## A Simple Suggestion for Reducing First-time Online Student Anxiety

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**Abstract**

This is a case study of a best-practice suggestion for addressing anxiety among first-time online students. This is a significant problem with many students new to online classes and one that benefits from early intervention. A simple devise for alleviating first-time online student anxiety is presented. Through the use of a Check-in Quiz, first-time online students can be taken on a tour of the class website without the fear and anxiety that typically accompany assignments and exams. This is a simple, low-pressure, and effective way of quickly introducing first-time students to the online class format. The essential elements that make an effective Check-in Quiz are also discussed.

**Keywords**: online anxiety; first-time online student fears; Check-in Quiz; attributes of effective Check-in Quizzes; novel uses of fill-in the blank questions

### Introduction

Online classes are often intimidating for first-time students. Just about everyone who has taught online has encountered students who are worried and concerned about what will become of them as they venture into the cyber abyss. Sull (2009) reached the same conclusion when he noted that there is "a wide range of enthusiasm when it comes to taking an online course for the first time: from a level of total comfort and ease to major fear and anxiety. Many teaching online don't expect the latter; there is a widely held belief that anyone taking an online course not only is tech savvy but also has no problem in not being in a brick-and-mortar classroom … As just about anyone who has taught online has discovered, this is a major misconception."

The pain of anxiety is bad enough, but even worse, many students waste a lot of time worrying; they wait in dread of the online assignment or exam that they cannot open, or the course materials that they will not be able to download from the class site They wrestle with a gnawing fear that their class has no anchor in the physical word and that there will be no one there to address their fears and concerns. We send e-mails of welcome to students replete with assurances that all will be well, but the apprehension persists.

### Student Anxiety in the Literature

A review of the literature on first-time online student anxiety yields mixed results. Discussions of online teacher anxiety, such as Kelly (2009), are more prevalent than discussions of student online anxiety. This is understandable given the audience; it is probably also due to the fact that student anxiety is seldom addressed directly apart from general best-practice suggestions for creating an engaging and compelling online class experience.

Nonetheless, student online anxiety is a common observation in the literature. Kelly (2009) admonishes online teachers to remember that "It's important to keep in mind that you're not the only one who may be a little anxious about going online. Students often have anxiety when taking their first online course." Block, Udermann, Felix, Reineke & Murray (2008) note that "For those who have never taken an online course or who have little computer experience, an online course may be frightening." Likewise, Wang, Newlin, and Tucker (2001) have observed that many online students express feelings of intense anxiety about online technology.

Student anxiety also surfaces in discussions of problems with online student retention. Palloff & Pratt (2001) cite the difference in the mode of instruction in online classes as a significant factor in why online students drop out more frequently. Whether online student retention is significantly lower than student retention in general is a subject of debate, but online student anxiety as a significant cause of online student drop out is generally accepted. For example, Tyler-Smith (2006) attempts to put the online-versus-traditional retention numbers in perspective; the results are subject to different interpretation, but the importance of "underlying increased levels of anxiety about engaging with eLearning and a sense of becoming overwhelmed by unfamiliar modes of learning" as a significant reason for online drop out is quite apparent.

Discussions of test anxiety are also common in the teaching literature, but performance and test anxiety is not new or specific to online teaching.  For example, Hamilton (2009), Ormad (2010), and Papanastasiou and Zembylas (2008) all describe student anxiety in different non-online settings. However, it is not hard seeing how online anxiety would exacerbate all forms of student anxiety. Indeed, online anxiety should be considered as a more fundamental or basic form of anxiety. Regarding online anxiety, Bischoff (2000) has likened the anxiety of a student prevented from logging on to the class with that of a traditional student driving to an educational facility and finding the doors locked. If this were to occur on a testing date, it is not hard imagining the escalation in test anxiety that would ensue. For first-time online students, cyber fear entails a general fear of being locked out from the class at critical times.

### A Simple Suggestion for Reducing First-Time-Online Student Anxiety

The problem is apparent, but is there anything that can be done at the onset of a class to alleviate first-time-online student anxiety? True, surviving an online course will usually eliminate or lessen this anxiety, but this is hardly proactive and it begs the question.

