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Using Entry Ticket Attendance: Moving Beyond "Pass the Sign-In Sheet" to Engage With Each Student, Every Day

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When I left private practice to start teaching legal writing in the fall of 2019, I never thought much about how to take attendance. But teaching during a pandemic has been full of disruptions and unexpected surprises, and here I was, scrambling for a head-count system that would work during a school year unlike any other. Some days, class was fully remote. Other days, it was hybrid, with half the class attending in person, and half remaining remote. No telling how long that would hold either, as change seemed like one of the only constants. The old "pass the sign-in sheet" wasn't going to cut it in a COVID world.

The shift to remote learning also impacted other parts of teaching that I took for granted. How could I "read the room" during class in these various formats? Remotely, there's no true eye contact, and the usual classroom soundtrack—a murmur of understanding or questioning, a chuckle here or there, the chatter before or after class—and other clues about student morale, workload,

and working relationships are gone.[1] In a hybrid setting, reading facial expressions through masks is impossible, and social distancing requirements limit student interaction both in and out of class.

      More profoundly, how would the shift to remote or hybrid instruction impact the class's growth into an inclusive community for learning and collaboration? How would the typical assessment tools need to adapt for use in a remote or hybrid class? How could I encourage connections with and between hybrid and fully remote students, some of whom would never meet me or another student in-person all year? And I worried about the compounding strain of remote learning on students, especially those with limited access to high-speed internet or suitable study space, or students with children facing upheaval and uncertainty in child care or schooling availability. [2]

      The hunt for answers led to an easy-to-use tool that not only tracks attendance across class formats but also helps me read the room, assess student skills, and build a robust classroom community. Pairing an electronic sign-in with an "entry ticket"[3]—a simple, one-question tool rooted in engaged pedagogy and other student-centered learning techniques—provided insights into student progress and attitudes, and many opportunities to connect with students and react to changing needs during a turbulent year. Not bad for a pandemic pivot.

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[1] Susan D. Blum, *Why We're Exhausted by Zoom*, INSIDE HIGHER ED (Apr. 22, 2020), https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2020/04/22/professor-explores-why-zoom-classes-deplete-her-energy-opinion; Beckie Supiano, *Why is Zoom So Exhausting*, CHRON. HIGHER EDUC. (D.C.) (Apr. 23, 2020), https://www.chronicle.com/article/why-is-zoom-so-exhausting; Kristen Casey, *Guest Post: "Is Remote Learning the Future of Legal Education?"*, LAWFIRE (May 14, 2020), https://sites.duke.edu/lawfire/2020/05/14/guest-post-is-remote-learning-is-the-future-of-legal-education/.

[2] *See* Thomson Reuters Institute, *Law Schools and the Global Pandemic: New Research*, 3, 14, https://www.thomsonreuters.com/en-us/posts/wp-content/uploads/sites/20/2020/12/Law-Schools-and-the-Global-Pandemic_FINAL.pdf (reporting that fifty three percent of surveyed students identified study environment and childcare concerns as primary challenges in attending law school during a pandemic); Ilhana Arogheti, *Powering Down: Low-Income Students are Struggling to Plug into Remote Classes*, THE DAILY NORTHWESTERN (Oct. 15, 2020), https://dailynorthwestern.com/2020/10/15/campus/academic/powering-down-low-income-students-are-struggling-to-plug-into-remote-classes (describing the acute challenges of remote learning specific to low-income students, including basic internet access); Avi Stadler, *The Legal Profession's Child Care Problem*, JD SUPRA (Mar. 2, 2021), https://www.jdsupra.com/legalnews/the-legal-profession-s-child-care-1602884/ (explaining burden on women working in legal profession from disruption in childcare and primary or secondary education due to pandemic).

[3] *See, e.g.*, *Entrance and Exit Tickets*, HARRIET W. SHERIDAN CENTER FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING AT BROWN UNIVERSITY (last visited Aug. 3, 2021), https://www.brown.edu/sheridan/teaching-learning-resources/teaching-resources/course-design/classroom-assessment/entrance-and-exit; *Entry Ticket*, THE TEACHER TOOLKIT (last visited Aug. 3, 2021), https://www.theteachertoolkit.com/index.php/tool/entry-ticket.

This article briefly describes the principles of engaged pedagogy and total participation underlying entry ticket attendance systems; introduces the version of the system I used, including examples of my questions and the responses they generated; and explains how the system proved so useful that I plan to keep using it whether class returns to fully in-person or continues with some remote components.

