Audio Transcript of ODLI on Air | Season 1, Episode 4 | Utilizing a Student Response System with Dr. Simon Ruchti

NARRATOR: Welcome to ODLI on Air, where we expand teaching and learning perspectives by connecting to theory and practice through conversations with expert West Chester University faculty and members of the Office of Digital Learning and Innovation. And now to our hosts.

JESSICA DRASS: Hello everyone, and welcome to ODLI on Air. I'm Jes, the Learning Technologist in the Office of Digital Learning and Innovation. Co-hosting today with my colleague…

MADISON STEINBRENNER: Hi, everyone. I'm Madison Steinbrenner. I'm one of the Instructional Designers in the Office of Digital Learning and Innovation.

JESSICA: Today, we are sitting down with Dr. Simon Ruchti to talk about his use of student response systems, specifically Poll Everywhere (that's what we use here at West Chester [University]), in class to encourage interactivity and active learning. Simon, thank you so much for joining us today!

DR. SIMON RUCHTI: Hi! Thank you.

JESSICA: Do you want to start off by telling us a little bit about yourself?

SIMON: So, I'm an Associate Professor in the Philosophy department. Most of my courses are First Year Experience courses and I teach a lot of large lecture halls for Women's and Gender Studies. And then, of course, Philosophy courses.

JESSICA: I actually took a couple of your courses during my undergrad here at West Chester and I remember the format was largely engaging, discussion-based lectures. Could you tell us a little bit about the current format of your courses? Is there a lot of discussion going on?

SIMON: A lot of my classes now are anywhere from 100 to 200 students; sometimes more. So, if things go well, I can get, you know, a third of the class talking. If things go *really* well, we can get well over half the class talking. In my smaller classes, I usually expect a lot more discussion.

So, I do lectures, but the lectures are always using interactions, discussions, questions with the students.

MADISON: Would you say that these discussions follow the format of a *Socratic Seminar*? And in case, listeners, you aren't familiar with a Socratic seminar, maybe you want to explain this a little bit, Simon?

SIMON: I would say that, to start, it would be ambitious for me to say that I pull that off. The idea of a Socratic seminar is you take a text and you sort of deep dive into it. And the professor's job is to ask sort of broad, open-ended questions, right? And then the students share their opinion, but my job is often to just disagree with them. Not for the point of telling them they're wrong, but to the point of getting them to think through their opinions.

However, I always tell my students beginning a semester, I take a very obnoxious approach to the Socratic method. And so, a lot of what I do is kind of teasing my students or saying something that I know is fundamentally wrong and kind of wait for them to turn the table and challenge me.

So, it is kind of like that, but not entirely.

JESSICA: You're kind of riffing off of it.

SIMON: Yeah, it's a kind of lazy riff of the Socratic Method.

JESSICA: And that is a connection to theory here. [Chime Sound Effect] In Norman Eng's book, *Teaching College*, one of the tips [he provides] for discussions is he suggests using that Socratic Seminar format. And again, I know you're not following the rules exactly, but I think it's close enough…

[Light Laughter]

JESSICA: So, discussions, especially in-person discussions, can be intimidating for some students. Do you establish and enforce any rules of engagement with your classes?

SIMON: Yeah, especially- The courses I teach tend to be on things like structural oppression and ethics and so, inevitably, students are going to be worried about saying the wrong thing. So, I always start every class with, basically, rules of engagement. We have to understand that at any point somebody is going to say something that offends you, and that's perfectly fine, so long as their intent isn't to offend you, but their intent is to come to a better understanding. And so, I remind my students that when they're going to get upset with somebody for saying something, say homophobic, they need to remember the time that somebody was offended by something they said that was racist. And that doesn't mean that they were a bad person for saying the homophobic or the racist thing. It's okay to be mad about it and be offended and talk about it, but we don't attack each other.

JESSICA: Yeah.

SIMON: And I also kind of give some common language that we can all agree on to use. Because a lot of times students would say to me, "I want to ask a question, but I don't know the right term to use for whatever thing."

JESSICA: Yeah. And again, especially with some of that subject matter, they are difficult things to talk about. And students might be scared to speak up in some cases, but I think having that

baseline, being able to navigate those disagreements, and then having you as an instructor kind of moderating is helpful.

And that is also a connection to theory. [Chime Sound Effect] [Laughter] Those rules of engagement in discussion.

