocle.com>.
- [10] Top Hat Monocle is being used by a professor with 600 hundred students in a class at a Canadian university. See <https://www.tophatmonocle.com/tour/casestudies>. Student cost is \$20/semester or \$38/five years. See <https://www.tophatmonocle.com/tour/pricing>.
- [11] Ryan, Lytle, *Smartphone Use Among College Students Concerns Some Professors*, U.S. News & World Report (Education) (Mar. 21, 2012), <http://www.usnews.com/education/best-colleges/articles/2012/03/21/smartphone-use-among-college-students-concerns-some-professors>.
- [12] *Id.*



- [13] Jacques Steinberg, *More Professors Give Out Hand-Held Devices to Monitor Students and Engage Them*, The New York Times (Nov. 15, 2010), http://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/16/education/16clickers.html?_r=0 (exclamation point added).
- [14] Clicker (Hardware) Technologies include Smart Response Systems: <http://www.smarttech.com/>; Promethean Activate: <http://www.prometheanworld.com/>; eInstruction: <http://www.einstruction.com/>; iRespond: <http://www.irespond.com/>; Quizdom: <http://quizdom.com/>; Powercom: <http://www.powercomars.com/>. Free Application Technologies include Poll Everywhere: <http://www.polleverywhere.com/>; SoapBox: <http://gosoapbox.com/>; VotApedia: <http://www.urvoting.com/>; Socrative: <http://www.socrative.com/>; ProProfs: <http://www.proprofs.com/>. Lists compiled by Beth Lander and Sheila Stoeckel, *Tips & Trends: Classroom Response Systems*, Association of College and Research Libraries and American Library Association (Winter 2012), <http://www.ala.org/acrl/sites/ala.org.acrl/files/content/aboutacrl/directoryofleadership/sections/is/isweb/website/projpubs/tipsandtrends/2012winter.pdf>.
- [15] *Smartphone Use Among College Students*, *supra* note 11.
- [16] See CRS Policy at Vanderbilt University, <http://cft.vanderbilt.edu/teaching-guides/technology/clickers/>. Most schools in the university adopted the same clicker device. *All links in this paper were last accessed on March 19, 2013.*