1. Entry Tickets as a Total Participation Tool

My entry ticket attendance system was strongly inspired by engaged pedagogy and total participation teaching techniques that solicit thinking from all students at the same time.[4] The premise underlying engaged pedagogy is that although a simple invitation to all students to freely participate in class *seems* fair, the resulting discussion often amplifies only the voices and values of the classroom leader and those who speak first and most often.[5] Engaged pedagogy seeks to empower all students and ensure that everyone in the room has a voice, receives an opportunity to register an idea, and shares in the responsibility for learning.[6] Total participation methods can take many forms, but all of them are designed to avoid top-down teaching or the "group think" that can result when a small number of voices dominate the conversation.[7]

The entry ticket is a well-established tool for student assessment at any level that is built on total participation.[8] An entry ticket is a short, simple prompt distributed to all students on index cards or through an online survey at the beginning of class. The prompt might ask students to reflect on the day's reading or to recall previous lessons that are relevant to that day's session. Students get a few minutes to think and then respond in writing; the responses in turn provide jumping off-points for class discussion and ideas for future topics to cover.

Connecting this pedagogical tool with the rather rote task of taking attendance made sense. I already had to adopt a new system for tracking people who were coming to class, and an online survey was one easy solution. Adding an entry ticket prompt transformed a consistent, easy-to-use attendance tracker into a powerfully useful tool for my remote and hybrid classes. I used entry tickets both to address substantive class topics and to learn about students' interests

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[4] Cathy Davidson, *An "Active Learning" Kit: Rationale, Methods, Models, Research, Bibliography*, HASTAC.ORG (Nov. 15, 2017), https://www.hastac.org/blogs/cathy-davidson/2017/11/15/active-learning-kit-rationale-methods-models-research-bibliography.

[5] *Id.*

[6] *Id.*

[7] The Davidson blog post cited repeatedly here describes several active learning methods, including "Think, Pair, Share," and others that work well in a legal writing course. Davidson, *supra* note 4.

[8] *E.g.*, *Entrance and Exit Tickets*, *supra* note 3; *Entry Ticket*, THE TEACHER TOOLKIT, *supra* note 3.

and connections with the broader classroom community. No matter what the prompt asked, it gave every student an opportunity to actively think, engage, and react.

2. System Setup

My entry ticket attendance system uses a one-question online survey form distributed before each class session. The survey requires students to enter their name—to track attendance—and to answer a single short question of the day. The survey is a Google Form, a format that is familiar to most students and easy to create and replicate. [9] There is only one question each day, and the form has some formatting and other limitations, so the question must be relatively narrow. To broaden its scope, the question could include a free-form text box that box that gives students the option to include "[a]nything you think I should know" or something similar about the question and their response to it.

Each class session that uses the entry ticket system produces real-time responses from every student on the question of the day, along with a list of everyone who attended class that can be downloaded or exported in a variety of easy-to-use electronic formats.[10] The possible question topics are essentially limitless, though two categories of questions have provided the most useful results for very different reasons: (1) assessment questions that gauged student knowledge about key concepts, and (2) "softer" questions that attempted to both build class community and elicit feedback from students about the course or their states of mind.

1.   Student Assessment Questions

First, questions designed to assess students on a particular concept or skill were particularly useful because they required each student to engage with the material, and they provided both professor and student immediate feedback on the student's substantive knowledge. Some basic assessment question topics might include legal writing fundamentals ("Which is the following is the most effective rule statement?"), citation checking ("Which of the following is the correct citation to [source]?"), style editing ("Edit this passage for wordiness:"), and many more. When only about ten percent of the class could identify the correct *Bluebook* citation to the Florida statute that was central to the first semester objective memo assignment, I pivoted to workshopping the citation at the beginning

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[9] Presumably, there are other tools or form generators that could work, though I haven't tried them.

[10] Available downloadable formats for a Google Form include CSV and other formats easily imported into Excel, Google Sheets, and the like.

of class—ten minutes well spent on a topic fresh in students' minds.[11] If I had asked an open-ended question during class—What is the correct citation for the relevant Florida statute" or "Does anyone have any questions about how to cite the Florida statute?"—the students who were most confident in their citations would be most likely to answer, and their responses could give me a false sense that the class had a better grasp of the material than it actually did. By asking the question in the entry ticket, I required every student to work on the citation, but they could work at their own pace and without the pressure of producing public, off-the-cuff answers. Introverted students with correct answers might feel empowered to participate in the ensuing class discussion. Additionally, by getting results from every student and not merely a confident few, I could see that most students needed some guidance and modify the day's agenda accordingly.

