

Just Do It

Being a Most Effective Distance Educator in 2013!

Errol Craig Sull

It's 2013, and you are actively involved in your courses. But as each new year taps us on the shoulders we look to improve, to be the best we can be as distance educators. There are many components to go into this, and thus it is easy to

overlook one or two—and if we do it could hurt our effectiveness in the classroom, something that must never occur. To make sure this year is your best yet as a distance educator, embrace each of these suggestions:

GIVE YOUR SUPERVISORS WHAT THEY EXPECT

There are certain parameters and guidelines you are expected to follow, but often distance educators can let some slip by simply by virtue of the online environment, that is it's you and a computer, with the daily doses of life also needing your attention. But teaching students online is a job, a very professional one, and the quickest way to please your supervisors—and to show them they were right in hiring you—is to ensure you follow, item by item, all you need to do. As your courses go on, especially if you are teaching more than one simultaneously, more requirements might come your way: it's a wise distance educator who makes a checklist of what is required and when in each course—and consults it daily. This will keep you from falling off any distance education cliff.



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**NUMBER 1 RULE
OF DISTANCE EDUCATION:
BE A CONSTANT PRESENCE**

The students cannot physically interact with you, there is no brick-and-mortar classroom office they can visit, it is rare (if at all) they can see and/or hear you—but when they see your postings, your e-mails on a regular basis it goes a long way to keeping your students engaged in the course. Some folks still believe online courses teach in a silent vacuum, i.e. students will do the readings, hand in all assignments, be on time, and walk away satisfied with the course. It ain't gonna happen—no how, no way. You need be there as conductor and coach—it's your guidance, motivation, and input that keeps the course alive.

**NUMBER 2 RULE
OF DISTANCE EDUCATION:
BE TIMELY IN ALL RESPONSES**

The importance of responding to all student assignments, e-mails, and in-course office postings, combined with weekly reminders and daily postings of a this or that, can seem daunting—and it is easy to reach a point of taking your time in responding, sending, or posting. But students need your information, they need your clarification—they need your words pretty much right away. And for those students new to online learning this is even more critical. All in your class want to learn, and when they know you can be depended on to help out when they need it—and even when they don't expect it—this goes a long way in giving them a relaxing, enjoyable, and fulfilling distance learning experience.

**NUMBER 3 RULE
OF DISTANCE EDUCATION:
BE ENTHUSIASTIC AND INTERESTED**

Words aplenty from the distance educator to his or her students are great—but

they can be simply words one can find in any dictionary or words that come alive with your enthusiasm, your verve, your excitement, your interest in the course and the students. When the students can feel a very positive and involved you in each of your postings and e-mails it results in a strong student-instructor rapport—so important in the learning process. And if you have the opportunity to additionally incorporate phone calls, audio, and/or visual (of you) again—be simply a great instructor with a smile in your voice and enjoyment in your attitude. Flat words, lethargic words offer ... nothing.

**POPULATE YOUR COURSES
WITH EXTRAS**

Each distance learning course comes complete with a syllabus, readings, and assignment information. By themselves these usually do a good job at presenting the subject information and course requirements so the students can learn and stay on task. But never leave a course as is; there is so much more you can offer students to augment and enhance their online course experience, thus making for learning that goes beyond the course length and will stick with the students for a much longer time. Suggestions: tie in material (articles, essays) that show the relationship between the course subject and the professional world ... post YouTube videos that give extra info on varied course items ... create a webliography with solid websites the students can use for additional information.

**INCORPORATE YOUR STUDENTS'
PERSONAL LIVES INTO
THE COURSE SUBJECT**

Distance learning courses really become interesting to the students—and the material becomes so much more meaningful—when the professional lives of your students are tied to the subject matter. Whether in discussion threads or assign-

ments, have student discuss their employment (now and down the road) and how the course subject relates; what experiences have they had with the course material; and how will the course help them in work? These types of questions take what can appear as theoretical, bland information and make it become very important, very real in the students' lives. (A cool exercise: have students post websites that relate to the course subject: they enjoy doing this, it gets them more involved in the course, and each student leaves with more helpful resources.)

