

Ask Errol!

Errol Craig Sull

Ah, the questions regarding online teaching keep pouring in, and that's a good thing, for it gives many in the United States and abroad an opportunity to benefit from your problems, concerns, and queries. This column's selections:

While my classes are going fine, and I receive excellent reviews from my supervisor, recently my supervisor wrote me, indicating one of my students had complained



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about me (regarding a low grade she had received). Although the student never mentioned anything to me, and I have a record of always responding to student posts in a timely manner, this still bothered me. (My supervisor backed me up, and I was found to have done nothing wrong.) Your thoughts? Am I just being overly sensitive?

Let's begin by what's at the heart of most folks who teach online: your contract extends only as far as the class session in which you are teaching, thus you don't want anything untoward to happen that could possibly result in you not getting asked to teach the following session. Such a mindset is enough to make anyone look at what for a tenured professor would be a mosquito bite but for you makes it into a shark chomp. Beyond this, however, you must keep in mind that no matter how good of an online instructor, you will have students who don't understand all the procedures and rules, who will blame you for their problems in the course, and who will "make noise" to the school about you. As long as you have covered all your bases—ongoing and timely communication, returning student assignments when due, and following your own rules and the school's expectations in the classroom—you can rest on this foundation of being a solid instructor. Sure, it's inconvenient and annoying—but then being an online teacher will never be a Walt Disney cartoon.

As I write this I am in the midst of an orientation class as a new online instructor for an online school where I was recently hired. Getting deeper and deeper into the orientation I am surprised—perhaps shocked would be a better word!—as to how the school micromanages every step, every word of the instructor. Although orientation will be over when this comes to print I'd like to know your thoughts on my reaction to this school's approach to its instructors.

I'm constantly amazed at how so many online schools go overboard in developing what they believe to be the ideal molds in which to place their instructors. (If someone is new to teaching, and the type of orientation you mention is this person's first introduction to teaching online, I'm sure it would give this person pause to continue his or her decision to teach online.) Of course, these schools are fighting for student enrollment, and thus they try to develop what they hope will be the "perfect" online instructor—almost robot-like—so each student can be guaranteed an excellent learning experience in any online course the student takes at X school. My experience in teaching online—and I've been doing it for 16 years—tells me that once the orientation ends and the usual probationary period (of someone observing the newbie online instructor in his or her first class or two) ends, there is a relaxation of the "it-must-be-done-this-way" approach. But do keep two items in mind: (1) What may seem like a whole bunch of confusing "stuff" will soon give way to a "Hey, it's no big deal!" attitude because you simply get used to doing all that is required of you. (2) Not to sound calloused, but you did opt to teach for this school, you were selected, and now you must go through their requirements if you want to get paid as an online instructor. You can seek out other online teaching opportunities if, no matter what, your school's approach is too confining for you!

My school bombards me with notices of faculty in-service online seminars, faculty websites to visit for discussion with my colleagues, and informational emails about school policies and teaching strategies. Perhaps if I were teaching full time for the school or at least getting paid a healthy salary I would find this all worthwhile to explore, but as an adjunct with a typical adjunct's pay I find myself shying away from any of this. While my lack of involvement has never been pointed out to me, and attending/reading any of this has never been required, I wonder if I should start being more involved.

In one way, you are fortunate to have your school extend so many opportunities to you for professional development—and let me quickly add: no matter how long we have been teaching online each of us can still learn new online and educational strategies, activities, information, and theories; if we take away but one new item the training has been a positive experience for us. Can schools go overboard with their efforts at professional development? Sure, but the schools also want faculty they can believe are at the top of their game and offer the type of learning experience that retains students (think bottom line profits), thus the more professional development opportunities offered their online instructors the better the schools can assume they are doing the right thing, i.e., not letting instructors stagnate with their own professional development once hired. And here's one other important item: in all those opportunities being presented to you to learn more there will be, I assure you, new information relating to updates or changes in your school's policies and procedures, and if you miss any of these you can really end up in deep doo-doo!

More and more of my online colleagues are using social networking sites, such as Facebook and Twitter, to stay in touch with their students; also, several of them encourage their students to IM them whenever their stu-

dents see the faculty members online. And while my school has never required it, the school does matter-of-factly mention social networking sites and IMs as a way to have more communication with students. I feel that my communication efforts in the online classroom—using email, announcements, live chats, and phone calls—keep my communication very active and show me as an interested instructor. Your thoughts on this pressure to push me into these new areas of communication would be appreciated.

It's the twenty-first century, my friend, and that means your grandfather's online teaching experience is not going to be yours ... and your child's will not be yours, etc. Online education has, at its heart, computer technology, and as this technology continues to develop new software, programs, and hardware will be introduced into online teaching—whether mandated by a school or simply transitioned by other online educators into their classes. And because constant, enthusiastic communication with students is the bloodline that keeps that computer technology alive, connecting you with students and vice versa, it stands to reason that anything with a chip, a byte, or a bit that can help that communication process will be recommended for you—if not required. With all this said, there is a “however”—if you are not required to use sites such as Facebook and Twitter; you still maintain ongoing, timely, and motivating communication with your students; and your supervisor has no complaints about your student communication, then just keep on doing what you are doing. But do be prepared: the time is not too far off when online schools will begin to require its instructors to incorporate one or more social networking sites into their toolbox of student communication approaches.

Okay, I'm getting a bit worried about the future of online education, as I received an article from Forbes magazine indicating that many online for-profit schools enroll-

ments have gone down. Teaching online is important to me for both professional interests and the pay—can you offer any insight on the future of online education?

Online education began in the 1984, through a school called American Open University of NYIT (New York Institute of Technology), and since then has grown at an exponential rate (at the end of 2009 there were approximately 12 million post-secondary students taking some form of online class, and this figure is expected to reach 22 million by 2014). Yet obstacles have been placed in the paths of schools offering online courses: the so-called 50/50 rule, enacted in 1992, was a U.S. government restriction that required schools to offer at least 50 percent of their classes in physical classrooms (rather than distance or e-learning) before qualifying for federal financial aid program; it was repealed in 2006. More recently, the U.S. Department of Education has proposed legislation—the Gainful Employment Rule—that would require for-profit colleges eligible for federal aid to have at least 45 percent of their former students paying down the principal on their loans. While the former had and the current proposed one is having negative effects on enrollment at online schools, the sheer number of students wanting—and in many instances needing—online courses is very much like an army of ants overrunning any barrier placed in front of it. And one other item to keep in mind: schools—obviously for-profit but also not-for-profit—find online courses big moneymakers by having lower expenses than traditional postsecondary schools (pay less to faculty members and no buildings to maintain, for example). So while there will be valleys, to be sure, the peaks will remain.

REMEMBER: *Questions asked are like vitamins for the mind: the more we present them the stronger our mind becomes, and thus the healthier we are in taking on everyday tasks.*