

Teaching Today's Online Students

They Are Diverse, But a Challenge to Teach!

Errol Craig Sull

As distance education has become more complex in its platforms, technology, marketing, and offerings so, too, has the makeup of its students. They are of a wide variety now: ages, ethnicities, nationalities, capabilities, and interests. This can make for a challenge in teaching such a mixture, and if the distance learning educator is not fully

immersed in understanding each student's specifics the class can be less than fulfilling for one or more students—something we never want. Thus this guide: it offers a better understanding of some bits and pieces for several categories of students an online educator would find enrolled in a 21st century online course.

Two notes:

1. Many of the items mentioned, although listed under this or that group, can easily be applied to other categories. Yet they are placed in the group where they reside as they are most important in that category.
2. It is not only possible but also quite probable that all categories of students listed in this column can be found in one class. Look over all the items listed, then select those that work best with the class. In the end, the distance educator must meld his or her teaching strategies with the specifics of each category's points: only this will result in a class that is perfectly fulfilling to the students.



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THE MULTICULTURAL STUDENT

Students who live in another country or are new to the United States can bring

some challenges the online educator does not anticipate. Without being on the lookout for signs these students are in the class—and for indications of the students struggling—it can result in a poor learning experience for the multicultural student.

- In the class intros ask students to indicate where they live—and, if necessary, how to pronounce names. It is crucial these students feel as comfortable as possible in the class, thus understanding the culture of the students and making an effort to pronounce their names—even if audio is not part of the course—shows the instructor's interest in making all feel welcome. And do not hesitate to ask students—in a general e-mail to the class—for info on how they have previously learned.
- Immediately reach out to students who display a language barrier. There may be students whose difficulty with the English language presents as hurdle with assignments and/or understanding the course material. Take time to work with these students—and the use of audio or audio/visual in explaining can prove very helpful in these situations.
- Make it a point to show enthusiasm for the multicultural makeup of the class. The online instructor sets the tone for the class, and when he or she displays excitement for a cultural buffet in the class makeup it becomes infectious. Not only will students more readily become involved in the course but this will also strengthen that important instructor-student bond.

THE ADULT LEARNER

The so-called “baby boomer” generation has reached record numbers in this country, the country's economy has resulted in more out-of-work folks returning to school, and online education simply makes it easier for older individuals to seek a return to college. Yet there might be certain

difficulties they encounter in the distance learning course, and it's important to meet these head on.

- There can be other major responsibilities in a person's life, thus limiting time for studies. Deadlines are certainly important, but the distance educator must also be mindful of students with families, employment, and other responsibilities they deem equal in importance to school. Sometimes, deadlines should be bent to accommodate such situations—it shows one's interest in the student as a person, always important.
- It may take a bit longer for this student to master all technological aspects of the course. If a student has been out of school for some time he or she may be somewhat new to use of the computer for learning. Be sure to ask the class if anyone fits in this category; when hearing from such person be sure to learn in what areas the student feels weak, as help can then be given.
- Information presented in the course may be more difficult to learn due to being out of school a long time. Course material for students not too far removed from a learning environment may find a sense of familiarity with the material currently taught, while the student away from school for some time may find he or she is starting from scratch. The use of extra resources to help in explaining the material using detailed feedback on assignments, and including audio or audio/visual input on assignment and the course can prove very helpful in these circumstances.

THE COLLEGE-WHILE-STILL-IN-HIGH-SCHOOL LEARNER

Although less than 8% of the current U.S. high school population takes college courses this number is rapidly growing. Teaching this young student in a college-level distance learning course requires an

awareness and understanding of the high school student mindset—and how best to integrate this student into a college-level course.

- Keep in mind that these students are in high school for the majority of their learning hours. The rules and procedures of high school is what governs these students most of the time, and the learning approach offered them can be different from the online educator's approach. This student is straddling two academic worlds, and the online college educator must always be cognizant of these possible differences.
- Stress the importance of learning what is to be expected at the college level. Using any online college course to teach high school students the expectations of college—beyond the course subject—is a strong bonus for the students. This offers not only jump-start learning at the college level and college credits but also a smoother transmission into the long-term college of choice for these young men and women.
- The students' basic knowledge of the subject being taught may be at a lower base. In teaching high school students it is possible that certain given the online college instructor expects new students to have will not be there, simply because the student has yet to be taught the information or has not been taught the information at a college level. More basic teaching approaches might need to be employed, as well as additional drams of patience and understanding.

