

Your First Postings Always Crucial!

Errol Craig Sull

It's a cliché, to be sure: you only get one chance to make a first impression. Yet this truism becomes especially important in the online course where the distance educator's words posted can be read by students again and again throughout the course, so what these postings say must be measured, must be precise, but be ... perfect. But too often these first postings are just tossed into the course with little

thought given to the impact they can have throughout the course—and that impact can be huge.

There are three major areas of each distance learning class: general class announcements or e-mails; assignment feedback; and discussion postings. (Other areas, such as Live Chats, phone conversations, private messages, instructor course office, etc. also require much thought in the first response/postings by the instructor, and nearly all in this column can apply to these.) What follows are suggestions for the first posting in each, yet the substance and approach of each first should be maintained throughout the course. Do this and you'll markedly increase the engagement, enthusiasm, and excitement of your students.

THE FIRST GENERAL CLASS ANNOUNCEMENT OR E-MAIL

CONSIDER YOUR AUDIENCE

Is it primarily freshmen with many who are new to online learning or a group level has students who previously have taken online courses? Is the audience mostly military, civilian, or a combination? Other factors include their ages and whether they have taken other courses in your subject.



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The more you know about your class, the more specific can you make this first post.

YOUR FIRST FEW LINES SHOULD BE ENTHUSIASTIC, INVITING, AND CARING

Here's where you can erase the divide of only a computer between you and the class—by letting the students immediately feel you are glad to be teaching the course and that they are taking your course, that you are sincerely interested in their learning and improving, and that you are there to help whenever they need you. Also: encourage your students' suggestions and involvement. This sets a most positive tone and allows for a sense of humanity to come through the monitor—so important in getting and keeping students both engaged and motivated in the course.

BE SURE TO INCLUDE THE COURSE BOUNDARIES

These include both the "musts" and your expectations of the course, and are crucial to post at the beginning of the course so the students cannot say they weren't informed of this or that. Additionally, the students need know they must take the course seriously, there are major repercussions if they don't, and just because the course does not meet in a brick-and-mortar classroom doesn't mean they can simply come and go when they choose, as they choose. This is your "I'm the boss" section of the post.

INCLUDE THE COURSE'S IMPORTANCE BEYOND THE COURSE

Called reality-based education, it reminds the students that the course has importance beyond a grade, beyond X number of weeks. By explaining to students the subject's importance to them beyond the "I must take this course" mindset you are, yet again, offering a reason for their ownership of the course, and thus

bringing about more involvement on the students' part.

OFFER TIPS ON HOW TO DO WELL IN THE COURSE

These tips can come from your past experience in teaching the course; items you look for in assignment submissions; insight on what their overall contributions in discussions, teamwork, chat, and other such areas should be; what they shouldn't do—these and other like items help improve the overall quality of each student's class involvement AND contribute to your humanization and I'm-really-interested-in-helping-you image.

LET STUDENTS KNOW YOU ARE AVAILABLE AND THAT YOU WANT THEM TO SUCCEED IN THE COURSE

While this should be mentioned at the beginning of your post it should also be restated at least two more times, including at the end. Again, this shows your sincere involvement in the course and concern for your students.

MAKE USE OF COLOR, BOLDING, ITALICS, ETC.

When available, the use of color, bolding, italics, et cetera, can highlight what you deem especially important, give a sense of personality and warmth to your words, and break up the print so it's easier to digest. Also, don't hesitate to use subheads, a word or two in caps to introduce a section, and sentence fragments to emphasize.

ALWAYS END ON A POSITIVE, UPBEAT NOTE

This is the very last part of your first post that students will read, so restate the positives in your opening few lines; use an exclamation point here and there to show

excitement; and let them know you are really looking forward to the course, their involvement, and—very important—their overall improvement.

BEFORE YOU POST, READ IT ONE MORE TIME

Proofread and edit, proofread and edit: once you send out your first post you can't recall it, so be sure it says what you meant to say, that it's well written, and that you proofread it. You do, indeed, only get one chance to make a first impression!

THE FIRST ASSIGNMENT FEEDBACK TO STUDENTS

GIVE DETAILED FEEDBACK

Students want to improve, yet too often instructors simply indicate that something in an assignment is incorrect without giving specifics; this does not help the student. By establishing an initial reputation as one who gives detailed feedback—most comments will consist of indicating something in the assignment is incorrect, why it is incorrect, and how to get it right—the students will know yours is a class where they can learn, and this starts the road to a strong student-instructor rapport.

INCLUDE POSITIVE COMMENTS IN THE ASSIGNMENT FEEDBACK

We want students to improve, of course, and the ones who do well and are energetic coming in will continually give what is expected—and beyond. But there are also the students who do poorly on their first assignment, and while your comments will point this out it's also crucial that these students—of course, all students—receive one or two positive comments on their assignment. This motivation goes a long way in keeping students enthused and helps to build their

confidence from the beginning of the course.

INCLUDE A TRANSITION/TIE-IN OF THE ASSIGNMENT TO THE PROFESSIONAL WORLD

Many students don't consider a course beyond its X amount of weeks and a final grade, yet by initially reminding students of how the course subject relates to the professional world you immediately make the course more important. And this can be done not only through the general subject being taught but also for the specifics of each assignment.

