

# Using Non-Content-Related Quiz Questions to Build Rapport

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Preparing a new class can be a great way to think about pedagogy with a clean slate. But it can also be a lot of work. I recently taught American National Government for the first time and it presented me with just this conundrum: introductory level, online, and totally asynchronous. With a lot of my students being in their first year of college and enrolled in an asynchronous online class, I knew that I was going to have to work hard to keep them engaged.

The pedagogical solution I settled on was weekly quizzes. They served as a kind of attendance policy. Just as taking roll in introductory in-person classes can be a way of keeping new students accountable (Moore 2003; Rendleman 2017), these quizzes helped them stay engaged with course material each week.

But I also wanted to build rapport with my students by helping them to feel like I care about their success and to make real human connections with them (Glazier 2016, 2021). So, I snuck at least one “rapport-building” question into every weekly quiz. I asked the students everything from: “What’s going on? A new semester is starting! How are you doing? How can I help?” to “If you could only eat one dessert for the rest of your life, what would it be?”

These questions gave the students a chance to connect with me about something silly or something serious. Sometimes they told me that they were not doing okay. Students typed all kinds of things into the digital void and hoped for connection: funny stories about pets, concerns about sick family members, feelings of being overwhelmed. Even though I am in the Bible Belt in Little Rock, Arkansas, I was honestly surprised by the number of students who asked me to pray for them.

On the last quiz of the semester (right before Thanksgiving break) the check in question was: “This is your last quiz! That means it’s your last chance to check in with me one-on-one in these freebie questions. Tell me the truth, do you ever read the personal responses I write to your answers?” I was moderately surprised to learn that 2/3 of the students who completed the quiz that week responded that they read my responses every week (I may have wondered if I was sending my responses into the digital void). I got responses like:

- “YES! I always check for a response. I think it’s so awesome that you continuously check in on your students throughout the semester.”
- “Yes I do! They’re a fun way to check in and your answers tickled me at times.”
- “Yay! What an awesome semester! I have learned and gained so much from fellow classmates and you as my professor as well. Of course I read your feedback, enjoy your Thanksgiving break we are headed [specific details of Thanksgiving plans].”

The students loved the rapport in this class and I felt really con-

nected to them, as well. But this was a fully asynchronous, introductory level, required course. We may have been building rapport, but what did the retention numbers look like? Well, we know from years of research that retention in online classes is consistently lower than in face-to-face classes (Glazier 2021; Jaggars 2013).

I looked at the percentage of students earning D’s, F’s, or withdrawing completely (DFW rate) for American National Government at my university from 2017 to 2023. It averaged 28.1% or more than one in four students not successfully passing this foundational course. The semester with the best DFW rate was Summer 2021 with only 2% and the semester with the worst DFW rate was fall 2019 with 55%. Ouch. My DFW rate for spring 2023 was 15.6%. Honestly, I wish it was better. I lost five of the 32 students in my class (four of whom just stopped showing up or responding to emails), but I think this was the best I could do, given the student population I teach, many of whom have significant family responsibilities, are first generation college students, and/or work multiple jobs.

What I learned from this experience was that keeping in regular contact with students through weekly quizzes helped to keep them engaged. And using non-content-related questions on those quizzes helped me to check in on them, offer help when they needed it, and build the kind of rapport that led to a significantly lower DFW rate than was usually seen for this introductory course. ■

## REFERENCES

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