

## Zapping for Learning

**ROB ANDERSON**

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Those who attended the winter luncheon of the Teaching and Learning Committee got a brief look at a new technology for enhancing student participation in large lecture classes. Dr. Beverly Berger, chair of the physics department, demonstrated the Wireless Personal Response System in a demonstration she called "Zapping for Learning". Some may greet the manufacturer's tag "the Interactive Lecture" with understandable skepticism: why do we need a new techno-gizmo to create an interactive lecture, when humans (at least competent teachers) have what appears to be an inherent capacity for interactivity: conversation skills.

Dr. Berger's presentation demonstrated just how this new adaptation of an older technology can be useful. The Wireless Personal Response System consists of a classroom set of remote control devices linked to a laptop computer and a projection system which helps a teacher gauge on the fly how well students are learning the material presented during a lecture or discussion. When presented with a multiple choice question, students can select the appropriate answer by pushing a key on their "zappers."

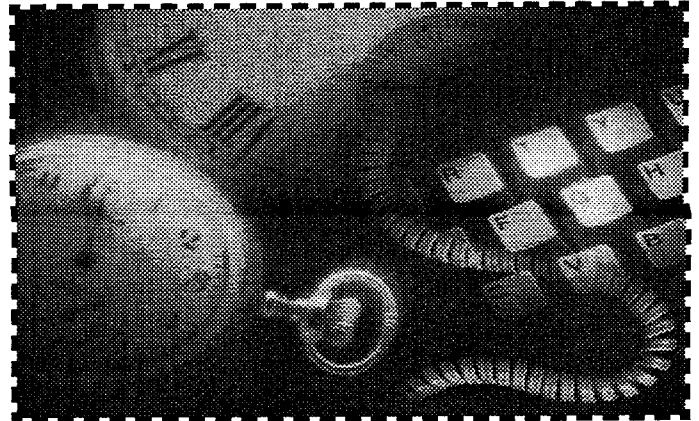
Strategically placed receptors (the number is determined by the size of the class) track the responses, which are then tabulated and projected on the screen. The computer simultaneously records the student responses, which can be tabulated later to judge an individual student's record during the class period.

As the computer tabulates the responses and the projector displays the graphs of the results—in a fashion that recalls the "poll the audience" lifeline on *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?*—a teacher can judge how many of the students are "getting" the material. For example, in response to Dr. Berger's first question—identifying the day of the week for that demonstration, a small but significant portion of the audience insisted that the day was either Monday or Friday, although the calendar noted it was Tuesday. However, since there was no attempt to register the individual zappers to the person using them

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(as there is in Dr. Berger's classes to facilitate recording of a student's participation), we can safely assume that the



errant choices were wishful thinking or deliberate testing of the parameters of the system.

As Dr. Berger explains, the projected results provide more advantages than enabling the teacher to gauge understanding of the material during the course of the lecture: it allows the students to see for themselves how their own learning is progressing, thus giving them a sense of how they are doing before the exam. A decrease in the number of students surprised by their performance on an exam has obvious benefits for both students and teachers.

There also seems to be a benefit that is more intangible than tracking student learning along the way: Dr. Berger explains that students seem to like zapping. She began investigating the Wireless Personal Response System when she noticed attendance in her large lecture courses sagged.

Because she makes available lecture notes for the class on the Internet, many students simply do not attend class. On average, about 20% of a class would be present on any given (non exam) day. She makes the lecture notes available to students on line because the computer-based format of the astronomy lectures makes it difficult for students to take notes. When she noticed students not attending, she began introducing daily quizzes, but students would leave after the quiz, or would show up late when the quizzes were going to be offered late in the hour—a practice not limited to students of physics general education courses. She thought the zappers would provide students with an incentive to attend because it would enable her to keep track of their participation in a way that would translate easily to a grading system. After introducing the system, she noted that about 80-90% of the 120 students enrolled in the class would be present.

Dr. Berger noted that when she introduced the system

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# Shakespeare and the Question of Distance Learning

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A recent issue of Education Life featured an interview article

about the work of Dr. William Sanders:

*The Teacher Factor—*

*A bad one can thwart a child's progress for at least four years says a University of Tennessee statistician, who has quantified just how much teachers matter.*

*(The New York Times, January 9, 2000)*

But how much do teachers really matter—in the real rather than virtual classroom?

