Ask Errol!

Errol Craig Sull

In 2015 distance learning continued to grow, although a much smarter growth. Beyond an expansion of online courses educators have placed added focus on making this cyber learning environment one that is more student- and faculty-friendly. This translates into better efficiency, increased course tools, and a better overall educational experience. On the flip side, this offers increased complexities and challenges … and thus more e-mails for this column to answer! Please keep them coming—I'm happy to help out: do write me at erroldistancelearning@gmail.com

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The latest questions with the most interest …

I must admit that when first coming to distance learning I was naïve in many ways about the student demographic taking these courses, and one area in which I was way off the mark was believing every student would quickly adapt to and certainly not be intimidated by the online course environment. Boy, was I wrong! Again and again I had to gingerly, carefully, and specifically walk many students through the "hows" of the course layout, as well as such basics as attaching a file and saving an assignment. Fast forward 4 years into this teaching adventure, and I believe there must be shortcuts to cut down on the extensive amount of time and effort I put into my primer for newbies to online education—are there?

Yours is such a common comment and question that it easily has vaulted into one of the top three of all time! But I was no different than you and many others in this regard when I began teaching at a distance 21 years ago, and along the way I have stumbled across several strategies that have greatly minimized my work in this area, while decreasing student anxiety, and increasing their engagement in class. One of the most important of these is to take the various difficulties with which these ner-

vous students have presented you, and incorporate them into a very warm and inviting "I-know-some-of-you-might-have-technical-problems-with-our-course-but-I'm-here-to-help" welcoming message on Day 1 of class and a sheet that offers tips (and perhaps videos and/or audios) on various technical aspects of the course (e.g., how to attach an assignment, where to find assignments, how to save a file, etc.). Both of these have been extremely successful for me.

Here are some additional tips:

- Ask for student "aides" who are willing to help the technologically challenged students. This fosters more student engagement and camaraderie, strengthens the professor-student bond).
- Throughout the course, occasionally remind students you are available for technical assistance.
- Post a resource sheet in class with contact info students might need (especially information technology).
- Offer info and websites to help with time management and organization.
- Always remind students that everyone has a first day or week, and thus everybody begins by learning how to do something, not being born knowing how to do something.
- Every now and then send an e-mail to those students who initially displayed this lack of technical prowess, mentioning you just wanted to see if all was going okay.

The bottom line of all these suggestions: students who are, overall, more comfortable taking online classes, and thus have a more positive and successful experience with it.

I want to thank you for all your help over the years. Both your columns—"Ask Errol" and "Try This!"—have made my life and many of faculty members' lives easier and more efficient in teaching online. So, now it's my turn to reach out for help, specifically in the area of rubrics. My school dictates that we use them, but I have never been a fan of rubrics; they always seem so cut-and-dry, so devoid of that important personal touch from a faculty member. I know I can put in my own comments, but are there additional items that can be done to rubrics so they will be more inviting to students?

First: thanks so much for the positive words! It's always nice to know my suggestions have helped others, and now I'll try to turn your concern into a nonconcern :) As you indicated, rubrics—initially—seem like cold boxes with preset feedback: at first glance, not much to encourage students to read them or to motivate the students. But we can make rubrics live, exciting, enthusiastic, and motivating feedback tools—help for students they look forward to receiving! It's done in taking the initially bland and seemingly lifeless "canvas" of the rubric and painting it in bold colors. Here's how:

- Do not hesitate to add individual comments to each section of the rubric, including an explanation as to why each section is important.
- Use color and bold: it gets the reader's attention.
- Insert small visuals: these become icons that indicate things like "Good job!" "Need improvement," "A suggestion," et cetera.
- Always include a summary comment as to how the rubric feedback and the assignment link to the "real world" of work. This makes the rubric a pragmatic tool.
- End each rubric with a positive, motivating, and—if possible—somewhat humorous comment (the goal here is to have students look forward to reading your rubrics).
- And post a Day 1 announcement or resource item that discusses why rubrics are so important—including their value beyond the course.

For additional tips on using the rubric see my column in *Distance Learning,* Volume 9, Number 4.

I'm pretty sure I can count on you to give me some solid advice on a challenge that has been perplexing me for years: how do I develop assignments for my students that go beyond the same-old-same-old multiple choice, fill in the blanks, and "Write an essay on X." My subject is math, and I have looked at many websites and read a few books on teaching math to online students, but have come away with not many ideas that I believe would really test the students' knowledge and critical thinking, as well as make the assignment not so standard. Any help you can give me would be appreciated.