There is a relatively simple way to address this problem. A Check-in Quiz is a simple device that works well to orient students into online courses quickly, even without them realizing that this is what they are doing. Best of all, it allows an instructor to address this problem before assignments and exams arise. It is also one of the fastest, easiest, and most effective best practices for reducing online student anxiety.

### The Online Check-in Quiz

At the onset of an online class, a graded Check-in Quiz is assigned. All students are required to take the quiz in order to meet the university's first-day attendance requirement. Students are informed that failure to complete the Check-in Quiz could result in them being dropped from the course. The quiz must be done as soon as the student has read the syllabus. The syllabus is sent as an attachment to a Welcome e-mail and is also posted on the class' Blackboard site.

The Check-in Quiz appears as a simple check-in procedure, but it is actually an excellent way of taking students on tour of course features. To find the quiz, learn about the quiz, take the quiz, and to receive their grade on the quiz, students need to navigate through virtually every part of the online class site. Students thus become involved in the class format through this low-stress devise. They are able to become involved and accustomed to the class with a minimum amount of anxiety and pressure; in fact, they are generally not aware that this is occurring.

There are certainly other ways of instructing students on how to navigate the online course, but the Check-in Quiz borrows from the mantra of successful screenwriters – don't tell it; show it! Telling it is likely to create stress; showing it tends to minimize stress.

### The Check-in Quiz as a Proactive Best Practice

Clarity and proactivity can be critical to reducing student anxiety. "Student anxiety can be reduced when clear expectations are detailed at the start of the course." (Hess, Falkofske, & Bormann Young, 2009). The Check-In Quiz is the very first task given to students and it clearly delineates the online course structure and navigation. It is proactive in that it anticipates that course navigation will be source of anxiety for first-time online students, and then immediately acquaints them with what they will need to do in the course (and how they will do it).

Pelletier (2013) makes the point that "Students are expected to be engaged in the online learning environment but it doesn't happen automatically. If you want your students to be engaged, you must

model the type of behavior you seek." Similarly, Palloff & Pratt (2001) argue that students must be introduced to the class software before the start of instruction. The Check-In Quiz provides a very good proactive demonstration of how the course functions and what a student will be doing online in the class. Since it is a hands-on activity, it models the navigation routine that will be the staple of the course.

Sull (2009) advises online instructors to address possible student concerns before they are brought up and to anticipate student computer fears. He cites a nearly 25 percent drop in hearing from students about such issues after taking a proactive approach. He stresses that this is "not going to address every concern, but it does help – and every little bit allows for more focus on the course itself." (Sull 2009).

**Characteristics of the Check-in Quiz**

Every aspect of an online course should be tailored to the specifics of the course and to the personality and approach of the instructor. That being said, a successful Check-in Quiz should usually incorporate the following elements:

1. The Check-in Quiz should be required.

The Quiz must be part of the class grading requirement, i.e., it should not be for extra credit. Students often ignore extra credit assignments, especially at the start of a semester or quarter. (Students often clamor for extra credit at the end of the term, but this is a different matter and of no value for Check-In Quiz design.)

More problematic, students with higher anxiety are more likely to skip an optional or extra credit quiz; this is unfortunate because this should be the primary target group. A small nominal point value is all that is required; in fact, the value of the Check-In Quiz should be minimal in order to "lower the stakes" and thereby minimize testing anxiety (Hamilton 2009). The Check-In Quiz will be most effective if has a minimal point value, but the clear understanding that not doing the Quiz may entail a serious penalty.

2. The Check-in Quiz should be done at the very start of the semester or quarter.

Online classes must engage students quickly and get them into a class rhythm. The Check-in Quiz is an ideal device for initiating this engagement. It can and should be done prior to the beginning of course work. For anxious students, quick engagement with the class is even more critical. Anxiety seems to grow exponentially with the passage of time and addressing it immediately is vital.