Clearly web based learning, not only here to stay, will expand its hegemony in the delivery of certain kinds of knowledge. As a teacher of early modern (English Renaissance) literary texts, I am particularly interested in the kind of dialogue web supplemented courses can produce between students, as way of making their knowledge gathering a more collaborative and less solipsistic enterprise. But it should be equally clear that certain kinds of knowledge resist being delivered or shared electronically by the very nature of their educational and cultural value. The study of literature, for example, has been identified by the wider university as an especially fruitful discipline for developing what is called critical thinking. But where Shakespeare's own plays can be demonstrated to think critically themselves, I would argue that the appreciation and understanding of these Shakespearean capacities need to be transmitted not electronically but dialogically. The question then follows: can pointing and clicking a visually authoritative screen or engaging a distant classroom through audio visual equipment approximate in any meaningful way the presence of live bodies, students and teachers, to each other, on the stage we call a classroom? The invitation to develop web based courses should invite us to consider as well those aspects of the subjects we teach that resist mediatizing. In my field of Shakespeare studies I can think of three.

The first is that the subject of Shakespeare—while it has meant many different things to many different sorts of people for the past 400 years—is inevitably an art of performance, and that the teaching of this art—either for those who will themselves perform it, or for those whose reading and beholding will carry on the historical traditions of interpreting Shakespeare—seems to demand some performative notion of pedagogy. That the classroom is a kind of theater will seem like a very natural idea to many teachers of literature, but I want to clarify that what I mean by performative pedagogy doesn't necessarily involve histrionic display; teachers of Shakespeare can perform poetic, textual, and theatrical meaning for their students in much more subtle ways than usurping the roles of the Shakespearean characters

they teach. While Internet screens exploit our culture's visual literacy and attentional focus through mediatized consciousness, it is worth mentioning that the kind of performance Shakespeare pedagogy makes use of is related more to an interpersonal dynamic of the theater than to a passive visual medium.

Secondly, the art of teaching Shakespeare is as much an act of beholding as it is of performing. By this I mean that the model of performative pedagogy I have just been describing owes much of its success—what educationalists attempt to call learning outcomes—to the psychological dynamics of emulation. In the classroom, physically before and among our students, we ourselves are witnesses of the capacity to behold and understand what we hope to inculcate in our students. The problem with the whole notion of learning outcomes is that the closer our students move toward real consciousness of Shakespearean depth and complexity the less effective become any of the conventional instruments for measuring their increase in knowledge. It is worth remarking that the subject Shakespeare has a long history of being exploited by academic institutions to examine, measure, and categorize the varieties of human intelligence. In the nineteenth century, for example, you didn't get sent up to Cambridge unless you passed with flying colors your Shakespeare Exam; extant copies of cheap Shakespeares inscribed by examining board members and awarded to successful entrants are historical proof of the existence of the Shakespeare Ur-SAT.

I'm led to my third point: to the extent that Shakespeare pedagogy distinguishes itself in motive and strategy from the exploitative uses of Shakespeare I've just cited, it recognizes that knowledge is produced by the creative interaction of teachers, students, and plays, rather than in the student "educational product" alone. A part of the (I don't mind saying) *mysterious* nature of this interaction is that it occur between real bodies in real space and time. What these bodies might discover—if they dialogically engaged the accountability of certain learning outcomes—is that only a "virtually" transmitted and purveyed "knowledge" of Shakespeare could array itself as definite set of knowable facts about a textually stable set of wonder works. The nearer truth is that there is little in Shakespeare that signals such definiteness. Peering ever more closely into the monumental plays themselves (as one of my own teachers has liked to put it) gives the impression that they were founded upon shifting sands. Stephen Greenblatt writes that

We want to believe, as we read the text, "This is the play as Shakespeare himself wanted it read," but there is no license for such a reassuring sentiment. To be "not of an age, but for all time"

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means in Shakespeare's case not that the plays have achieved a static perfection, but that they are creatively, inexhaustibly unfinished. (The Norton Shakespeare, p. 67, 1997)

So another truth about Shakespeare that can't be approached except in close interaction between students and teachers over a scattering of texts is precisely the collaborative nature of those texts. If compromise and collaboration were a part of what it meant for the historical Shakespeare to be a man of the theater, so too are these the valued social modes of dialogue and pedagogy that inform today's Shakespeare class or seminar. Web based instruction narrows and constrains these values. It sells the notion that Shakespeare knowledge is a transmissible product, and that its buyers can point and click toward privileged possession. Web based instruction bathes the educational product it magically delivers in the light of an authoritative technology. But the whole

### ZAPPING, continued

students seemed to enjoy using the zappers. She conceded that it has introduced a little unruliness—especially at the beginning of the semester, it takes a moment for students to settle down after the periodic zapping exercises. Here Dr. Berger integrates the Wireless Personal Response System into her classes. At the beginning of the semester each student is registered to a specific zapper (to save money each zapper can be arranged to accommodate two students). This allows the teacher to maintain a running record of a particular student's responses throughout the semester. She informs the students how she will be using the zappers to record their participation and how that will work into their final grade. She also informs them that some of the exam questions will be taken from the zapper questions.

