Opinion Polls

Estimated Levels of Time and Energy Required for:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task</th>
<th>Estimated Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Instructor to prepare to use this CAT</td>
<td>LOW to MEDIUM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students to respond to the assessment</td>
<td>LOW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructor to analyze the data collected</td>
<td>LOW</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**DESCRIPTION**

Many instructors already use de facto opinion polling in their classes when they ask students to raise their hands to indicate agreement or disagreement with a particular statement. This simple technique builds on that kind of informal polling, providing more anonymity for students and more honest and accurate data for faculty.

**PURPOSE**

Classroom Opinion Polls help instructors discover student opinions about course-related issues. Students often have preexisting opinions about the material they will encounter in courses, and those opinions—when they are unsupported by evidence—can distort or block the instructional message. The fact that many opinions are half-formed and unarticulated, and sometimes even unrecognized by the learners holding them, only intensifies their power to interfere with learning. By uncovering student opinions on specific issues, instructors can better gauge where and how to begin teaching about those issues—and what the roadblocks are likely to be. This CAT can sensitize instructors to potentially divisive questions and can provide a forewarning of likely conflicts. In addition, Opinion Polls encourage students to discover their own opinions about issues, to compare their opinions with those of their classmates, and to test their opinions against evidence and expert opinion.

**SUGGESTIONS FOR USE**

Instructors can use Opinion Polls to prepare students to discuss a controversial issue or to assess their opinions after they have studied the material. Polling can also be used as a pre- and post-assessment device, to determine whether and how students’ opinions have changed in response to class discussion and assignments. Because students are more likely to have opinions on some matters than others, and because opinions play a larger role in some disciplines than in others, Opinion Polls are most often used in social sciences, humanities, and professional studies courses. Thanks to its simplicity, this CAT can be adapted to almost any class, regardless of size. In fact, the data from Opinion Polls taken at the beginning of the class session can often be tallied and presented well before the end of the same class.

**STEP-BY-STEP PROCEDURE**

1. Preview the material that you plan to teach, looking for questions or issues about which students may have opinions that could affect their learning.
2. Choose one or two issues for your Opinion Poll and draw up the questions or prompt and the response choices. Decide whether the question or prompt requires a binary response choice,
such as “yes” or “no”; a scalar response with several choices ranging along a continuum, such as the scale running from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”; or a multiple-choice response.

3. After trying out the question and responses on a colleague and making any necessary revisions, create a polling form to duplicate, or a slide on your presentation deck.

4. Explain the exercise to students, remind them not to put names on the responses, and give them a couple of minutes to respond to the Opinion Poll.

**PROS**

- Polling and reporting opinions are familiar and inclusive activities that engage all the students – even the quietest and most reticent – in discovering and expressing their opinions.
- Sharing the results of an Opinion Poll help students see, firsthand, the diversity of opinions among their own classmates, and can help them learn to accept and work with that range of opinions in a democratic spirit.
- Instructors quickly gain information that can help them adjust their teaching approaches and prepare them to deal with a range of student opinions.

**CONS**

- Instructors sometimes find that students’ opinions are diametrically opposed to evidence, to expert opinion, and/or to their personal opinions. This outcome, though to be expected, can still come as an unpleasant surprise.
- Some students find it difficult to commit themselves to a response, even though that response is anonymous.

**CAVEATS**

- Polling students on their opinions implies that there will be discussion of the relevant issues. Be prepared.
- In using Opinion Polls, as in using all other CATS that concern opinions, attitudes, or values, remember that student anonymity must be maintained and that feedback must be given carefully to model respect and open-mindedness.
- You may prefer not to tally and respond to the polls immediately. If you are disappointed, shocked, or offended by the class’s answers, you may need time to prepare your response in private.