

# Ask Errol!

**Errol Craig Sull**

And so we continue the questions related to distance education! What I have found so helpful is the variety of questions, all offering additional opportunities to provide insights, info, and suggestions to enhance the online teaching efforts of so many.

This edition of the column:

*I want to become a better online instructor, but I don't know what else I can do to accomplish this. I interact with my students*



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*almost daily, I don't vary from the syllabus, I offer my students good feedback on their assignments, and I turn in all assignment in a timely manner. What else should I do?*

Ah, this question is one that perhaps offers more possible suggestions than grains of sands in a desert, and I say this because there are so many components to being "a better online instructor." Without knowing more about you and the "how" of your teaching let me offer some items that really are crucial in pushing an online instructor into that category of outstanding evaluations by students and supervisors:

First, you say you don't "vary from the syllabus," and while it's important to follow the guidelines and due dates in a syllabus it also helps to add additional touches and flourishes, such as audio (.mp3 files) and video, to add to or enhance your feedback and course materials. These tremendously increase students' engagement in a course and they help bring the course alive. Also, be sure you are well organized. Check that your enthusiasm and personal stories enter into your discussion postings: these strengthen the student-instructor rapport. Post announcements and/or send class e-mails that are motivating, present general suggestions on more difficult aspects of the course, and offer general reminders of upcoming important deadlines. These tips are some basic yet very

important ones that all excellent online instructors practice.

*I have the freedom to create my own discussion questions, and I post two-five per each unit of class. For the most part, students do respond to my posts within the threads I created, but there are always at least a couple of students who decide to start their own threads in answering my posts, even though I told students not to do this. Any suggestions as to how I can keep all students "within the box" of my threads?*

This is a common problem in online teaching where discussion threads are a part of the course AND the students can create separate threads (some course delivery systems are structured where students cannot do this); it is especially prevalent in the first couple weeks of a course among students new to online learning. The best approaches: begin each course with a general posting to the class and an individual posting/e-mail to each student indicating students cannot start their own threads and must, instead, post only within the threads you have created. When a student does create his or her own thread—and this will happen, no matter how many up front “don’t do this” messages you give—do three things: respond to the student’s posting with a request to see your note in the student’s e-mail or private message posting area (this way you will not embarrass the student); in your private posting to the student begin by thanking him or her for showing enthusiasm for course involvement, then remind the student of the posting policy, and finally ask the student to respond to you indicating he or she understands this policy; post a general message to the students, reminding them of the “no new student threads” policy. With rare exceptions, this will bring the problem down to a “nonproblem” level.

*I believe the first and last posts in a discussion thread by an instructor are the most important, as the first sets the tone for stu-*

*dent involvement in the thread and the last sums up all that has been going on by the students in the thread. My efforts at this seem to work well, but do you have any tips?*

You are so correct in describing the importance of these two threads! Here are some “add ins” to improve their effectiveness. First discussion posting: Be clear in what you expect and in the topic’s importance beyond the course. Give an example of the topic’s importance from your professional experience. Be sure your tone and choice of words are vibrant and enthusiastic. While the topic of the thread has already been posted by you or the school, adding additional items related to the topic on which students can also comment gives the students more leeway in their postings (and this can help in getting more discussion engagement by students). Show how this topic continues to build on the previous unit’s week’s topic (so students can see how this upcoming discussion relates to the whole of the course). Last discussion posting: In summarizing the thread, pick on some key points students made, but without mentioning names (you don’t want others to feel left out). Remind students of the thread topic’s value to their life outside your class. Add an interesting quote or personal experience or fact to reinforce the importance of the thread. Be sure to link this topic to the next unit’s or week’s discussion topic(s); this allows for a natural transition

*While my courses run smoothly I encounter students who do not submit assignments by the due date, and losing points for the assignments being late does not seem to help. Any suggestions you can offer would be great!*

We sometimes forget that students have lives outside our courses; this becomes even more complicated if any students are new to online and/or college learning. For these reasons it is important to include info for students on time management and

how to better organize their lives. Also, draw a parallel between late submitted assignments and professional expectations on the job—why it would not be tolerated, possible repercussions, and so on. And while your students may not believe losing a few points here or there may hurt their final grade, send an e-mail or do a posting for the class that shows how the cumulative factor of late assignment submissions can impact their final grade. Finally, when students persist with late submissions, contact the student directly, by e-mail/private posting, but a phone conversation can be more effective.

*One of the benefits of teaching online is that all postings by students and me, as well as all students' assignments and e-mails, are permanent parts of the course. Can you give me a guide to mine this material to its fullest so I can use it for future teaching assignments?*

This is one of the true benefits distance learning courses have over face-to-face courses for, as you point out, all material—to the instructor—is available throughout the course and, for most schools, after the course has ended. However, to have the specific ideas, info, suggestions, and so on, you want to use again readily available it is important to organize for easy access, thus set up a folder in your computer labeled something like Previous Course Material; within this folder establish subfolders, each containing material you want to save (e.g., Websites, Exceptional Student Discussion Postings, Useful Instructor Postings, etc.). You can further organize your folders by dates of courses, specific assignments and discussion topics, and so on, depending on their importance to you. And as you do reuse this material remember to check its accuracy and timeliness; depending on the class and when you reuse it, changes might have to be made to the wording of the recycled material.

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