The system can accommodate both questions that are formulated in advance and integrated into a Power-Point style presentation and spontaneous questions that emerge out of a discussion and are either written on the board or posed orally, although the spontaneous questions would be harder to track because the teacher would have to remember the question and the correct answer. When a question comes up, the projector displays the question and the multiple choices for answers, and displays the amount of time allotted for the answer (which is set by the teacher). The teacher can set the number of times students may change their answers in the allotted time (the software only recognizes the last response). The program also allows students to note the degree of their confidence. Dr. Berger allows students to talk about their responses during the period. Although this may lead some students to confuse their socially-enhanced correctness with their individual accuracy, the interaction among students seems to be an important part of the system's success.

At the end of a session, the software has a marking program which records answers to questions; lists who

history of Shakespeare pedagogy has moved toward de-centering patriarchal forms of interpretive authority. *Having finally rid ourselves of the father, should we set up Big Brother in his place?*

Dr. William Sanders of Tennessee asks, "What specifically can be found out about the importance of teachers?" and "How much can a teacher affect what a student learns?" But how far the sort of pedagogy I've been talking about is from the utilitarian calculus of Statistician Sanders is a matter of how we decide to define the important place of Shakespeare in the general education of our students—an importance which cannot be statistically analyzed, anymore than you might try to pin Hamlet himself to a scantron table and subject his mystery to a grid of identificatory dots and holes. I suppose one could learn this truth from a great geographical distance, electrically abridged, where the crucial psychic fact of pedagogical presence has been digitized into a virtuality.

answered, and who answered correctly.

It will distribute points for correct and incorrect answers according to a scale the teacher dictates. This allows the teacher to determine which students need more help, which subjects are troubling students, and which students are not attending class. It also facilitates the recording and grading of participation for those who count it in the final grade.

Although there are some negative side-effects (the confusing socially augmented accuracy with individual competence and the momentary commotion after the zapping period) Dr. Berger is quite pleased with the system.

It is more difficult to see how the system could work in courses like philosophy and literature, but there are some possibilities. I could see using the system to facilitate discussion-starting questions about ambiguous questions without attempting to track right and wrong answers but to get a sense of the range of responses available. Of course, there is no reason that such a system need be useful in all disciplines, but there is also no reason it would not be useful in all disciplines. Dr. Berger is quick to acknowledge that although the company website (<http://www.bedu.com/publications.html>) does include citations of academic studies of the system, her observations are anecdotal.

The physics department purchased a lecture package for \$2500, which included two receivers and 50 zappers, and 10 extra zappers for \$480 more.

For about \$3,000, then, they acquired a system which will accommodate classes with enrollments of up to 60 students. A smaller classroom package is also available for \$1600, which includes 1 receiver and 30 zappers.

The zappers could also be keyed to a student number, which would make it possible for students to rent zappers for a semester and use them in several classes.

Dr. Berger's talk is available online at <http://www.oakland.edu/~berger>.

## Call for Nominations 2002 Teaching Excellence Awards

The Senate Teaching and Learning Committee is pleased to announce a call for nominations for the 2002 Teaching Excellence Awards. One award will be made for the academic year 2001-2002 to a full-time tenured or tenure-track member of the Oakland University faculty and the other to a part-time faculty member of Oakland University. Each award includes a cash stipend of \$2500 and will be presented at the fall 2002 commencement.

Nominations may be made by any member of the oakland University community, including students, faculty, alumni, and staff. Faculty may not self-nominate for the Award. The letter of nomination should address the nominee's accomplishments based on the following criteria: superior teaching; innovative instructional practices; high educational standards; productive learning environment; demonstrated ability to inspire and motivate students.

Student nominations are a highly valued component of this process. Faculty are encouraged to announce the nomination process in all classes.

The Committee will contact the nominees and chairs of their departments to request additional information. Previous Teaching Excellence Award winners and current members of the Teaching & Learning Committee are not eligible. A plaque containing the names of previous Teaching Excellence Award winners is on display in the lobby of Kresge Library.

Letters of nomination should be sent to: Teaching & Learning Committee, Attention: Prof. Tamara Machmut-Jhashi, 323 Wilson Hall, Oakland University, Rochester, MI 48309-4493. For more information contact Prof. Tamara Machmut-Jhashi at (248) 370-3389 or at machmutj@oakland.edu.

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