THE GROWING-UP-WITH-TECHNOLOGY STUDENT

Many students—especially those coming directly from high school into college and a bit older (read: Generation X and Millennials) are extremely tech savvy, thus the use of technology to highlight and demonstrate course material is often expected and

appreciated. A solid integration of technology with the course materials can help keep these students engaged.

- Make use of audio and audio/visual for a better and clearer understanding of the course and course material. Using varied software that incorporates audio and audio/visual is an approach to learning with which these students are familiar, thus their engagement and interest in the course is strong when these are introduced.
- Ask the students to contribute suggestions for websites and software for the course. These students are ripe for becoming student aides of a fashion, as they might have knowledge of websites and software or approaches to the Internet with which the online instructor is not. Use a discussion thread to corral these submissions—they can make the course stronger for all, and add resources to future courses.
- Offer assignment feedback in audio and written formats. Growing up with computers, smartphones, tablets, etc. places one in the immediacy of technology, and thus these students take well to feedback given in audio or audio/visual formats. When necessary to offer a more complete understanding of an assignment, balance this technological feedback with written feedback.

THE SPECIAL NEEDS STUDENT

More students with physical and mental challenges are attending college. While these students in online courses are usually designated and are given special accommodations, it is imperative the distance learning instructor become familiar with limitations and problems these students may face in learning through the online environment, while also understanding the online learning platform can offer this population certain advantages as well.

- When learning of students with specific mental or physical disabilities/challenges, learn as much as you can about the specific disability or challenge. Taking the time to learn about a disability can give added insight into such a student can better be taught in the online learning environment, while also informing the instructor on what usually standards components of the course may be more difficult for these students.
- If a student openly discusses it with you, respond to the student as you would any other student: with respect and as a college student taking a course. No differently abled student wishes to be addressed as such—and there is no reason for this. Interacting with this student as an online instructor would with any other student speaks well for the professionalism and humanism of the instructor, and results in more engagement from the special needs student. Important: always check over e-mails to these students to be sure no condescending or “pity” language has been accidentally included.
- If the opportunity arises, offer extra resources in the class or to the student that can be helpful in his or her learning. Creating a resources link in class where resources for all students can also include resources that can be helpful to a special needs student who might benefit from X or Y resource. If the student does mention his or her disability it is fine to suggest these resources—but do not be the one to initiate such a conversation.

THE TOTALLY-NEW-TO-THIS-ONLINE-EDUCATION-THING STUDENT

Many students come to an online course with only the experience of learning in a face-to-face environment; this can present some confusion and frustration. It is not only important to address this probability

on Day One of class but to also offer as much assistance as possible for a smooth integration of this student into the online learning platform.

- Offer a discussion thread or other area where students can drop questions and concerns they may have in switching from one learning environment to another. Many students find it somewhat of a shock to go from a physical classroom to the online classroom, and they often have questions and concerns not anticipated. Knowing these can be submitted to the online instructor and quickly—and clearly—answered is a big help in making these students feel more at ease in the asynchronous learning environment.
- Have a list of key contact info for departments and persons in the school that can offer additional assistance to these students. While this is beneficial for all students it will get constant use from the face-to-face to the online environment student: advising, information technology, financial aid, and other such areas not directly related to teaching can be needed, and it gives an extra touch to the online instructors’ concern for his or her students to have this info available.
- Offer basic computer assistance, such as information on making attachments, how to post assignments in class, and where grades can be found. This basic computer knowledge is so often taken for granted by the online educator in his or her students, yet there will be students who do not know one of more of these items. Either have info on these standard computer tasks posted or make it a point to post an e-mail early in class indicating an email asking for such assistance will quickly bring it.

Remember: Violins, cellos, drums, piccolos, and oboes: it takes a skilled conductor to create beautiful music from this mixture.