

*Book review: Increasing student engagement and retention
using classroom technologies: classroom response systems and
mediated discourse technologies*

(Eds. Wankel, C. & Blessinger, P., 2013, Emerald)

David Ramsey

Zayed University, UAE

“Fatima, please tell your mom I said, ‘Hi’.”

Such a statement is one method that I employ to (re)gain students’ attention in face-to-face classroom environments and *away* from the uses of technology (in this case, texting on a cell phone) that detract/distract from such engagement. Too many times, students are not engaged *in* the face-to-face classroom environment and are using technology to be otherwise disposed.

Given the positioning and perspective outlined above, one might consider me to be an unexpected reviewer for the text “Increasing Student Engagement and Retention using Classroom Technologies: Classroom Response Systems and Mediated Discourse Technologies,” edited by Charles Wankel and Patrick Blessinger. I would posit, however, that the perspective outlined above is not unusual among faculty and serves as a useful starting point for the considerations offered. To be sure, the employment of technology in classrooms is, increasingly, not a choice but an expectation—an expectation of both students and institutions. As one example, Zayed University offers particular initiatives and resources for research on the uses of mobile technologies in the classroom. In this way, such resources provide an avenue “to meet students where they are” for productive academic purposes.

This text is part of a series (Volume 6) focused on “Increasing Student Engagement and Retention,” a component of the larger series, “Cutting-Edge Technologies in Higher Education.” Taken together, Volume 6 offers a wealth of information to consider; other compilations focus on wikis and blogs, social media, gaming and simulation, and Skype and texting technologies, among other areas. Other particularly interesting volumes in the series include Volume 1: “Educating Educators with Social Media” and Volume 5: “Misbehavior Online in Higher Education.”

As the title indicates, the focus of this volume is on mediated discourse technologies to “create technology rich social learning environments” (Wankel and Blessinger, 2013, p. 3) with the overall goal to increase student learning and engagement. Similar to other considerations of technology in classrooms, research on this topic has moved beyond ways to merely include technology to a critical analysis of the ways technology is best used to achieve particular course objectives.

In their introduction, Wankel and Blessinger offer two key principles of the entries in this volume: use of technology to promote inquiry in the classroom and, in so doing, to increase a sense of community and participation. Importantly, the editors impart that the technological tools discussed do not demand that professors radically change their teaching styles but instead offer “relatively easy and flexible way[s]” to enhance the classroom environment (Wankel and Blessinger, 2013, p. 9).

Some of the chapters focus on faculty and student perceptions of technology and related course design. For example, in “Where Technologies Collide: A Technology Integration Model,” by Christa L. Wilkin et al., the authors discuss “TPACK” or “the knowledge necessary for educators to integrate technology, pedagogy, and content” (Wankel and Blessinger, 2013, p. 83), arguing that the current TPACK model needs to account for contextual factors, educators’ experiences and attitudes of technology, and outcomes related to the employment of technology in educational settings. Lauren Miller Griffith and Brian A. Roberts, in “Learning Tool or Distraction: Student Responses to the Use of iOS Devices,” posit that educators must coach students in methods to employ devices they may already be using for educational purposes, to (re)design their courses with appropriate pedagogical practices. Robert Garrick et al. review student engagement and learning in a more general “technology-rich learning environment,” in which tablet PCs for each student, projection screens, and collaborative digital inking software are utilized; the authors found that this environment improved student grades, particularly those struggling academically. Julie Schell et al., in “Catalyzing Learner Engagement Using Cutting-Edge Classroom Response Systems in Higher Education,” present the development of a new classroom response system—Learning Catalytics—designed to utilize frequent feedback in creating classroom learning experiences. In the chapter, “Using The Phoebe Pedagogic Planner to Enhance Student Learning and Engagement in Undergraduate Psychology Courses,” by Mark J. Hager et al., the authors offer that, given the ubiquitous use of social media by today’s traditional college students, both students and faculty “must learn how to appropriate social and instructional media to educational ends”(Wankel and Blessinger, 2013, p. 48) and explore use of the Phoebe pedagogic planner to design course activities using appropriate technology.

Many of the chapters, to no surprise, focus on classroom employment of particular discourse technologies. For example, Ferdinando Pennarola and Leonardo Caporarello, in “Enhanced *Class Replay*: Will This Turn into Better Learning?,” consider the use of a classroom lecture recording system; with the system, a user can, for example, view anything shown by the instructor on a PC together with audio/video of the accompanying lecture. In the chapter, “The Networked Faculty and Student Engagement: The Case of Microblogging to Support Participation in a Human Resources Management Postgraduate Course,” by Antonella Esposito, the specific medium of microblogging is examined as an example of a use of social media that helps to facilitate student engagement and negotiated meanings within a course. In “Bringing the World into Our Classrooms: The Benefits of Engaging Students in an International Business Simulation,” Tine Kohler et al. consider the use of technology to provide a “real world” scenario related to the course, where participants are part of multicultural, global groups that either collaborate or compete with each other. Binod Sundararajan et al. examine the uses of texting and instant messaging as supplementary teaching mechanisms in “Mediated Discourse in Higher Ed Classrooms Using Text Messaging”; participants found the methods useful for discussion of material, opening new avenues for exploration, and keeping focused, and the authors found their uses to be quite similar to face-to-face conversations.

Still other chapters focus on the implementation of mediated discourse technologies beyond individual classrooms. For example, in the Chapter, “Enhancing Learning and Teaching Using Electronic Voting Systems—The Development of a Framework for an Institutional Approach for Their Introduction,” Amanda Jeffries et al. recommend that such systems be implemented institution-wide to help reduce overall assessment workload and increase both student engagement and learning, offering a framework for such implementation.

In sum, “Increasing Student Engagement and Retention using Classroom Technologies: Classroom Response Systems and Mediated Discourse Technologies” is a useful text for all faculty and

administrators in Gulf-area academic contexts—those, like myself, who are looking for ways to appropriate students' proclivity to use technology in the classroom for productive academic ends and those who are looking to enhance their repertoire of strategies for such academic use. Moreover, in valuing electronic discourse technologies in the classroom and in integrating them with face-to-face modes of learning, students may be more accepting of these "more traditional" modes of learning.

While the issues discussed are relevant to Gulf-area educators—faculty and, in a supportive role, administrators—none of the chapters address Gulf-area contexts specifically; the authors are associated with various institutions in Northern America and Europe. In this regard, then, this text can serve as useful springboard for further, related research in Gulf countries, with the specific positionalities (religious, cultural, and others) of its students and educators.