

Ask Errol!

Errol Craig Sull

Between each column I receive a few dozen requests for assistance, and usually these are each different. This demonstrates the continued complexities involved in teaching online, and as distance education becomes more sophisticated and more software packages are created to assist in the teaching, additional questions will pop up. Below are some of the latest, each touching on important concerns of many online educators. This column's selection ...

I want to stay current in my class, and I know that means using some of the many software packages available that deliver audio/visual materials. My school provides some of this, and I've seen other examples, from other schools online and, quite frankly, I'm jealous. But I don't know where to start, and once I do what guidelines I should follow. Can you help me?

Your question and dilemma are more common than you might think, as many folks teaching online—the number is in the hundreds of thousands—are faced with incorporating new software into their courses. These have the potential, of course, to highlight, explain, or clarify various portions of the course. Of the many new ones around there are five especially worth noting—four free: Jing (URL: <http://www.techsmith.com/jing.html>), which combines audio and visual to allow for either snapshots of or a 5-minute (max) video of anything online ... VoiceThread (URL: <http://voicethread.com/>), an interactive audio/video program, allows the user to post a visual and others to offer voice comments on the posting ... Go Animate (URL: <http://goanimate.com/>) is a video-creating program that offers thousands of icons, faces, etc. to assist in the development ... Prezi (URL: <http://prezi.com/>) is a presentation and storytelling tool ... PowerPoint (URL: <http://office.microsoft.com/en-us/powerpoint/>; part of Microsoft Office, thus not for free) is the venerable



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granddaddy of visual presentation tools, and offers an easy way to create a slideshow.

Having these is one thing, but properly incorporating them into the online classroom quite another. The best suggestion: each offers tutorials, some videos and some as slideshows, so be sure to use these before launching any of the programs in your course. Also, some software is better suited for one type or approach or subject matter of a course, while others perform more effectively for different course situations—the only way to find the best one is to experiment with each. Two other points: (1) Be sure you post instructions for students on how to access and implement the software; (2) Check over your presentation before it goes public—you want to be sure it is error-free, its visual layout is clean and easy to read, the audio is crisp and loud, and it runs smoothly. One or more of these programs will definitely enhance your online teaching efforts!

First, thanks for some great suggestions in your previous columns! These have helped me become a better online educator, and I'm hoping you can again point me in the right direction. In one of your previous columns you suggested the creation of an online office for students to post questions and concerns, and I've done this, to much success. But recently I had a student post a complaint—the problem is not only was his complaint unfounded but it was also due to the student's error. Since all students in the class can see any posting in my "office" how do I best respond to this student?

Thanks for the nice words, and I'll do my best to help out! The problem you detail can certainly have negative ramifications for the online instructor if handled incorrectly, both in immediate class reaction and in possible poor evaluations of the instructor by the students. Most important in responding: never get on the defensive, as this immediately shows you as weak and less than professional. Always begin

by thanking the student for his or her comment. From here there are two approaches you should take; combined these usually result in a most positive outcome. First, discuss the problem in general—whether grading, late points deducted, et cetera—by offering clarification on a policy or information of which all students were previously made aware. It's important that no blame be placed on the student in this public forum.

The second step is to end the posting by asking the student to please check his or her e-mail for more specifics. And because you do not want to appear evasive—i.e., that you are hiding something negative from the class—add a bit of humor, such as, "Okay—there is so much more specific to your concern I don't want to take up any more of the class's time, so please see these details in an e-mail from me." Then, in the e-mail, go on to explain the student's error, ending on an upbeat note, including asking if the student would like to talk further via a call. The combination of you taking the time, your thoroughness, and your positive tone almost always result in a student who is more than satisfied with your efforts.

I'm beginning to think there must be something wrong in what I'm doing as a distance learning teacher! No matter how many reminders I give students, and I do this in written and audio form, again and again students leave out requirements of an assignment or don't follow all the directions of an assignment. Any suggestions would be gratefully appreciated. Thank you.

The #1 reason why students lose points on a college assignment—no matter the course subject and no matter if an online or face-to-face course—is what you mention: leaving out requirements of an assignment or not following all the directions of an assignment. In a meeting of online educators a few years ago this problem was discussed, and the consensus reason students do this is because they simply want to get

the assignment done, paying more attention to content of the assignment than to the requirements/directions. When students receive grades on these assignments they can become quite angry at frustrated (especially if the content of their assignments was, overall, good)—even though it was their own fault.

While never guaranteeing 100%, there are a few approaches that can be added that will reduce the incidents of this problem: (1) In addition to a general reminder posted at the beginning of the week also post class reminders—with follow-up class e-mails—throughout the week; (2) Create an assignment checklist, listing the requirements of/directions for an assignment; post this in class, and remind students to use it. (I created one several years ago—if you would like a copy just drop me an e-mail.) (3) For students who continually err write then individual reminders; (4) Post a Jing explanation (see first question in this column) of the requirements and directions and/or use an audio, such as Voice Thread or an .mp3, to go over the specifics of each assignment. Combined, these will result in more students following the directions and including all requirements.

My question may seem like a simple one, but it does worry me: how do I take time off from online teaching without fear of losing my teaching spots? I'll be getting married next summer, and my fiancé and I are planning a camping honeymoon that would take place over a month. I'd like to know I can take off time from my online teaching gig, and be welcomed back with an immediate teaching assignment. Any thoughts?

I assume you are in good standing with your supervisor, and thus are valued as a

member of your department's teaching team. If this is true, contact your supervisor—by phone is best, for a more personal conversation—early; it immediately creates a problem if you spring this on your supervisor only a month before you plan on taking off. This early request shows your professionalism and your concern for making certain all in the department runs smoothly regarding your classes. Your reason for wanting time off is certainly an acceptable one, but it's still important to stress how important your classes are to you, how much you enjoy teaching for X school, and that you certainly would like to immediately be placed back in the teaching queue upon your return.

Additional suggestions: be especially careful that all goes as well with your current courses and all that follow before you leave: you want the best possible evaluations, no complaints from students, and courses that simply look great if your supervisor should decide to stop in and look around ... add at least one additional software tool to show your increased interest in teaching ... look for more professional presence—whether through taking a course, publishing an article, attending a conference, or giving a lecture—to indicate an active involvement in your area of expertise. All of these approaches combined translate into giving your supervisor a picture of an online educator who is valuable to the students, and thus to the school.

REMEMBER: *A LEGO brick by itself is fairly innocuous, but combined with many other LEGO bricks—wow, what an effective structure can be created!*