

Ask Errol!

Errol Craig Sull

And so we have another compilation of questions on varied topics from distance learning instructors—as the profession grows so does the number of complexities and possibilities and opportunities that affix themselves to online education. Keep them coming, and I will continue to do my best in offering info that will help you enhance your efforts in the asynchronous classroom (I can be reached at erroldistancelearning@gmail.com).



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

This edition's collection ...

You will probably think this a silly question, and I know there are tons of suggestions on the Internet (believe me, I've searched), but what do you think makes for an ideal office environment to teach online? I'm curious as to what yours looks like, as you must have it down to a science. For me, I have my computer on a desk in my bedroom, and I let my wife and kids know when I need some quiet time. Looking at my workspace, next to my computer you'd see a cup of coffee, a pad and pen, and some other notes and papers (not very much). Still, occasionally I find it hard to really focus on my classes, and there are times where I've made mistakes in my grading and my class announcement postings because I know my surrounding environment interrupted me at times. Please help!

There are readers of this column who will see this first subject, perhaps roll their eyes, think a soft "You gotta be kidding!" and move onto the next letter—such is how basic and obvious most folks view the concern you raise and the solution to it. Yet I publish your letter because just the opposite is true: most people teaching in a distance learning setting don't really know how to maximize their environment for optimal online teaching focus. It's taken for granted that everything is fine the way things look and sound, and the major area of concern is the classroom. While the lat-

ter is true, the better the environment surrounding the online instructor the better the course can be.

Of course, the ideal situation would be to have one's own study or office—but let's work with your situation. First, you mentioned telling your wife and children that you need, in essence, to be left alone while teaching. That's a good start: the fewer outside interruptions the better. This also extends to phones and TV (music, however, can help one's focus). As for what's on your desk it seems rather spartan—the organization is good, but you might want to add a picture of your family (as a motivational reminder to do the best possible teaching!), a saying or two to emphasize teaching's importance, a box of tissues, a small house plant (it does have a soothing effect), a good lamp to offer directed lighting on your computer, and something to drink (nonalcoholic, which you have). Together, this collection equals a more content and relaxed online teaching environment, resulting in better concentration, more effective teaching, and improvement in student learning satisfaction. (NOTE: There is a myriad of environments created when distance learning educators teaching—if you'd like some suggestions as to how yours can be maximized please drop me a note.) Oh, yes, you asked about mine: I do have the luxury of my own study, and I've stocked it with what helps me to relax and focus: a tank of fish, some plants, and many books and posters!

Your column has given me many good ideas in the past, and I hope it can again offer me assistance. I've been invited to teach a MOOC [massive open online course, usually offered for free and usually with many thousands of students in a course.], and while I presume that the same abilities and approaches I've used teaching online for 5 years will come in handy, I'm sure there are some new wrinkles I need to know. Can you offer a few pointers?

An upcoming column will focus on what you ask—a miniguide to teaching MOOCs. And because it will take up a full column you can see I won't be able to give you here everything one needs to know to successfully teach—should I say “handle”?—a MOOC. But as your course will probably be starting before that column let me toss out a few items that are especially important.

First: understand the development of your content will take far longer than in a traditional online course. The reason: with so many students the idea of only lecturing and/or posting course readings will bore, and the students will quickly share these thoughts with one another. Thus, the use of video, slide decks, and audio, mixed with mini-lectures and course readings, is crucial, and this development takes time. Also: make a typo—or any major writing error for that matter—and thousands of students will immediately know it, so be über careful with any text offered to the class. Also, cheating is much more prevalent (why giving credit for taking a MOOC is very challenging), and the one or two wisecracks an online instructor can count on in a “regular” online class is multiplied in a MOOC. Too, be aware of your audience—as MOOCs are offered free with no (or limited) credit the mix of folks—educationally and reasons for taking the course—can differ quite a bit from the courses you now teach. And my final big suggestion: in addition to posting announcements in class, send them individually to students (in mass e-mailings) to be sure they receive all your info, and take an active role in forums/discussions so you can be seen as a MOOC instructor who is involved in the course, not merely one who teaches with a pointer.

