From: Teaching Toolbox - Center For Faculty Innovation
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Subject: Teaching Toolbox: Checking Up on Check-ins
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Checking Up on Check-Ins

by Jessica Del Vecchio

Last fall, in the Faculty Learning Community (FLC) I facilitated with faculty from across the university, I started our first session with a check-in, asking participants how they would rank their mood on a scale of 0 to 5. (This check-in is sometimes referred to as "Fist to Five.") They could indicate their number by speaking it aloud, by typing it into the chat box, or by signaling with their hands. As this was one of the many parallel processes in these FLC sessions, I asked participants if they ever used check-ins to start their own classes. A bit of a debate ensued about the purpose and value of this practice.

Questions raised included: Do check-ins allow instructors to quickly "take the temperature of the room" before diving into the day's work? Do they help to "humanize the curriculum" by acknowledging the outside factors that sometimes influence a student's ability to work effectively? As instructors, what do we do with this information about our students once we've gathered it during the check-in? What if some students don't want to participate? Are meaningful check-ins possible in large classes? How much time should we devote to the check-in process? Are there risks to foregrounding students' feelings at the start of class? Might the check-in even create the impression that feelings offer an excuse for not engaging in the day's work? Do ableist assumptions undergird the notion that emotions are "excuses"? Might check-ins allow students to express themselves and be heard by both instructors and classmates precisely so they can move on to learning? All of these questions highlight the fact that check-ins can serve a variety of purposes, depending on when and how they are used.

Immediately following the FLC session, I joined my fellow CFI Faculty Associates for our biweekly Zoom meeting. We start all of our meetings with a check-in and, that afternoon, the assistant director of our teaching team Emily Gravett selected a playful question for us to answer—one that she borrowed from Daisy Breneman's student: What food do you feel like today and why? All of our descriptions were evocative (I was feeling like a fallen soufflé), revealing something about our current emotional states, but also something about our personalities. For a group of associates working together for the first time (and virtually) that semester, these check-ins were a wonderful way to get to know one another.

The attention to check-ins in both my Faculty Learning Community and our CFI sessions led me to investigate their origins and uses. Social worker and teacher Trudy K. Duffy links the check-in ritual to the "talking circles" of Native People and points to its historical use in various therapeutic settings. The first time I remember seeing a check-in in action was when I sat in on a meeting of a community-based activist arts organization in Austin, Texas. Members of the group formed a circle at the start of the meeting and each, in turn, simply announced that they were "checked in." It struck me as a quick but powerful way of letting the others know that they were ready to participate.

A Google search of the term “check-in” reveals that the practice is commonly used in corporate settings, often as a team-building exercise. In a piece on *Medium*, Niklaus Gerber argues that check-ins “helped build trust and empathy” in the teams he managed: “checking in invites each member to be present, seen, and heard. Checking in emphasises presence, focus, and group commitment.” Gerber offers a range of check-in questions as examples. Pandemic-specific questions include: “How are you taking care of yourself today?” and “What times of the day or the week are the hardest?” General questions include: “If you could travel anywhere in the world, where would you go and why?” and “What is the best season of the year?”

Research links student motivation and achievement to perceptions of student-teacher rapport, and check-ins can help to build that rapport, even in large classes. Check-ins can create community in the classroom by allowing students to share something about themselves with their peers (as Daisy writes in her Toolbox on Collective Care). Check-ins can also foster students’ Social Emotional Learning, helping them to “develop awareness of others’ emotions—and how to respond to them” and “increas[ing] their comfort with vulnerability,” as community college teacher Alex Shevrin Venet argues in a piece about a check-in activity she calls “sharing roses.” John Spencer, an Assistant Professor of Education, highlights the importance of checking in with students in online courses, in particular, pointing out that check-in questions about wellness “can send the message that you care about your students and you want to know how they are doing.” When I taught my 40-student theatre history course online, I was grateful for the check-in function on PearDeck, the application I was using to deliver my lectures. PearDeck allows instructors to create interactive presentations in which students respond to questions embedded in a slide deck. At the start of each presentation, students are prompted to choose between three faces to represent how they are feeling that day: a green happy face, a yellow neutral face, or a red sad face. (They can also opt to skip the check-in.) I made sure to follow up with students who chose the red sad face to ask if they needed extra support.

If you do decide to try check-ins as a way to start your classes, it helps to have a specific goal in mind. Do you want to check in on students’ emotional well-being, on their experience of the course so far, or on their understanding of an assignment or other course materials? Or do you want to use the check-in to get to know them better and facilitate their getting to know their classmates? You can feel free to be creative with both your questions and your methods. There are so many ways to check-in; experiment until you find those that work for you and your students. I was surprised to find—in my Intro to WGSS course this fall—that a check-in asking “what three things do you always carry in your bag” inspired a student to investigate the gendered nature of the items we keep with us in an assignment later in the semester. You might have students check-in using note cards or Post-its (to put on a number line on the wall, for example), via an anonymous Canvas quiz, or using technology tools like Google Jam Board or Mentimeter (to make a graph or a word cloud). There are many more ideas here. Make it okay for students to opt out of participating. When developing check-in questions, think about timing and tone. Have a plan for what you will do if a student’s response seems to indicate that they need help. Be transparent about what you are doing; students unfamiliar with these types of exercises might need some time to get used to them. Finally, be sure to “check in on your check-in.” In an article about the

benefits of the check-in in a training program for social workers, Shantih E. Clemans reminds us to **“**take time at key points in the semester to ask students about their experience with the check-in process. . . . By keeping the communication open, teachers can make necessary classroom adjustments to ensure the class needs are being met.”

As with all teaching strategies, the effectiveness of the check-in is contextual: what works well in one class might fall flat in another. Duffy warns that check-ins “can be used in a gimmicky, restrictive, habitual way or they can be used with authenticity to build relationships and help the group do its work.” Responses to the strategy might even differ from session to session with the same group. For instance, at the start of the next meeting of my Faculty Learning Community, I asked participants to check in using one word to describe how they were feeling at that moment. Everyone seemed more engaged by this question than by the numerical scale I had used previously. Members of the group eagerly shared and connected with one another, empathizing with those feeling “overwhelmed” and agreeing with those feeling “ready” for the upcoming fall break. I am glad I did not give up on the check-in after that first try. If I had, we all might have missed out on that moment.

About the author: Jessica Del Vecchio recently departed JMU to start a new position as the Senior Associate Director for Teaching Initiatives and Programs for Faculty at the McGraw Center for Teaching and Learning at Princeton University. She can be reached at delvecho@princeton.edu.

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