SIMON: One of the other things I do want to add (and I think about), and I do a lot of (and I let my students know I'm going to do this), is I make a lot of mistakes in class, hoping that the students will call me out for it, but if they don't, I point it out.

So, the idea being, making sure that they understand that even people who teach this for a living are going to mess up.

JESSICA: Yeah.

SIMON: And so, messing up is an important part of the learning process.

JESSICA: Just from having taken your classes- I know it's kind of weird. [Laughter] That was seven years ago and now I'm working here and I'm doing professional development-

SIMON: And now I'm coming to you for help all the time…

[Laughter]

JESSICA: Exactly! But I think, having been a student in your classes, that is what made you just, so approachable and I didn't feel about coming to you with any questions or anything.

SIMON: Because I was a hot mess.

[Laughter]

MADISON: So, kind of shifting on this a little bit, could you tell us a little about your use of a student response system, specifically Poll Everywhere, in your courses? What led you to incorporating this tool into your lectures instead of maybe having people raise their hands and speak in-person?

SIMON: Honestly, it was when I moved to teaching 150-200 students in a class. There's no way I can lecture.

MADISON: Yeah.

SIMON: I can't work off lecture notes. I have dyslexia and ADHD. And so, I literally cannot read while I'm teaching. And so, I had to come up with a way to maintain a structure that would help me stay focused. But also, lectures like that, they don't work. Especially for what I teach.

So, people kept coming by the office talking about these polling systems and so I started using one. And what I found was that my engagement- once I figured out how to use them correctly-

student engagement skyrocketed. Like, better than what I had in my small, discussion-based classes. And students loved them.

Some of the questions that we would come up with on the fly, as we were going, just as a student would say- Things like, I'd write a question and they'd say, "That question doesn't make any sense." And we'd look at it and be like, "Oh, that's because I reversed the order of the words." [Laughter] So then we'd redo it, but then sometimes students would say, "No, but the *premise* of your question is wrong." And when we talked about the Socratic thing, that was where I found them really starting to get comfortable engaging with me.

And so, then I would start to *intentionally* create crappy questions. Then I'd sit there and wait for students to tell me there's a problem with the question. And then I started actually doing that on my exams, more and more.

JESSICA: That's awesome.

SIMON: For like a mid-term, not a final, but I would put in a question that the way the question was written, students could look at it and say, "Yeah, that doesn't make any sense." I'd be like, "Okay, bonus point for the whole class."

JESSICA: That's awesome!

MADISON: Yeah.

JESSICA: And I feel so redundant, but again [Chime Sound Effect], you're talking about those large lecture halls and how the student response system, Poll Everywhere, has increased engagement. There are a ton of journal articles on this, but the one that I cherry-picked was published in 2009. It's from Gauci et. Al. (I'll put it in the show notes). But basically, they did a study at the University of Melbourne involving undergrad physiology students and they implemented a student response system with the goal of increasing active learning and student engagement. And they found a significant increase in, not only student engagement, but [also] testing scores. [Students] scored significantly higher on their midterms and finals. So, I thought that was interesting and kind of highlights the benefits of using that kind of system. And the fact that you're confirming that the engagement in your larger courses went up, even more so than you've seen in some of your smaller courses, is…

SIMON: One of the things I, you know- just because I've been really pushing the success of the Poll Everywhere stuff, is that there have been times at the end of, you know, an hour-and-15-minute class with 100- even with my class with 200- plus students in it, where I'm trying to say to students, "We need to leave now," [Laughter] like, "Class is over; we need to stop." And that would almost always happen after we had been doing a lot of- not polling just for asking, "Do you know the content?" but discussion, incentivizing polling. Students are always bringing their friends to class and-

MADISON: Oh, wow! That's nice.

SIMON: students are doing the polling. They enjoy it

JESSICA: That's awesome! And would you say, overall, Poll Everywhere, specifically, is pretty easy to use?

SIMON: The interface is easier to use than the one I'd use before… in some ways. There are some issues I have with it, but, overall, it's easier to use.

I have not yet once had all of my poll data just disappear unless I made the mistake. [Laughter] So, that's a good thing.

JESSICA: And I know we've kind of gone back and forth a little bit. For those listening that don't know, I actually am the administrator of Poll Everywhere [at WCU]. So, if you're trying to get a presenter account, you can email me at jdrass@wcupa.edu. So, Simon and I have sat down a couple times- you know, maybe I'm skipping forward a little bit (I was going to get to this later), but what are some roadblocks you've encountered with use of Poll Everywhere. Are there any features maybe you'd like to see that aren't yet available?