ATTEND ALL FACULTYWIDE WEBINARS AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT COURSES

Throughout your tenure with each school there will be required and optional faculty-wide webinars to attend, as well as required and optional professional development courses to complete. Certainly, attend all that are required, but also attend those webinars and take professional development courses not required: this shows your personal dedication as a distance educator, and also as one who is constantly striving to be the best as a distance educator. Taking such an approach demonstrates your value as a teaching asset to the school—so important when it comes to evaluations and new course assignments. And you do become a better online instructor.

USE HUMOR ... BUT SPARINGLY

Humor is a great thing in any classroom—it lightens the tone of the course, it makes students feel more welcome and relaxed in a course, and it is another step in humanizing you. But what no course needs is a comedian; unless you are teaching a course in stand-up comedy the humor should appear now-and-then, not take over the course. And keep in mind that many people cannot use humor: it falls flat, and the result is chasing students

away from the course. Certainly, you do not have to incorporate humor, but it is mentioned simply as an additional tool one can employ in the classroom. Suggestion: if you are unsure of the impact of your humor do try it out on a colleague (your parents or significant other or friends or relatives might be nearby—but do they really know what works in the distance learning classroom?).

INCORPORATE AUDIO AND/OR VISUAL

The technology of today offers a wide variety of options that can make your voice and/or all of you play a role in the course, along with the words you type into the course. Audio files such as .mp3 have proven to be a solid help in keeping students more engaged and interested in a course, and the use of YouTube and other such “movie” software can allow you to make a full-person presence in the course, whether to simply welcome students to the course or offer additional insight on varied areas of the course. Added to this are the use of live chats, PowerPoints and Prezis (and other such software), and phone calls: no longer does any distance learning course need remain with only the printed word in a flat, black-on-white, silent format.

KEEP YOUR SOFTWARE KNOWLEDGE CURRENT

The New York Institute of Technology is credited with offering the first online course in 1984—it was very basic, and could only use the most rudimentary of computer equipment. Our current hardware and software, as well as social media and varied computer applications, give the online instructor a dizzying array of technological tools from which to choose. Caution must be used, to be sure, in selecting which ones you bring to your course, but what knowledge of anything computer you employ in your course must be fully understood by you, and, as much as possi-

ble, keep your software and hardware up to date. This not only makes for a smoother teaching experience on your end but for the students, as well.

OFFER SOCRATIC QUESTIONS TO HELP STUDENTS BECOME MORE INVOLVED

The use of Socratic questioning in the distance learning classroom is a proven method of getting students to use critical thinking skills and take students into areas of a subject they may not have previously considered. Whether this is used in discussion forums, individual interaction with students, or as part of assignments it puts the one and two-word answers from students on a shelf, instead resulting in sentences and perhaps a paragraph. As an example, instead of asking “Is this what you believe” a Socratic approach would be “What do you mean by ___?” While there are several websites that offer a good variety of Socratic questions this is one of the better ones: http://ed.fnal.gov/trc_new/tutorial/taxonomy.html.

STAY IN CONTACT WITH YOUR “BOSS”

Although you will have required e-mail correspondence with your supervisor, and perhaps a required phone call or two during the course, it behooves you to stay in contact with him or her with once-in-awhile e-mails, if nothing else but to indicate the course is going well. And if you get some great, unsolicited comments from students about your course do send those along as well—it’s nice to remind your

supervisor that you are a wise choice to have in the classroom. Also, your supervisor may be responsible for so many faculty it can be easy for you to get lost in the crowd—and you don’t want that to happen. Finally: don’t hesitate to pitch a suggestion that might improve the course or for a professional development webinar—it shows your interest beyond merely what you are required to do.

GIVE DETAILED AND CONSTRUCTIVE FEEDBACK

One benefit of the online course is returning student assignments with your typed comments; this allows for more detail, and certainly no arduous writing-by-hand-on-paper approach, from which one quickly tires. The result is ample room for detailed feedback to students, and it should come in a triptych form: pointing out an error, indicating why the error occurred, and showing how to get it right. This approach makes each feedback effort on an assignment a student’s personalized “guide to getting it right”—something useful far beyond the course and great in upping the value of your course. Also: also point out at least a few positives on an assignment, and give an overall comment that is motivating and positive.

Remember: Bob Dylan, Picasso, Meryl Streep, Bill Gates, Isaac Stern, and Toni Morrison were not born great, and neither is the distance learning instructor: dedication, practice, and enthusiasm are needed.