

Family & Health Research Brief

Clickers: Voice with Anonymity-- Implications for Research

Clickers – What are they?

Clickers are a relatively new technology, particularly within the realm of Cooperative Extension, community groups and university classrooms. Officially known as “audience response systems,” these handheld devices are linked to Turning Point software that allows an audience to “click” an answer to a particular question. All participants’ answers are displayed on the screen for everyone to view. Beyond the advantage of audience viewing and anonymous polling, this technique preserves the responses as research data for analysis with additional software.

Using Clickers for Research – Equalizing the Audience

Research study participants come from unique backgrounds that may lead them to feel uncomfortable in sharing their personal information, options or challenges. Because clicker technology assures that answers are anonymous, participants may feel freer to “click” their true answer. Clickers can be used to remove social, economic, political, gender or other barriers to participation by equalizing marginalized audiences. (1) Clickers can help stimulate participant engagement, as there is often a desire to view others’ responses. (1) By revealing all answers, participants are more likely to feel involved with the group and are thus encouraged to participate further.

Clickers - A New Tool for Qualitative Research

Our case study used clickers with a traditional qualitative research technique – focus groups. Seeing the responses on the screen led the participants to engage in discussions about the differences and similarities of their viewpoints. Clickers are able to elicit discussion, which is a great starting point since a challenge in a focus group is getting the participants to open up to the discussion. The quantitative data from clickers solidifies the comments garnered during the focus group discussion.

Lessons We Learned

We used clickers in multiple focus groups with racially and ethnically diverse mothers from rural low-income families in multiple states. (2) From our experience, we learned the following lessons:

1. Participants will come to the focus group with varying levels of technology expertise. Care must be taken to ensure they are comfortable with the clickers before beginning the session.
2. Retention of training information was marginal for state facilitators who did not conduct focus groups until 4-6 weeks after clicker training. For inexperienced researchers, clicker training needs to occur closer to use.

3. Using clickers may dampen facilitators' creative license, as they will be unable to change the order of the interview questions. Order is usually by design for a research study. Retaining order of questions must be clearly explained by the trainers and understood by the facilitators.

Conclusions

Clickers met our rationale: easy handling; anonymity for participants' responses; quick display of answers; and ability to store and later analyze data. Participants were able to view and comment on each other's answers, thereby allowing us to collect both qualitative and quantitative data. This pioneering case study is adding to the limited body of knowledge about the use of clicker technology in general and in research settings with rural, low-income mothers in particular.

Recommendations

We recommend that researchers and educators who use clickers: a) Be aware that slides are presented in a predetermined order and b) Make sure participants are comfortable with clickers at the start of the focus group.

References

1. Benavente, L. M., Jayaratne, K. S. U., & Jones, L. (2009). Challenges, alternatives, and educational strategies in reaching limited income audiences. *Journal of Extension* [On-line], 32(2) Article 6RIB2. Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/2009december/rb2.php>

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