SIMON: Well, there are two major ones. The first one (that I was able to use with the previous system that I used)- within PowerPoint, I could be on a poll, return, and then type up a brand-new question. And the thing that was great about that is, if a student, you know, responded to a poll and said, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, but you're not thinking about blah, blah, blah," I could go, "Oh, really?" And then I would type up that question and really quickly throw in a few random answers. And students would often be like, "Put this in there, put that in there." And then I hit "Start" and it would run in a poll and I'd *love* that.

The other thing I would love is if they had it so that I could run my PowerPoints, my polls, everything, and create them on the fly, from an iPad. Because I would like to be able to do, when I'm not running a poll, I'll walk around the auditorium. But what I end up doing- I always get my steps in this way- I'm out there with a microphone, giving it to students, then I'm sprinting back up to the stage and running the polls. So, it'd be great if they had better integration with the mobile apps.

JESSICA: Yeah, I know we've looked into the Presenter App a little bit before and it was like, the app was available on an iPad, but you couldn't cast to the PowerPoint on a MacBook. It was specifically for the Windows version of PowerPoint. But if you have the technology for that, the presenter app is not bad. But there are some things, and I have talked to our vendor about it as well.

SIMON: They're *minor* things, though.

JESSICA: Yes, very minor.

SIMON: Considering. Some of the functionality- the interface with it is so much better than the previous ones, that I'm okay with waiting for them to make those changes.

JESSICA: Yeah. And I've found just interacting with them- and like, our case manager for them- they're very responsive and they do take those things into consideration, so…

SIMON: One of the greatest things for me, that I think might be useful for a lot of faculty to know about, is that- what's it called? We can aggregate the data- not aggregate; that's wrong. Oh, here we go! [Laughter] Words are hard!

So, I'll do a poll. I'll ask a question and I can show the results based on the gender or the race.

MADISON: Oh, that's interesting.

SIMON: So, a lot of the polling that I'll do, I'll ask a question, I'll throw up the answer, and students will be like, "Oh, okay," so they'll say, "Okay, well now….," and I can just very easily, from the PowerPoint, go in and say, "Now tell us who answered wha,t" based on their race, based on their gender.

JESSICA: Yeah, I think that they call it the demographic polls.

SIMON: Demographic, yeah. And one other thing that would be nice- if they got to the point where you could actually break it down by multiple categories. So, I would like to be able to break it down by race and gender simultaneously.

MADISON: Yeah, that would be really interesting data.

JESSICA: Yeah.

MADISON: This might be a broad question, but what kind of polls do you usually ask students to respond to?

SIMON: So, sometimes I just will ask them some questions where I want to see, "Did you actually do the reading?"

MADISON: Yeah.

SIMON: And so, I'll ask them a question from the text, or sometimes I'll ask them questions where I will often start by saying kind of, "What did you think of this reading? Was it too hard? Was it confusing? Did you disagree with it?" But the stuff that I find most useful is when we're asking questions that help them connect their lives to what we're studying in class.

For example, in one of my classes, I'll ask, "Have you ever had somebody harass you at a bar? A restaurant? Club? Party?" And then the next question is, "Have you ever had anybody touch your body?" And then I can break that down by gender. And then I'll ask, "Have you ever intervened when you saw a woman-," and I'll be specific in that case, "-a woman being harassed?" And the answers will, for the guys, will be almost every one of them will say, "Yes." But then the next question is, "Have you ever experienced a man intervening on your behalf?" And almost none of the women say yes. And so, the nice thing about that is I can say, "Okay. All of you guys think you're intervening."

JESSICA: Right.

MADISON: Yeah.

SIMON: All of the women and the nonbinary and genderqueer folks are saying, "Yeah, I've never experienced that." And so, we can have a really robust conversation about why that is.

So typically, for example, in this case, guys will think that walking up to their buddy and put their arm around him saying, "Yo bro, let's go here and talk," is an intervention. But what that person being harassed thinks, and all the other people around witnessing it think, is he's just patting his buddy on the back for calling this woman a "slut".

MADISON: Yeah.

JESSICA: Yeah.