Other questions asked students to reflect on their own understanding of a skill or progress on class projects. For example, the question might ask students, "How are you feeling about conducting your first open research project?" and offer a range of response options from 1 (very confident) to 4 (feeling lost). The entry ticket is particularly effective here because it provided a way for each student to communicate with the professor using a confidential channel. It also gave me feedback about the class's perceived strengths and weaknesses, helped to identify struggling students, and provided opportunities for one-on-one follow up. Had I simply asked students for a show of hands corresponding to each confidence level, students might over-report their true confidence to avoid appearing more confused than others.

Another asked students to "[e]stimate the time you need to complete the remaining work on your memo." That question required students to practice material from a prior class about project and time management, and to begin forming a realistic plan for meeting a big project deadline.

2. "Creating Community" Questions

The goal for the second type of question could be roughly described as "Creating Community," or more broadly, getting to know each other beyond "law student" and "professor," practicing empathy, and encouraging mindfulness and self-care. Early in the term, I used "get to know you" questions like, "What band, book, show, game or something else have you enjoyed recently?" and then posted the responses to the course's home page to allow students to learn about their colleagues and to recognize shared interests.

Questions can also give insights into student mood and morale. A basic multiple-choice question posed last fall ("Today, I'm feeling: Good; Meh; Not Good") provided a meaningful opportunity to "read the room" and respond to student morale. The question did not ask students whether they felt prepared for

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[11] Not to mention, a (hopefully) easier job grading the statutory citation in student papers.

that day's session, or whether they were up to date on their work; students might not feel comfortable reporting to me that they had fallen behind or needed help. Rather, I simply (and genuinely) wanted to know how they were feeling as we had reached the mid-semester mark. Nearly two-thirds of students reported "not good," and the rest were "meh" — justifiably, as wildfires near the Portland metro area had closed our campus due to intense smoke, adding to the stress of the 2020 election and the ongoing pandemic. With that real-time information, I cut my lesson short by about half, acknowledged that it was a particularly difficult week in a difficult term, and gave class some unexpected time away from Zoom. A small gesture, sure, but one that helped to build trust and community by showing my students that I was listening to them and cared about their well-being. And it was based on information that I likely would never have uncovered if I tracked attendance in a different way.

Other questions like "Today I'm thankful for . . ." or "Something good that happened to me recently was . . ." encourage students (and, let's be honest, me too!) to engage in mindfulness, self-care, and gratitude, important skills for combatting the strain and burnout pervasive to law school and practice.[12] Several students reported that these types of questions were personally helpful and showed that I cared about their well-being and success in my class and beyond.

3. A Little Extra Work; Big Payoff

Admittedly, using entry ticket attendance requires a few extra steps than some simpler methods, like a QR code scan or other automated, "set it and forget it" attendance-takers.[13] For one, it requires the professor to prepare a different question for every day of class. With a growing stable of past questions and topics, though, that task becomes easier.[14] A "freebie" day every so often can also lighten the load: the form that day only requires students to enter their name, with an optional response box for "Anything you think I should know?"

Sending out the survey form requires a daily email or some other distribution just before class begins. I managed that task with an email app that allowed me to schedule email delivery in advance.[15] And to track attendance accurately, the best practice is to change the survey's setting after each class to stop

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[12] *E.g.*, Ronald Tyler, *The First Thing We Do, Let's Heal All the Law Students: Incorporating Self-Care into a Criminal Defense Clinic*, 21 BERKELEY J. CRIM. L. 1, (2016); *see also* Shelley Awe, *Don't Forget About Self-Care This School Year*, VAULT.COM (Aug. 5, 2020), https://www.vault.com/blogs/vaults-law-blog-legal-careers-and-industry-news/don-t-forget-about-self-care-this-school-year.

[13] *See, e.g.*, Joshua Aaron Jones, *QR Codes in the Classroom: Thinking Inside the Square*, 33 SECOND DRAFT 34, 37 (2020).

[14] I'm happy to share past questions with anyone who's interested and would love to hear your ideas for useful questions or topics. Email me at rdoeckel@lclark.edu.

[15] I use Spark, though there are many others.

accepting responses. It's an extra "to do," but I created a browser bookmark for the survey builder homepage to quickly access its settings, meaning I can turn off responses in just a few seconds.

The benefits of entry ticket attendance far outweigh those difficulties for me. The student assessment data, in-the-moment feedback, and the opportunities to foster an inclusive classroom space where every student gets a chance to participate were instrumental to successfully navigating a complicated and changing teaching year. Though I'm eager to forget some parts of pandemic teaching (e.g., "You're muted." *pause* "Nope. Still muted."), entry ticket attendance is one thing I'm eager to continue for years to come.