This is a favorite subject of mine, as it immediately takes me back to the "olden days" of college when assessment (of course, that word was never used—it was always "test"!) never was inviting, and seemed more about rote memorization than anything else. Yet developing assignments for students in the online environment offers so many possibilities for assessments that are interactive, offer the importance of a subject beyond classroom studies, and can be more Socratic in their approach than mere memorization or "yes" and "no" answers. The most important key in making this all work is to know the answer to one crucial question: "What do I want my students to learn from this assignment?" For it is the online educator who only thinks of students receiving grades on an assignment, and not a far-reaching purpose of the assignment, who presents an assignment worth little.

Fortunately, there is much that can be done. Some examples (and these can apply to any subject, not just math):

- Ask students to relate a topic, theory, equation, approach, et cetera, learned in class to a real-world, on-the-job situation.
- Develop a story with a challenge where students must demonstrate some aspect of what they have learned to overcome the challenge.
- Look for a news story where the subject being taught is the focus; ask students to incorporate the course subject into the story where it becomes an important and natural part of the story.
- Search for interactive exercise websites that feature your core subject; most of these are free and open for use to the public.
- Have students use a combo of essay and other forms of presentation (blog, PowerPoint or Prezi, YouTube, game, play, etc.) to present their understanding or support of a topic.

And as for multiple choice, fill-in-the-blanks, and other such assessments that are necessary at times spice them up a bit by using current language, real-life situations, or a bit of humor—this makes the "medicine" go down easier!

You have often mentioned "reality-based" education in your columns, referring to connecting coursework, assignments, and feedback to the professional world so students have a more global and pragmatic understanding of what they are learning in the online class. This is a teaching strategy I had not previously considered, and since using it I have had great results with my students. My approach, however, has been pretty much monochromatic in that I always ask students to tie in what they are learning to the world of work, either what they are now doing or what they plan on doing. Could you please offer me some additional options?

It is always gratifying to know that something I have used in my classrooms also has found success in another's classroom, so thank you for letting me know! And reality-based education is crucial in helping students to understand what they are learning in the online classroom is far

more than mere bits and bytes that translate into a grade. This can easily be incorporated into a variety of assessments (see my response above regarding assignments) and is especially successful in the discussion component (details below). Also, incorporate feedback on assignments into their tie to a job or profession, both pointing out the relationship and asking students to respond with examples they can offer where their mistakes might be costly on the job or where the information they are learning can be helpful.

As for online discussion, threads can be created that relate the week's subject to the professional world. Students can be asked to show examples from their experience on the job to the subject (this works well, as students enjoy opening up about their personal lives!). Little puzzles or challenges can be incorporated into discussions (as well as larger assignments) where an on-the-job scenario is given, and then students are asked how X or Y subject can be used to improve, strengthen, increase, or broaden a company product, brand, employee, or market share. Finally, a big help is to post examples from newspapers and magazines, as well as video and audio clips, that feature news stories incorporating the subject or a portion of the subject being taught: it shows students what is being taught is used in everyday, real-life situations.

Remember: *Starbucks is a coffee behemoth in the world … but it is only as good as those who help it—baristas, roasters, servers, cooks, bakers, managers, and cashiers.*

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The federal government also has a position on interaction. In the rules for federal aid eligibility there is a requirement that there be "regular and substantive interaction" between students and instructors in distance education programs. The phrase "regular and substantive interaction" has become an important best practice for accrediting groups.

Some institutions offering courses, programs, and degrees at a distance may have run afoul of this federal rule, especially those offering competency-based education—sometimes called direct assessment programs. Competency-based programs are a modern interpretation of programmed instruction where specific competencies presented in modules are learned, and until a test is passed a learner is not permitted to move to the next module. This form of instruction is often called independent study. Massive open online courses (MOOCs) are one example of this approach. MOOCs have been criticized also, since interaction is often nonexistent in MOOCs.

Opponents of the regular and substantive interaction concept say it has to go, and that the rules for faculty and student interaction are outdated and narrow. Supporters of interaction state that this rule was put in place for good reason, to crack down on education fraud in the 1980s and 1990s.

If distance education is to continue its growth and gain even wider acceptance, then best practices should be identified and included in courses and programs offered at a distance. Interaction is a critical best practice, and the regular and substantive rule is a good one that should be required.

And finally, in the words of Aesop, "beware lest you lose your substance by grasping at the shadow."

References

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