The Sample Quiz: Helping Students Prepare for Online Tests

Kate Britt, Ask Dr. C

Introduction

Faculty are on the front lines; we are frequently the first go-to person for students who are experiencing technical difficulties while working in their online courses. Perhaps one of the most important tools in many Blackboard courses is the Assessments tool (for Quizzes, Tests, and/or Assessments). Providing students with a short sample quiz helps them become familiar with the tool and gives them a head start in troubleshooting any technical problems that may arise during online testing.

"My browser crashed and I can't finish my test!"

When a technical challenge arises during a test it can cause panic for most students, not to mention frustration and any resulting confrontation if their technical difficulties result in a lower score than anticipated.

In Ask Dr. C, I see this question often: "Students have told me they've had problems using quizzes in my course. Is there some troubleshooting advice I can offer new students at the beginning of the term?" Let's look at a few ways we, as course instructors, can anticipate and circumvent most of those difficulties.

Set your students up for success

First, ensure that your students have their browser and computer set up correctly for the best course experience. See my post "Set your students up for Success" in the Connections ADC Blog.

The sample quiz

Set up a sample quiz in your course. The purpose of the sample quiz is to help students try out the assessment tool of your choice, detect possible technical problems with their computer setup, and increase their confidence in the technology. If students are assigned this sample quiz before they are assigned graded assessments, there should be fewer complaints about assessments not working in the course.

Students new to the system can use the sample quiz to find out how the tool works without the pressure and concerns surrounding testing. Seasoned Blackboard users should

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also try the sample quiz before doing the graded assessments in the course just to make sure nothing has changed since their last use of the system—things such as updated system versions, updated browsers, or differences in test settings in your course compared to those in the last course they took.

The Full Monty

We want the sample quiz to give students the full testing experience. Make the sample quiz as similar to your course assessments as you can. Here are some ideas:
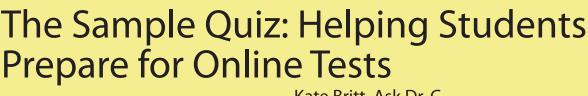
- Give advance instructions and reasons for the test. Some of the instructions can be included in some of the sample test questions.

- Where you put the instructions and test depends on the arrangement of items in your course. Post a question to the Ask Dr. C forums if you need suggestions.

- Provide a variety of question types, using each type that you've included or plan to include in your course assessments. If your course assessments include images, external links, scripting, flash, videos or media, third party software, math formulas, or require student use of the HTML Editor/Creator, etc., include examples of each of those special items in your sample quiz.

- Set your sample quiz to have unlimited attempts and no date restrictions. Full access encourages new users to try it as often as they need to. (Perhaps explain in your advance instructions what an "attempt" is if your real tests allow for more than one attempt. If they don't, explain that this sample quiz is the only exception, thus ensuring that it doesn't create confusing expectations.)

- If your course assessments include timed tests, give this sample quiz a tight time frame. Let your students see what it's like to run out of time. If the test has unlimited attempts, it won't matter if they can't complete it on the first try. If your instructions point out the timer and how it works, they'll have a chance to get used to watching it. (In your instructions, you can also indicate that the actual course tests allow—or don't allow—submission after time is up.)

   TIP: The timer is potentially one of those instructions that could be included as a sample question. "Do you see the test timer in this test window?" and "What is the time limit on this sample test?"

- Let the students experience a post-test report. Set up report options similar to what they will experience upon completion of the real assessments in the course.

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Should the sample quiz be graded?

There are several ways to go:

- Make it clear that this sample quiz is not for marks. This makes it optional, so point out to the students that although this quiz is just for experience and advance troubleshooting, not doing it could affect their marks if/when they encounter technical problems.

- If you want to ensure that students actually do this sample quiz (we all know that anything optional is often avoided), make it worth a small percentage of their total course mark—and tell them so in the advance instructions.

- Make it for marks, but don't include the mark in the total course grade. You can then either hide the column in the Gradebook entirely, or show it but do not include it in the final mark calculations (and tell the students this to help avoid any confusion when they see the grade in the Gradebook).

Make it fun (and informative)

I try to make my sample quiz fun by throwing in odd or silly questions. I also like it to be informative. A question like, "Who will you contact if you have problems with this Blackboard system?" could include answers like "email the instructor", "ask the school's local technical support team" (include the link to the support page, set to open a new-window), "post a question in the Ask Dr. C forum" (include the link), and maybe a funny answer or two, like "call Ghostbusters". My point is that you can sneak in some reference information for them and also make your quiz a light-hearted learning exercise in getting to know how the tool works.

Conclusion

We already help students prepare academically for doing course assessments. Let's also help students prepare for the technical aspects of using the tool. A sample quiz takes little effort to set up but will help eliminate time-consuming troubleshooting throughout the term.