3. The Check-in Quiz should be announced in *Announcements.*

A description of the Check-in Quiz should always figure prominently in a Welcome e-mail to students. It therefore does not really require an announcement on Blackboard (or a similar platform), but it should still be posted as in **Announcements.** Since the primary goal of the Check-in Quiz is to familiarize students with the course routine and rhythm, a Check-in Quiz announcement replicates the type of announcement that would always precede an exam or assignment. Students thus learn where important announcements are posted.

4. The Check-in Quiz should be very short and simple.

A short and simple Quiz is all that is needed. The primary goal of the Check-in Quiz is not the information covered in the questions; the primary goal is to take students to all of the critical places in the online course. A brief and simple quiz serves this purpose just as well as a longer assignment. In addition, a shorter quiz seems to better focus student attention on the *process* rather than on the *content*. A shorter Quiz is also less intimidating and is more likely to be done sooner.

5. The Check-in Quiz should not be course-content oriented.

A Check-in Quiz featuring course material is usually counter-productive. Invariably, including course-content in the quiz will shift attention to the content; this will increase rather than decrease performance anxiety. Discussions with colleagues have yielded disagreements as to whether this is always the case, but the author's experience definitely confirms that it usually is. Content-oriented quizzes do not work well.

6. Syllabus Items usually make for good content in a Check-in Quiz

If course-content questions are to be eschewed, what are good Check-In Quiz topics? Any syllabus topic or any class structure topic will usually make for good Check-In Quiz questions. This is especially true of questions dealing with important grading issues, or grading option issues. Ammendolia (2009) suggests that it is necessary for online instructors to deliberately allow for redundancy is online course communications. This is especially important as it relates to  grading issues, due dates, options, etc. The Check-In Quiz can serve as an effective devise for drawing attention (again) to important structural aspects of the class.

7.   The Check-in Quiz should be light-hearted or humorous.

This is not an absolute requirement, but for the same reasons cited immediately above, a light-hearted or informal approach seems to work best. The goal is to reduce anxiety and an informal and light approach is a good adjunct.

The role of humor in online classes is well established and should be considered in constructing a Check-In Quiz. For example, Eskey (2010) has argued that "humor, whether in the form of jokes, riddles, puns, funny stories, humorous comments or other humorous items, builds a bond between the instructor and students; bridging the student-teacher gap by allowing students to view the instructor as more approachable. A number of researchers have found that humor is instrumental in creating an inviting classroom environment, reducing stress, improving attention, enhancing learning, creating a positive emotional and social environment, reducing anxiety, enhancing self-esteem, and increasing self-motivation.

In some preliminary research with 126 students in six online criminal justice courses …Nearly all agreed that humor can add a sense of flavor to the class experience (98%), including the ability to relieve stress (97%), improve student attention (94%), enhance learning (94%) and influence student interest and participation (97%). In addition 83% agreed that humor can augment teaching and 87% said humor can help promote course objectives."

Hiss (2000) argues that humor in the online class performs a number of very valuable functions: 1) Humor "fulfills an individual's need to be part of a group, an important consideration in the technologically dependent and deindividuated environment of online learning. 2) Humor eases online stress. 3) Humor warms up what might otherwise be a cold and sterile environment. 4) Humor promotes novelty, creative problem solving, and risk taking. Hiss further argues that humor is not a substitute for content, but should rather be viewed as a seasoning that enhances online learning.

Norin & Wall (2009) point out that "While we do not want to be in the stand-up comic business, we can make it clear that we are not a robotic part of the machine with a square screen." Humor can make the instructor human and approachable, no small accomplishment in the impersonal world of cyber space.

8.   The Check-in Quiz should be accessed exactly the way that assignments and exams will be accessed.

The Quiz is designed to be a low-pressure way of showing – rather than just telling – students how to do assignments and exams online. Consequently, the quiz should utilize the same protocol and procedures as the exams and assignments.

9.   The Check-in Quiz should never depart from normal course patterns and procedures.

Using special links or accessing procedures – such as a special *START HERE* link – for initiating the Check-in Quiz is counterproductive.  Such links will be used once, and then not used again. There is no advantage to introducing students to features that are not part of the course navigation protocol (i.e., that they will not be using on assignments and exams).  The Check-in Quiz should be exactly like an exam or assignment.