SIMON: And those are the kind of things that Poll Everywhere is really good for. Because you can ask sort of generic questions, and everybody sort of assumes that everybody agrees with them. And then, all of a sudden, they look up and they go, "Oh." And I found that a lot of students would never participate in my class say, "I felt comfortable participating in a class because I realized I wasn't the only one in the room who thought that way."

JESSICA: Yeah!

SIMON: That's one of the nice ways of creating questions to get conversation going.

JESSICA: Yeah, definitely a great way to make students, you know, feel more comfortable about those discussions, knowing they're not alone.

Also, I feel like I'm hitting this button too many times, but [Chime Sound Effect] [Laughter] those questions make the lessons relevant because you're asking them beforehand- I'm assuming before you get into like the main content of the lecture, like, "Has this happened to you? How did you react in this situation?" so it gets them thinking about their personal experiences, which then makes it easier to relate [to] the new content.

MADISON: Mm hmm.

SIMON: And then also, honestly, it helps them remember the stuff later. Because if we have that conversation and then we get into the lecture content and I repeat some of what we've already talked about, it seems to me, from my understanding, that is going to help them with those multiple touchstones on the content- remember it.

JESSICA: Yeah. In your opinion, how have these Poll Everywhere activities enriched your lectures and discussions, overall?

SIMON: So, we've talked about a lot of things, like just getting students who wouldn't normally engage engaged. And when you're teaching- I use it a lot in big lecture halls, but I've also

started using it in smaller classes, because when students start drifting off, if they have to do the poll, then all of a sudden I bring them back.

JESSICA: Yeah.

SIMON: So, even when I've got 25 students in the class, that's a good way to to say, "Hey, I'm still waiting on a response," and then it, you know, brings students back.

I feel that it helps students feel more comfortable challenging me and the content because they see me, in real time, making mistakes. And as long as I'm encouraging them to say, politely, respectfully, that I've made a mistake, then I find that to be a big benefit. It gets rid of that top-down notion of teaching. Or, challenges it anyway.

JESSICA: Yeah, kind of makes them more responsible for…

SIMON: Yeah! They get to also be the educators in the room.

JESSICA: Which is another… [Chime Sound Effect]

[Laughter]

MADISON: We are full of them today!

JESSICA: Not just feeding them the content, but having them explore and come to that discovery in a more collaborative way.

MADISON: So, have you gotten any feedback from students?

SIMON: Students really like it.

MADISON: Okay.

SIMON: Even when I haven't been able to use it as effectively. Like, in my First Year Experience courses I haven't quite figured out a way to integrate it as well. The feedback was really positive for it. Sometimes there are students who don't like it, but those tend to be the students who just want to hear the information. They want me to do the lecture. They're consistently the students who are like "What's going to be on the test?"

[Laughter]

But most of the students who come into my class, this has always been the case and I suspect [with] some of the stuff I've been reading, it's going to be even more-so the case, as students have been, at home learning. They come in wanting to have those conversations that they always imagined college would be like. You know, the exciting, vital conversations where they aren't being censored. Where people are having disagreements. And some students don't like the disagreements, but as long as (I think) you keep them as calm as you can, they want to talk

about the big issues. And so, students have consistently said the pull everywhere is great for them being able to do that in a less tense, conflictual environment.

JESSICA: Because you can also, like with the responses- do you like have them show up anonymously on the screen?

SIMON: So yeah, I use a lot of anonymous questions. If you're going to use the demographics, you can't be anonymous.

JESSICA: Right.

SIMON: So it's very important to make sure they know that I will have access to that information, even though I'm not going to use it. But once you use the demographics, it's not anonymous. But there are certain questions that just have to be anonymous.

MADISON: Yeah.

SIMON: So, I make sure that they know that it's anonymous, and I think that helps a lot; students feel safe answering those questions.

JESSICA: Definitely. Do you have any advice for faculty who are interested in implementing a student response system in their course?

SIMON: Yeah. Be patient with yourself in the beginning, as you figure out how it's going to work for you, and encourage students to be patient. Just say, "Hey! This is new to me!"

There were a lot of glitches for me when I first started using it. It was taking up too much time in the classroom. The other system I used- they had to have these little clicker devices. It took *forever* to get that set up. But this new system is just an app, right?

One thing I would want to encourage, aside from just that sort of general "be patient with yourself," is I encourage people not to use it simply for taking attendance. If you're going to do that, that's fine. But if that's all it's for, students can find easy workarounds with that. But when you're using it throughout the class, then students start to expect it. Your students are going to be on their phones anyway.

