

Checking In

Anna Hensley

University of Cincinnati

My teaching style hinges on close and ongoing communication with my students. Like many teachers across disciplines, I learn about my students through beginning-of-term surveys, through class discussions, and in one-on-one meetings. But one of the great luxuries of teaching writing is that I am afforded so many informal and impromptu opportunities to connect with my students. Lower course caps mean I quickly learn students' names and can easily participate in pre-class chats. Frequent small group activities and peer workshops give me the chance to circulate and check in on students' conversations with one another. And the nature of their writing projects means that many students share openly about their experiences with school, about their work and family lives, and about niche interests and generational trends that are important to them.

Learning about my students makes it easier to develop writing assignments they find meaningful and to select course content that resonates with them, but it also allows me to provide students with more individualized support. I am endlessly curious about my students and genuinely want to get to know them; the more I demonstrate this openness and respect for them as individuals, the more they are willing to share. And the more that students share—the more honest they are about what is happening in their lives and what is getting in the way of their progress in the class—the more I can offer realistic, personalized strategies and solutions that will get them across the finish line.

When classes moved online in March 2020, I felt profoundly disconnected from my students. I had no prior online teaching experience to draw from, and I also suddenly had my toddler home with me during the workday and could not hold synchronous online class sessions. Luckily, the good will, familiarity, and respect I had already cultivated with students meant that, by and large, they posted their work online, eagerly answered my emails, proactively sent me messages when they were struggling, and kept me updated with what was happening in school, at home, and at work. When my summer classes began, I had the benefit of a few online teaching workshops under my belt and felt better prepared to encourage class engagement in an asynchronous format. But I knew I wanted to find some way of asking the question that jump starts so many of my interactions with students: "How is it going?"

To that end, I instituted two practices for checking in with my students. The first was a set of informal Check-In assignments that were built into my Canvas course at regular intervals, typically after I introduced a major essay assignment and then shortly before that assignment was due. Each Check-In asked students to answer 3-4 simple questions like: "Is there anything

about this assignment that has you feeling confused, excited, or nervous?” “Do you think you’ll have any trouble meeting the deadline?” and “What can I do to help you as you work on this assignment?” I might also include questions about recent class activities, like, “How did the peer-review go for you? If you couldn’t participate, why?”

Students could answer each question with one or two words and earn full credit, but they also could (and frequently did) write much longer responses. Through these Check-Ins, students let me know when they were ill, when they were dealing with difficult family or work situations, when they were struggling with mental health issues, and when they simply needed help understanding the assignment. In my responses, I shared additional resources, clarified requirements, offered encouragement, and extended deadlines. The Check-In assignments consistently had the highest rate of on-time submission from my students, partially because they were an easy “to-do” item for students to check off, but also because students looked forward to our one-on-one exchange.

From my perspective as an instructor, these Check-Ins were invaluable because they provided an opportunity to form meaningful relationships with my students, despite a lack of synchronous interactions. Through these updates, I was able to connect with students over the kinds of smaller, casual details of their lives that regularly emerge in the face-to-face class, creating a more personal experience for both myself and the students. I believe the personal connection made through these Check-Ins also helped students feel increasingly comfortable reaching out to me through email and my virtual office hours, and they became more proactive over the course of the semester in asking questions and seeking help. The more I learned about my students through the Check-In assignments and the interactions they encouraged, the more clearly I understood what I could do to help my students succeed in the course.

While the Check-In assignments encouraged my students to bring their questions and concerns to me, I also instituted a second practice to ensure I was communicating my own concerns to students. Each week on Friday morning, I added a “Class Check In” reminder to my calendar that would prompt me to send a quick email with the subject line “Checking In” to students with outstanding work or a sudden drop off in participation. Instead of warning students of the penalties they would face as I’d done in the past, I changed my tone and sent a short message saying, “I noticed that you haven’t submitted the essay yet. I just wanted to check in and make sure that everything is okay.” My goal was to signal concern and curiosity, hoping that this would keep students more open and engaged than the scolding language I had used before.

Like the Check-In Assignments, the student response to these emails was universally positive. Students responded quickly and freely, expressing gratitude for my concern, and openly explaining the circumstances that were affecting their class performance. Occasionally a student would ask for a bit more time to submit an assignment or for advice about the best approach for getting caught up with late work. But often, they would say there was nothing I could do to help because they just needed to “get it together.”

In the past, when I had sent more scolding emails, I would have interpreted a student's apologies as the desired end and assumed they would put forth more of an effort in the future. But shifting my tone from scolding to curiosity and concern influenced the way that I read the responses from my students. I found myself feeling more empathetic towards students than frustrated with them, and I could see more clearly the very real struggle of trying to manage class work while dealing with complex work demands, family responsibilities, burn out, anxiety, time management, and/or the stress of learning to navigate new and shifting online learning environments.

Rather than accept the students' belief that they needed to "get it together" and solve the problem themselves, I helped them understand their options for moving forward and the resources available to them. I realized in the process that I overestimate students' ability to ask for help when they need it. More and more, I am learning that many students who need help either don't know that it is available, don't trust that it will be given, or don't believe that they deserve it. Simply asking "How are things going?" has turned out to be a more accessible, more effective starting point for those conversations.

I am teaching face-to-face classes this coming term and cannot wait to hear all the wonderful chatter that arises when a group of students gather. But the Check-In assignments are already posted on my Canvas courses; the "check in" email reminders are already set on my calendar. I have desperately missed the impromptu communication of the face-to-face classroom, but the greatest value of my new "checking in" practices is that they are not impromptu at all. They are regular, scheduled, and structured. They are intentional. They demonstrate to students that their communication, their engagement, and their success matter. They transform the act of asking "How is it going?" into an ongoing practice of care.