10. Check-in Quiz results should be accessed exactly the way assignment and exam results will be accessed.

Again, the goal of the Quiz is to show (rather than tell) students how to handle assignments and exams. Obtaining scores, grades, and feedback is an integral part of this. Indeed, knowing how to obtain feedback in an online course is very important because there is no online equivalent of simply going to

class to get assignment or exam results. Using the Check-in Quiz to demonstrate how to obtain results and feedback is just as important as using the Quiz to demonstrate exam procedures.

This is another reason why the Check-in Quiz must be graded; it may have to be graded in order to for it to be posted along with exam and assignment scores in the grade book. (This may not be the case with all platforms, but it is the case with many, including Blackboard.) Since students will be checking their assignment and exam grades, it is advisable for the Check-in Quiz results to be available in the same way.

11. Information about the Check-in Quiz should be posted where other course materials will be posted.

An online course usually posts a considerable amount of material online; on Blackboard, these materials are usually placed in *Course Materials*. (Other programs and platforms may have other designations – for example, materials are usually placed in Files on Canvas – but they should be readily apparent on other platforms regardless of the name.) Since knowing where these materials are and how to access them is such an important part of the course, information about the Quiz should also be placed in *Course Materials*. Posting Check-in Quiz instructions and information in *Course Materials* goes a long way toward familiarizing them with this important site.

Regarding the type of information about the Check-in Quiz that is posted, posting the actual questions ahead of time (without the possible multiple choice answers) usually works well for two reasons.

First, posting the questions convinces students that there are no course-content questions on the Quiz. By posting the actual questions, this is apparent and pressure is reduced.

Second, posting the actual questions in *Course Materials* almost guarantees that students will become familiar with this important part of the course site. Very few if any students will pass up an opportunity to see the questions before going to the Check-in Quiz.

12. The Check-in Quiz should incorporate any important exam features.

Ideally, the Check-in Quiz should include any features that students will encounter in the class. For example, if exams will feature multiple attempts, the Check-in Quiz should do the same – even if multiple attempts are rarely needed on a Check-in Quiz.

If there are special question types on class assignments or exams, they should be on the Check-in Quiz as well. For example, there is a way of creating multiple choice questions on Blackboard (and Canvas) that avoids the tedious multiple choice question creation procedure; multiple choice questions can be created out of fill-in the blank questions that require students to enter the letter or number of the correct answer. This can save an instructor considerable time in making multiple choice questions.

However, while this can dramatically reduce the time and difficulty of making multiple choice questions, there is a potential problem that must be addressed. Blackboard will grade fill-in questions, but the student's answer must be an exact match to the answer-key answer. Case does not matter, but anything that a student enters along with the letter will result in a wrong answer.  Students cannot enter a period or any part of the correct answer – just the letter.

This does take some time for students to get used to, but the Check-in Quiz is a great place to get students used to it. The Check-in Quiz is short and the point value is minimal. In addition, the multiple attempts on the Check-in Quiz make it easy for students to remedy any problems with these questions.

**Conclusions**

The Check-in Quiz does not eliminate all anxiety -- it is a device, not magic. The first couple of assignments will still generate anxious e-mails from some students, but the number of such emergencies is greatly reduced with the use of a Check-in Quiz. In an informal tally, the author found that anxious e-mails from students before the first assignments and exams were reduced by about 80% after the introduction of a Check-In Quiz. Admittedly, the Check-In Quiz itself became the focus of anxious e-mail, but this is the rationale for having it in the first place – better here than later when there is more on the line.

Proactively addressing anxiety is certainly a major benefit of using the Check-in Quiz, but equally important is how it helps with problems that arise later. The real advantage of the Check-in Quiz is often

found in how one can deal with subsequent problems. In most cases where a navigation issue or concern arises, the instructor can assure the students that he or she has actually already done this before on the Check-in Quiz – all they have to do is to follow the same procedure that they used earlier on the Check-in Quiz. Students usually have little problem reconstructing what they did on the quiz, and the change in verb tense is usually quite comforting, i.e., needing to return to what one has already *done* is usually less intimidating than being told that they have to *do* something else.

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