I have read your columns where suggestions were given for group work among students; they have proved quite helpful in my classes. Thanks! But I have what can best be described as a touchy group project because

it involves creating and presenting a webinar to my department in collaboration with three colleagues. Some of the problems you mentioned and problems I've previously seen with my students are happening here: one person—me!—who is carrying the burden of the presentation; lack of communication from my colleagues on the project; and minimal contributions by two of my mates. Unlike students who are more apt to listen to me because they realize a grade is at stake, the only "reward" we get is a job well done and a thumbs up from our Faculty Manager. Added to this: our Faculty Manager has already indicated another project she wants us to create! Some advice on how to maneuver through this quagmire, please!

As more "cool" tools become available for giving online presentations—webinars—more distance learning educators are jumping into the fray of creating and presenting these programs, and often, as you point out, in a collaborative effort. All previously mentioned suggestions for good student group projects apply here, but a few with some tweaks: constant communication amongst group members; electing a group leader (no-one need be officially appointed as a group leader, but someone must take on the same responsibilities—amongst teaching colleagues the title "group leader" can result in an elitist ring to it); assignment of project components (this is better done by one person in a "Let me suggest ..." mode OR by simply stating, "I feel comfortable in doing XXX—what about the rest of you?"); and setting and adhering to a timeline for completion of various parts of the project. (Again, this is best accomplished by someone merely reaching out with an email that states, "Let me suggest we have A completed by X, B set to go by, Y, etc.")

Now, the delicate part comes in when someone is not putting in the amount of effort expected and/or a team member offers material that needs substantial changes. You have to interact with these folks on a regular basis in other situations,

and thus you don't want to come across as arrogant or bossy. Therefore, being positive with a suggestion for change works best (e.g., "Marv, thanks for the great info; if it's okay with you I'm going to smooth it out a bit for a better seamless fit into our project" OR "Great ideas, Shwana, but perhaps you can cut down on the text a bit so it more readily fits on one slide?") One other suggestion: whenever I'm involved in a collaborative project I make it a point to call my colleagues: it puts me in a leadership position without being appointed leader, and it helps establish a cordial, easy-going working relationship.

Tips, tips, and more tips, and suggestions, suggestions, and more suggestions: not only do you offer many in your columns (and I appreciate them) but there are thousands more to be found in a large number of books, websites, and online articles on distance learning. Is there one umbrella tip you have that is perhaps not so obvious but can be a huge help to anyone teaching an online course?

I've been teaching online for 20 years, and again and again I've found one item that is somewhat of a magic many-purpose elixir in helping one to teach in the asynchronous environment: posting resources that target working the online class, course content, and assignments (as text, audio, and video). I'll explain the specifics of these shortly, but implementing these results in fewer e-mails and calls to the faculty member, higher grades for students, more classroom engagement, less angst and anxiety from the class, and an overall heightened learning experience for the students. The only downside: offering these resources takes more upfront time from the instructor ... but it is so worth it!

As for details of the lists, they fall into the three areas mentioned: working the online class, course content, and assignments. For the first, post tips on how best to succeed in an online class; reminders of when assignments are due; school contact

info for problems out of the teacher's control; the faculty member's expectations from students; reminders as to where materials and resources are located in the classroom; problems students might encounter in an online course—and how to overcome them; and instructions (text, audio, or video) on how to attach a file, submit an assignment, et cetera.

For course content, offer additional resources that highlight or underscore the importance of the course content, updated info on the course content, and materials that demonstrate the relationship of the course subject to the “real world” of employment and everyday life. Also included can be puzzles, cartoons, videos, etc. that add a bit of lightness and humor to the course while still emphasizing various aspects of the course subject. Finally,

post information on what is expected—in general—for each assignment (including discussions); common mistakes students make in assignments, and how to overcome them; and tips on how to do well in all graded course components. Added to this I always include an Assignment X Checklist (to be sure students include all requirements of an assignment), an example of a good quality upcoming assignment, and samples of what constitute good discussion postings. Certainly, additions to all of these resources should be made as material relating to the course subject and student questions warrant it.

Remember: Einstein. Lincoln, Curie, Gandhi, Twain, Thatcher, King, and Child—they all were brilliant, but all had libraries—and used them.