OFFER A MOTIVATIONAL AND UPBEAT SUMMARY COMMENT ON THE ASSIGNMENT

This is where you have the opportunity to personalize your feedback; it lets the students know you are not merely checking off a list, but rather focusing on each student, and his or her needs. And by including a positive and energetic sentence or two you establish yourself as one who is a cheerleader for the students' success, always crucial in keeping students engaged in the course.

INVITE STUDENTS TO CONTACT YOU IF THEY HAVE QUESTIONS OR NEED FURTHER EXPLANATION

When students see you are available to help—indeed, you want to help—with any questions or confusion they have on assignments your role becomes that of a 3-D course instructor. For instead of the one-way conversation of you giving feedback to the students now you are inviting two-way conversation on their assignment submission and your feedback. This is but another way of letting the students know, early on, "Hey, I'm interested in helping you improve!"

PASTE A COMPREHENSIVE SUBJECT-RELATED WEBLIOGRAPHY AT THE BOTTOM OF YOUR FEEDBACK

This is akin to one of those TV commercials with the famous line, “But wait—there’s more!” Yes, students expect feedback from you, and giving detailed feedback will be quite nice. But at the end of your overall/summary comment paste a list of websites that offer additional information relating to the course subject and/or the assignment. This “resource bank” goes a long way in showing students they can count on you to give them everything they need to do well in the course. And always remind them of your comments’ and the webliography’s value beyond the course.

DRAW STUDENTS’ ATTENTION TO POSITIVE AND ESPECIALLY IMPORTANT COMMENTS WITH HIGHLIGHTING

By giving students detailed feedback, an overall summary comment, and a webliography you are also giving them much text—and this can begin to run into one another if you don’t use different-sized fonts, underlining, and—especially important—highlighting for the positive and especially important material. By doing this you’ll immediately draw the students’ attention to the “high points” of your comments, while establishing colors for which they will look with future assignments.

POST AN ASSIGNMENT X CHECKLIST TO BE SURE STUDENTS INCLUDE ALL REQUIREMENTS

Although this is not part of your feedback it does go a long way in making sure you have more positive feedback on the students’ first submission. One way students often lose points on an assignment is by leaving out one or two items that are required for the assignment. A great way to help students prevent this, show the

students you are truly there to help them, and start students off with a positive feel about the course is posting a sheet that lists all requirements for the first assignment, in bullet form, indicating that as the students complete an item it can be highlighted as having been completed. You are letting students know you are trying to do everything possible to help them succeed!

THE FIRST DISCUSSION POSTING

POST IT EARLY IN THE DISCUSSION THREAD(S)

You are the umbilical cord that connects the students to their course, and the more life you pump through that connection the more students will want to be involved in the course. So, by posting early in a discussion thread—ideally, prior to the thread beginning, and then again on the first day the thread is open—the students see you are actively in the course, you are part of the course, and can be counted on to give suggestions and insights in discussion. Certainly, you do not want to overtake discussion—it is, after all, the students’ discussion—but seeing you involved in discussion, with a reminder or two about the importance of the discussion thread, will prove quite meaningful.

MAKE YOUR FIRST DISCUSSION POSTING A GENERAL ONE—NOT IN RESPONSE TO AN INDIVIDUAL STUDENT

As the discussion goes on it will be important to post to specific students—this gives your postings a personalized touch and allows you to offer motivation to each student on a name basis. But the first couple of postings should be to the whole of the class—this way, the class knows what you are saying in discussion is for all and you are interested in all doing well in discussion.

EMPHASIZE THE IMPORTANCE OF THE THREAD'S TOPIC TO THE COURSE AND BEYOND THE COURSE

This is something that should be done throughout the course, but in each first posting opportunity this needs be mentioned to get students used to thinking about your course as more than a brief time with you for a grade. Thus, in your first and second post in the discussion remind students of how the thread's topic ties into the professional world—and always ask students to share any experiences in their professional lives that tie into the thread's topic: this immediately gives them more ownership in the course, which results in enthusiasm for learning the material.

BE ENTHUSIASTIC, MOTIVATING, AND EXCITED ABOUT STUDENT DISCUSSION POSTINGS

While this is a given throughout the course, if established in the first and second posting the students will see you are doing more than a “Ho-hum, I gotta post, so here it is” posting. If students know you really enjoy learning from discussion posting it's another push to get your students involved. And remind them: each time they respond to a classmate's posting it

takes the course deeper and wider, which makes for a richer learning experience.

REMIND STUDENTS TO BE POLITE AND TO USE THEIR LIFE EXPERIENCES

Proper netiquette is always important, but the heat of a discussion topic can make students post with emotion first—and this can hurt or upset other students. To stem this do remind them to be courteous; to disagree, if they choose, but in a professional manner; and to read over their posts before hitting “submit.” Also, tell students how valuable their life experiences are to the course as they relate to the thread topics—overall, students enjoy talking about their worlds, and when they tie it in to the topic of the thread, even the course subject, the students are contributing to that reality-based education that takes the course out of the school and into the real world.

REMEMBER: The first whiff of food, the first interaction with a waiter, and the first reaction to the ambience in a restaurant set our anticipation for what to expect—and it is the responsibility of the restaurant's owner to make all positive; if not, the customer will have a less than positive experience, and probably not return.