JESSICA: Mm hmm.

SIMON: So, you might as well take advantage.

MADISON: Take advantage of it, yeah.

SIMON: However, what can happen is a student picks up their phone for a poll, they see a text, and now they're reading that text. So, you really need to kind of rein them back in. And it does take a lot of work at times, until you hit a rhythm. And then it's pretty good.

One other thing I would suggest, if you're going to use demographic polling, I've consistently run into this problem where you look out at the room and you've got, maybe, you think, possibly, two trans or genderqueer students. If you do gendered demographic polling, and you do just men and women, you've alienated those students.

JESSICA: Right.

SIMON: But now, if you say "men, women, genderqueer students," you've outed all of their answers. So, one of the ways that I've handled that is to at times say, "Hey, to avoid doing this, we're going to just pick- I want you to pick these two categories or none of the above." That way, it's like- it could be somebody who identifies as a man, identifies as a woman, picks none of the above.

JESSICA: Mm hmm.

SIMON: Sometimes I won't offer the "none of the above," or I will check in with that student. Say, "Do you want me to leave that option open for you?"

JESSICA: Yeah. Or, like, "I don't care to answer."

SIMON: Yeah.

MADISON: Yeah.

SIMON: So that's just- It's important to remember. And it's not just around gender, it's around race. And our students of color are so often asked to speak on behalf of an entire race that it becomes… you may opt not to use race as one of your demographic polls if you run the risk of revealing what that one, or two, students of color think in the class.

MADISON: Yeah, that's a good point.

JESSICA: Yeah, I think that "opt-out" is really great.

MADISON: What has been your favorite memory so far this summer? Anything exciting?

SIMON: Wow, there's a lot, actually! It's been a busy summer. We put in a pool in the backyard.

MADISON: That's fun!

SIMON: Yeah. And so, I think just hanging out the pool with the kids was fun.

JESSICA: That is fun. Is there anything you're looking forward to this fall?

SIMON: Nobody's going to believe this when I say it, but it *is* true. FYE.

JESSICA: Oh!

SIMON: [I'm] teaching two, three sections of FYE. And I really like teaching that class. You have the opportunity to help students figure out how to make the most of their college education. They pretend to be indifferent, but as you talk to them, they're really excited and nervous. And that's where I find students are- they're just like- you can tell the content in FYE where students are like, "I hate this."

[Laughter]

JESSICA: Yeah.

SIMON: And the stuff that I get excited about, it's the stuff that you see movies that make college look exciting.

JESSICA: Mm hmm.

SIMON: That's the stuff they get excited about! [Laughter] The other stuff, that we're like, "Oh, but this is so important!" they're like, "Ugh!"

JESSICA: "I don't care." That's awesome.

Okay, so let's see if Madison and I can recap the key points from today. One was, Simon, as a professor, you prefer a more interactive type of lecture rather than just standing there and talking at people or reading notes. And you do kind of riff off of a Socratic Seminar. It's not a *true* Socratic Seminar, but I think there are some elements there that make it work.

MADISON: We also talked about how Simon has used Poll Everywhere in his larger lectures to, you know, get engagement, make students more comfortable getting into those tough discussions, and really, how he kind of set up some rules for engagement for those tough discussions, too, so that students don't feel called out or that they're making mistakes and saying the wrong thing.

JESSICA: Yeah, and we did note that you have noticed an increased level of participation in using Poll Everywhere and have run some really interesting polls to get students to personally relate to the content before it's even presented to them. in some cases.

And lastly, your advice for faculty who are interested in implementing it is there is a little bit of a learning curve, so try not to get frustrated as you do that; there will be some kinks. And try not to use it just for attendance. Incorporate it into your classes to make your lectures and lessons more active and engaging.

On that note, if you do want to get started with Poll Everywhere, if you've not used it before as a presenter, you can contact me, Jes Drass, at jdrass@wcupa.edu. I'll put my email in the show notes. I do also offer one-on-one consultations if you want a deeper dive into the mechanics of it, how it works, and some best practices.

Simon, thank you so much for joining us today. It was great to sit down and talk and-

SIMON: Thank *you*.

JESSICA: See how you're using these strategies and tools in your courses to improve the student experience, and also your experience.

Thanks for listening today. If you have any interest in being a future guest or have any suggestions for a future topic, please email us at distanceed@wcupa.edu.

And we're closing now.

MADISON: Stay odd!

[Laughter]