“... THEY ALL WERE BRILLIANT, BUT ALL HAD LIBRARIES—AND USED THEM.”



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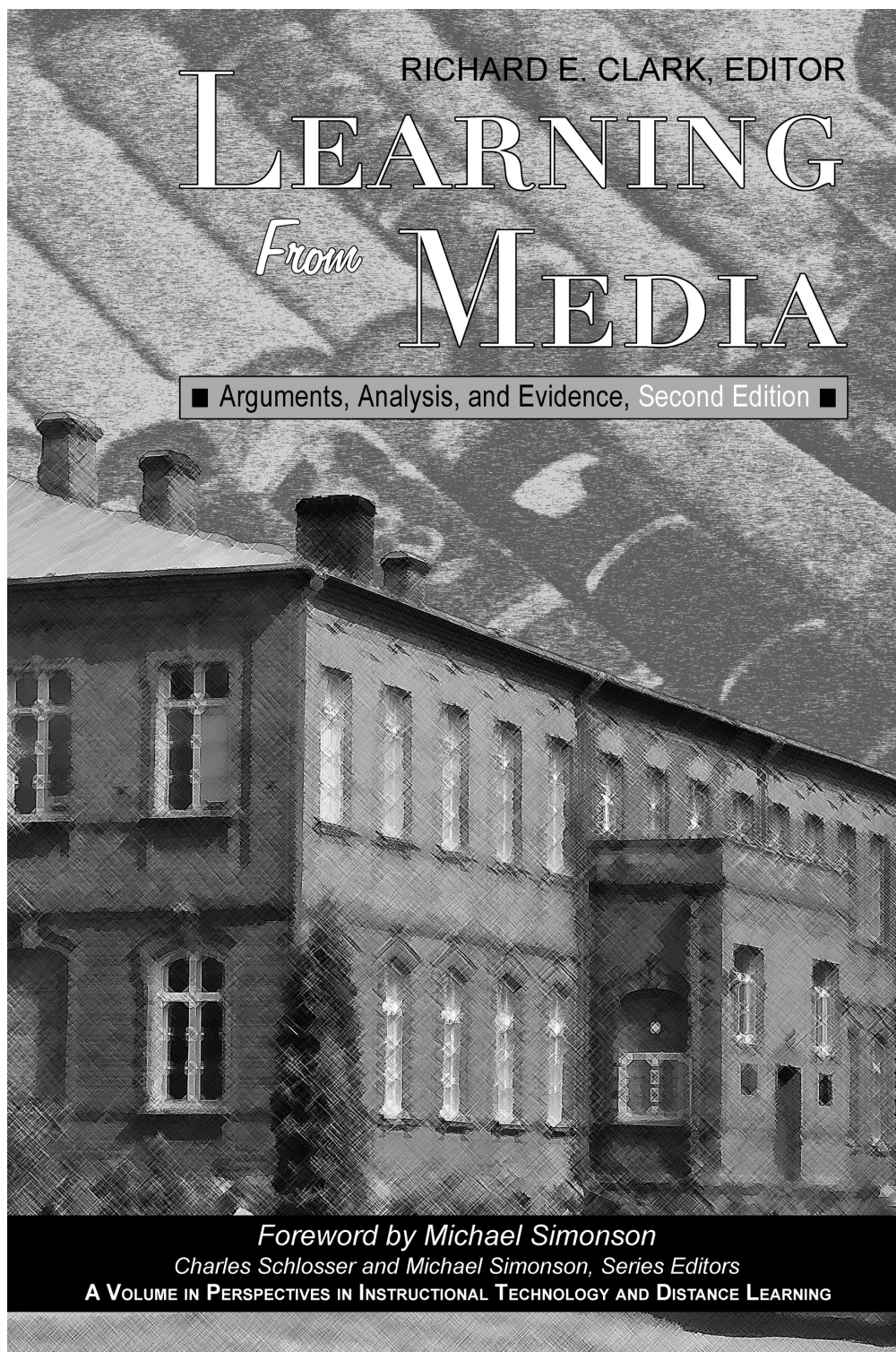
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