

Ask Errol!

Errol Craig Sull

And so we begin a new year, and the questions and concerns regarding distance learning continue! I'll be here to make an attempt to answer whatever you toss my way, and I'm always interested in hearing from you; please drop me an e-mail with your thoughts at erroldistancelearning@gmail.com Here is an interesting mixture I received toward the end of 2012:

I am overwhelmed by the variety of software on the market that allows me to offer enhanced audio and visual materials for my students. These are great, but is there any rule of thumb to determine which are best and when X or Y should be used for a class? (P.S. Thanks for the Q & A column: you give me information I've not found elsewhere!)

Wow—you ask a question for which one could write and write and write! The problem is threefold: (1) picking software that fits the needs of your class; (2) using software that best presents your course content and others areas of the course; (3) the overall structure of the course, i.e., what will work best within the length of the course, the course syllabus, and daily time segments. Each of these can only be answered by you, of course, but there are a few things you can do to help you make the right decisions. First, talk with colleagues who teach the same courses, as well as your supervisor. No matter how much I am up on the latest computer software I have learned that someone else can offer me a new piece of software of which I was not aware. Second, reach out to your students: I have set up discussion threads with a focus of students posting helpful software (as well as websites) they feel would work well in my course, and I always come away with new items that can be used in my classes. Lastly, visit one or more of the many online teaching blogs



Errol Craig Sull,
Online Instructor,
P.O. Box 956, Buffalo, NY 14207.
Telephone: (716) 871-1900.
E-mail: erroldistancelearning@gmail.com

and forums (do some Google or Bing searches), and ask for suggestions—fellow distance educators will deluge you with responses! (By the way: glad you like the column!)

This may seem like a minor concern, but it's bothered and puzzled me for quite some time, and that is knowing the amount of force, excitement, and minutes I should use with my voice when doing live chats with my students. I have found it's a great tool, but it sometimes seems that what I feel I should be doing and what I must do clash. Any insight you can give me would be appreciated.

This is a trial and error thing—each of us needs find the voice that works best for us in connecting with students. With that said, there are some guidelines that can help: (1) Never use a monotone and don't talk in a soft, "whispery" voice; by varying your tone and speaking with a strong voice you keep the students more interested in what you have to say—and you say it in an authoritative manner. (2) If you have a personality that is somewhat reclusive, shy, and not effervescent it behooves you to take on a more enthusiastic, "I-love-what-I'm-doing," excited personality when you are live in the chats: this engages students, and they will feed off the bubbles of interest you are generating. (3) While you are the one in control of the chats you do not want to be a talking head, that is lectures quickly bore students. Keep them involved and active in the chats by asking questions (see my other column in this issue, "Try This," and find the point I make about Socratic questioning), taking polls, soliciting their experiences, et cetera. Finally, an item many people overlook, but it can make a big difference in how students react to your voice: keeping to a minimum clearing of the throat, coughing, laughing, and sneezing; also, don't chew gum, don't eat while speaking, and when sipping a drink—our throats need this!—keep the slurping away.

Is there a rule regarding the use of student assignments and other materials for future classes? And while I use these for the obvious reasons of showing good and poor examples of student work are there any other ways these can be incorporated into a class? Thank you!

We all find it helpful to use "real life" examples of student assignments, discussions, et cetera to show other classes the good, bad, and ugly. Of course, your students who birthed these items do own them, even though they may appear in the somewhat public forum of a chat room or discussion forum; and the line is even clearer on student ownership when students submit an assignment for your eyes only—there is an expectation of privacy. So, what to do? First, ask students, either in a general beginning-of-the-class announcement or individually, for permission to use their work produced in class. Two important points here: (1) Be sure you indicate their names and no other identifying info (such as student IDs) will appear on any recycled work; (2) Stress that use of their materials will be quite helpful in educating future students in the course subject. Ultimately it's best to have a student drop you a note stating it's okay—and when a student nixes your request not only abide by that but also let the student know, in writing, you accept his/her decision. Finally: if you are using minor portions—a sentence here or there, for example—this can usually be done without permission from the student.

Increasingly, students are signing their e-mails to me or saying goodbye in phone calls with a phrase such as "Have a blessed day." Also, sometimes they are more direct in their closing salutations by inserting the name of a religious deity. This makes me feel uncomfortable, and I've had a few students complain to me as well. Are there any guidelines on this? I do not want to offend anyone in class, but it seems religion does not

belong in a secular classroom, which mine is.

I've had an increased number of queries on this subject in the past couple of years, and I've also noticed an uptick in such salutations and end-of-live conversations in my courses. For whatever reason(s) this is happening, there really is no problem with it unless a student begins proselytizing, i.e., "selling" his or her religion to other students (this is not the purpose of a classroom). The type of closing you mention—such as "Have a blessed day" —may be part of the student's core belief and is, in essence, a positive message aimed at the recipient, in this case you. While you may

feel uncomfortable with it, the statement is rather generic—making a big deal about it to the student could really blow up in your face, as your objection could easily be construed as religious intolerance or bigotry. As for the students made uncomfortable by this, I'd simply remind them folks express beliefs in different ways, and as long as it's merely used as a closing salutation—sometimes as a tagline under one's name—it's not reaching out to convert, but merely saying hello: in the end, a nice thing.

Remember: A person is only best when striving to be better—and you can't get there without asking questions.



Master

the future of distance education

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-PLATTEVILLE is one of only a handful of schools nationwide with a master's program that focuses solely on training distance education leaders who promote academic and operational excellence.

- 100% online, with mixed-delivery modalities
- 30 credits to earn a **Master's Degree in Distance Education Leadership**
- Accredited by the Higher Learning Commission
- No GRE or GMAT required

Apply today at GoUWP.com/USDLA



**UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN
PLATTEVILLE**
ONLINE



MASTER OF DISTANCE EDUCATION AND E-LEARNING

LEARN ONLINE TO LEAD ONLINE.

Tomorrow's most coveted instructors and managers will be those who can design, develop, deliver and manage educational programs online. Start preparing today, with a certificate or Master of Distance Education and E-Learning from University of Maryland University College (UMUC). Taught by an international faculty of distance learning professionals, the program takes a unique, interdisciplinary approach. Dual degree options with the UMUC MBA, MS in management or MEd in instructional technology are also available.

- Three specializations available: Teaching and training, policy and management, or technology
- Opportunities to network with students through several social media channels
- Financial aid and an interest-free monthly payment plan available



Enroll now.

800-888-UMUC
umuc.edu/elearning