

# Ask Errol!

**Errol Craig Sull**

Distance learning continues to grow, and thus come more questions—and I am m happy to help out when I can! Each of the four concerns raised in this issue have been asked of me often, in different forms. There will never be the day when all of distance learning will exist without hiccups, curiosities, and challenges, but the more information that can be shared among the folks who teach these courses the continued growth in the quality of that teaching.



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

This column's offerings ...

*I appreciate your columns, and have been especially interested in your emphasis on personalizing and "exciting" the course through various resources, cartons, puzzles, et cetera. This is an approach I have taken in my online classes, but I'm wondering: when does a teacher reach a point when there is too much creativity, too much "other stuff" in the online class?*

Ah, this is a question and concern I often hear, and it would be great if I could give you a simple ratio, such as, 60% course shell and standard materials, 40% other. But such cannot be, as each course, each course subject, and each course instructor demand different materials to make the class "work" for the students. However, in introducing extras into a course—and by "extras" I mean anything that you add to the course beyond as it is delivered to you on Day One of teaching it—it is crucial that one never let audio, video, cartoons, and so forth take over the class. The standard for any online course is the instructor must make the material come alive for the students, must be the one who explains and highlights the information offered to the students.

Incorporating these extras is important: they can help make a course more engaging and exciting to the students; they offer illustration and highlights of various components of the subject being taught; and

they give the (correct) impression the online educator truly cares about his or her students having a positive learning experience. An overdose of these additional items, however, and two negative results can occur: so much added to a course that students do not have time to explore all or will simply overlook much ... and giving the impression these “bells and whistles” are more important than one’s teaching efforts. Ultimately, it is a feel, a sense of the right balance each online instructor must have—and a look back on each course taught will eventually offer the perfect formula for the courses yet to be taught.

*I have a student in one of my distance learning courses who will not accept that it is her fault for not doing well in the course. Her excuses range from it being my fault (“You expect us to be a professional like you!”) to her having a bad cold to not getting the textbook on time to believing she did follow certain assignments’ directions (she did not)—the list goes on. Although I have been patient with this student, and I have taken the time to point out, in detail, where she went wrong in assignments, this has been to no avail. Have you encountered a student like this? What did you do? Any help would be appreciated. Thanks!*

I do not know of any distance educator who has not had at least one of these students—for anyone who really cares about his or her teaching this problem can lead to some sleepless nights! Yet there are approaches one can take to reach this “hey-it’s-not-my-fault” student, if only for his or her partial acceptance of taking more ownership in not doing such a great job in the course. First, you point out taking the time to indicate where the student went wrong in an assignment—have you tried incorporating audio or audio/visual feedback? This not only can lend a clearer explanation of the material but also add a more personal touch to the feedback, thus creating a stronger student-professor bond ... important because it often results in the

student being more willing to accept your comments.

Additionally, a phone call can go a long way in helping right the student on a track to improvement—tone of voice and the immediacy of a call often results in a positive student response, while problems in a student’s life not related to the course might be discovered—important in wanting to work with the student. Also, begin each class by mentioning to students you are not expecting them to produce assignments at a professional level—this only comes with years of experience; rather, they will be graded on their ability to follow directions, to present the content needed in the assignment, and on their improvement. Finally, stay in constant contact with the student—initiating e-mails (with small learning suggestions in each) can help bring the student into a better flow of the class.

*I teach two online courses at a small liberal arts college, also teach two traditional courses at the same school. Through online webinars and ground meetings I have had the opportunity to meet many of my teaching colleagues, and most of them are also adjuncts. The problem I have—and it may sound picky, I realize—is the lead faculty for our department continually refers to us as “adjuncts,” never as “professors” or “teachers” or the like, often giving us the impression (through his e-mails, webinars, and faculty meetings) that we are somehow less important than one who is not an adjunct. Am I being petty? It really does irk me!*

Depending on which study one reads, adjuncts now teach 60% to 80% of all college courses in the United States—and their numbers are growing. Overall, faculty who supervise adjuncts recognize their worth, and they treat them with the respect deserved (so, no, you are not being picky!). Yet there will be that one or two—as you mentioned—who seem to look down on adjuncts, giving the impression

one with the title of “adjunct” (read: part-time and nontenured track faculty member) is somehow less than a teacher. The short response to your concern is you are probably not going to change this person’s attitude toward adjuncts.

What you can do equates to a simple answer: be the best adjunct possible so one can see no difference in the quality of teaching one offers as an adjunct from anyone else teaching in your school. “Quality will out” is an old expression, and if one offers excellence in teaching—including going beyond what is required—that online educator who proves him or herself to be valuable not only to the students but also to the reputation of the school ... and the lead faculty (or whomever) overseeing the adjuncts. Remember: “Sticks and stones can break my bones, but names can never hurt me”!

*There is certainly a rich array of software technology to use in the online classroom, but I’m specifically interested in using programs that allow for student collaboration on projects. This is a major focus of my courses, and in addition to simply assigning students to groups and setting up separate discussion threads for each group for members to interact on their projects I’d like to add some technology that would not only aid group members’ collaboration but also add a bit of pizzazz to my online courses. Any suggestions?*

You have asked a fun question! I say this because there are software products today that not only can be a major asset to assisting group members in their online classroom collaborative projects but also add an engaging quality—the “pizzazz” you mention—that helps bring a class alive with a bit of fun. This software falls into the cate-

gories of text alone, audio, and audio/visual.

On the easy side there are wikis—a web application that allows users to modify and change its contents (much like Wikipedia). Groups often use wikis for collaborative projects because they can modify and change the contents in the wiki without anyone limiting the changes. For more info visit <http://www.wikihow.com/Start-a-Wiki>.

Next comes VoiceThread, a free tool that allows students to post and create their collaborative projects as video or PowerPoint presentations, text, or other media; members of the group—as well as the online instructor—can comment and append the post for sharing with others. <https://voicethread.com/> contains all the information needed.

The next biggie in this group is the use of YouTube, Jing, and Screencast-O-Matic for presenting videos (YouTube can be a video of anything, while Jing and Camtasia can only record what is presented on the computer screen). Groups have used these successfully to share ideas, projects, interviews, and so forth. (Of course, one can also use audio, posting these files either in a wiki or exchanging them with each other, via e-mail or in a discussion thread). Additional info on the use of these can be found at <http://www.youtube.com/yt/about/getting-started.html> (for YouTube) ... <http://www.techsmith.com/jing.html> (Jing), and <http://www.screencast-o-matic.com/> (Screencast-O-Matic; YouTube, Jing, and Screencast-O-Matic are free).

**Remember:** The chain letter only works when it is forwarded on to others; sitting by itself no one else can make a decision as to whether its content is worthwhile.