

What About the Small Talk? Using Quizzes and SpeedGrader Comments to Foster Individual Dialogue with Students in Online Courses

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A key piece of creating an ethic of care in classrooms is personal connections and dialogue between teachers and students (Davis, 2003). In traditional face-to-face college classrooms these interactions can happen informally through small talk in the minutes before and after class and through office hour visits. These conversations add value to the classroom climate and foster a sense of belonging for students. Further, student perceptions of personal caring on the part of a teacher have been linked with increased engagement, academic performance and higher self-efficacy (Woolfolk Hoy & Weinstein 2006; Woolfolk & Perry, 2012). Accomplishing this can be challenging in online courses, however, where there is a high risk for students to feel isolated from both peers and instructors (e.g. Muilenburg & Berge, 2005). Therefore, creating a climate of personal caring and individual rapport between teachers and students online can require some more deliberate planning.

One way to promote the development of personal dialogue with students in online courses is to use an informal questionnaire followed by personalized typed comments on course assignments. The following steps detail how this can be accomplished within Canvas using Quizzes and SpeedGrader:

1. At the beginning of the semester, the instructor creates a questionnaire using a quiz with open-ended questions where students share their perceptions of course concepts, describe prior experiences with content knowledge, and have an optional opportunity to share additional information about themselves. When this approach has been implemented, the information students elected to share ranged from family and work situations to favorite sports teams and music interests. This provides a foundation for personal interactions that complement course content while providing opportunities to develop rapport and express personal caring in an online course environment

with individual students.

2. Next, throughout the semester the instructor follows up on these out-of-school facets through comments alongside assignment feedback within SpeedGrader. This cultivates connections to students' daily lives and prior experiences to support student meaning-making and foster an ethic of care in an online learning space.
3. As a result of the personalized questions and comments posed by the instructor, students would respond back to the comments and questions, both related to class content and informal topics.

For the instructor, this has been a simple and effective way to get to know students in an online course while fostering engagement and promoting motivation. For students, this approach has demonstrated instructor interest and respect. Students have indicated through unsolicited course evaluation feedback comments that they appreciated the "small talk" element of the assignment comments and looked forward to reading and responding to feedback. Future plans to modify and enhance this approach include leaving audio feedback instead of written comments. Using this method has effectively forged personal communication with individual students, which promotes an ethic of care in online learning environments.

References

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