

Ask Errol!

Errol Craig Sull

It's 2014, and with a new year comes more distance learning courses and more developments in distance learning. These will result in new problems and confusion, and I invite you to again share them with me—I'll do my best to help you out from my 20+ years of online teaching experience!

This column's selection...

I have been teaching online for 8 years, and recently I was asked to develop a training



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

session at our school to teach other faculty members the "how tos" of teaching online. These individuals have not previously taught online, I will be doing the workshop in a face-2-face classroom, and I want to do a really good job—any tips?

Kudos to you, both for accepting the request to teach others the fundamentals of teaching online and for your enthusiasm: too many teachers are asked to teach online with little or no training, and the students ultimately suffer. And let me begin with a cardinal rule in teaching such a course: have a minimal amount of lecture and a large portion of doing. The more your attendees can get the feel of being in an online classroom the better prepared they will be when it comes time to teach their courses.

A great way to start off such a session—after a brief introduction—is to have a dummy online course set up that is rife with errors, asking those in your class to wander through the course, jotting down what they believe are problems, inconsistencies, and poor teaching. Examples may include too little feedback on assignments, poor response time to student e-mails, lack of presence in the classroom, a link or two that does not work, and typos throughout an announcement posting. Once X amount of time has passed point out the correct answers, with a brief explanation as to what is wrong with each, indicating the items will be covered in more detail during

the seminar. Also, ask for others you did not mention—attendees may pick out items that are really okay or fall into a gray area, and it's good to discuss these so no confusion lingers in your classroom.

A second teaching technique is to post a discussion question in the mock course, then give the class approximately 20 minutes response time for the question and to each other's postings; when this is over delve into what makes a good discussion, using the postings in class for examples. (Of course, be positive in all remarks—these folks are, after all, learning!) Please drop me an e-mail when the training is over—I'd like to know how it goes!

Thanks very much for your columns—they have proven extremely helpful to my faculty in their online teaching efforts! But your columns also present me with a somewhat perplexing item: there is so much information coming over my desk and through my computer on how to effectively teach online that it is becoming time-consuming to read it all, let alone attend any live webinars on the topic. Additionally, there is such a wide variety of subject areas that it becomes increasingly difficult to decide what I need and what I don't. Any guidance you can give me on this would be greatly appreciated.

Thanks for the kind words—helping others become better online instructors through my experience and knowledge in the field is a true joy for me! And let me see if I can extend this to you again.

Perhaps the best umbrella piece of guidance for your concerns is to know what is most important to your courses. As an example, teaching writing courses might not need too much info on metadata relating to chemistry courses; classes that have no team or group assignments don't benefit from information on how to improve this setup; and classes that have 30-40 (or fewer) students per class won't find much help from articles on MOOCs (massive

open online courses). Doing this will immediately save you time.

Second, know which sources can be trusted to provide salient, timely, and quality material—this can take some time to discover, but once you have a reliable group of sources it becomes easier to disregard others.

Also, know what interests you. While this may seem obvious, there are subject areas in distance learning that might appear quirky or initially not related to your courses—but they just happen to grab your attention. Do look at these—you might be pleasantly surprised at what you find.

Finally, new avenues for information will continue to pop up—blogs, podcasts, videos, online and print columns and articles, books. Each of these offers the possibility of information useful to your courses, but a combination of your experiences with previous sources, your interests, and where you'd like to see your courses improve will give you the honing tools needed to find the best sources of useful info.

Is there one overriding area that is ignored or given scant attention by those who are distance learning educators? I regard myself as an excellent online teacher, but sometimes I wonder—is there something so obvious I'm just not seeing it? Thanks!

Much time—important time!—is spent focusing on getting courses just right and being certain one offers students the best in an online educator that often overlooked are setting up the most conducive environment in which to teach, keeping oneself organized, and having a good sense of time management. Ignore one or more of these, and the course (and thus the students) is immediately impacted. To be certain this does not happen: (1) create an online teaching environment that allows you to relax and focus on the course (clean desk or surrounding area; something to drink—nonalcoholic, of course!; good

lighting; efficient computer; a pad and pen or blank screen for notes); (2) organize what you will do each day in class, stay on top of “problem” students, plan ahead for each week of teaching, keep your personal life organized so it does not interfere with teaching duties; (3) have a good sense of how much time is needed to fully complete each day’s teaching, respond to student e-mails and other queries in a timely manner, and take time for yourself so you can always teach refreshed.

While these three items are not “in” the course each is crucial to keep a course well managed and producing excellent learning experiences for the students.

Online education has been here for quite some time, and it seems like it’s pretty much stayed the same. Are there any new trends or developments coming along?

The easiest way to answer this is step back a bit, and see how we are more and more receiving our information: through mobile devices where we can use our fingertips while waiting for an appointment, on a treadmill, riding a bus, on vacation, walking in the park—just about anywhere. Translate this into the online learning environment, and text-heavy/time-consuming courses do not match. Some schools understand this—and more will—leading to online courses that are rich in quizzes,

podcasts, videos, and small chunks of content. The course content remains the same, but it is delivered in bite-sized pieces, making it easier to digest in a handheld device with a bit of time here, a small amount of time over there.

Another interesting development is the increased use of apps for mobile devices that focus specifically on distance learning. Course components can be included in these apps, including audio and video, and they can be accessed online or offline.

A final big trend is toward what is known as gamification—the use of games and gaming mechanics to teach content. While online instructors have been using puzzles and games for quite some time as adjuncts to course content, gamification takes this one step more by using the gaming techniques of competition to become a core part of online instruction. Although now primarily found in corporate e-training, gamification is beginning to find its way into academic distance learning.

I will be featuring a full column of these and other new distance learning trends in my other column, “Try This,” later in the year.

Remember: Snow White had the seven dwarfs, Dorothy the Munchkins, and Robin Hood his band of merry men—and each was stronger for the help these aides provided.