

Ask Errol!

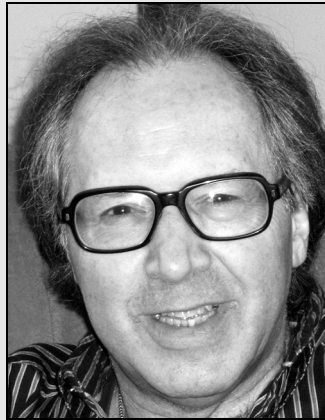
Errol Craig Sull

Seasons change, but distance learning continues, and so with it do the hiccups, glitches, challenges, and “uh-ohs” that online educators experience daily. I have heard from many of you, and always appreciate that, for it allows me to offer suggestions to help not just one but hopefully many in a career we truly enjoy. This edition’s questions, and my input to help ...

BEING SELECTED TO PRESENT AT FACULTYWIDE WEBINARS

First, Errol, a big thanks for the columns you have offered; many have proved helpful in allowing me to transition from a newbie online educator a few years ago to someone who is pretty comfortable in doing it. And now that I relaxed in the classroom I'd like to offer some of my experiences and teaching strategies and suggestions to other faculty through the various online faculty webinars the school's training division offers throughout the year. My problem is that I've noticed the folks selected all have been teaching here longer than I, and I want to know if you have any suggestions to further my cause before I fill out a formal proposal.

Well, thank you for letting me know my columns have proved helpful to you—and I hope this one does as well! Faculty, as you know, are better when they receive input, suggestions, and information from colleagues, and thus many welcome the facultywide presentations you mentioned. I have given several dozen of these, and can share several items I have done over the years that have helped me—and other colleagues—get tapped to give a presentation. Of most importance is to be sure to respond directly and exactly to the information requested in the proposal form. Many folks have made the mistake of going off on a tangent, and this does not help their case for being selected.



Errol Craig Sull,
Adjunct Professor, Department of English,
Drexel University, P.O. Box 956,
Buffalo, NY 14207.
Telephone: (716) 871-1900.
E-mail: erroldistancelearning@gmail.com

Your e-mail did not mention what professional involvement you have in the subject on which you want to present, but if you do have any professional expertise be sure to include it in your proposal. Additionally, if you have any published writing on the subject, mention it: the more you appear as an expert—or at least quite knowledgeable—in your subject, the better. Finally, do find a way (if not asked) to include in your proposal why your presentation would prove helpful for your school, including the specifics of its importance to faculty and students. You may not get selected the first time you apply, but what comes out of this nonselection (never look upon it as a rejection!) is your name is now known to the personnel in the training division. Meanwhile, be sure you look to better your strengths in your field(s) through more professional involvement, publication, and developing new class strategies for teaching—eventually, you will receive a positive response!

STUDENT WITH A POTENTIALLY DANGEROUS PROBLEM

Like many faculty members, I have had students send me e-mails with a host of excuses as to why they have not been participating in class, why they have not turned in assignments, etc. And also like many faculty members the excuses are pretty much the same: death in a family, really sick or in the hospital, Internet down—the list goes on. But in the 4 years of teaching online I have never received an e-mail like one I received from a student a few weeks ago: in it she stated there were so many things going wrong in her life she saw no reason to go on with her life, and ended the e-mail by saying goodbye to me! I won't lie: this scared the hell out of me, and I immediately forwarded it to my supervisor, who thanked me, and that was the last I heard from him. Is there anything more I should have done? Any thoughts you can offer on this would be appreciated.

Sadly, I have heard similar stories from many other online faculty around the country and abroad, and I've also experienced this a few times. Situations like this seem to be on the increase, and psychologists and college advisors have reported the same, and more often than not the blame seems to be a combination of increased pressures in our society to succeed and students unable to handle rather complex situations in their lives. But no matter the utter urgency of a student's e-mail or your desire to "do good," we must remember: we are NOT psychologists or school advisors, and thus there are actions we cannot take or should not take for legal, ethical, and/or school policy reasons. This means never respond to such an e-mail with advice to the student, other than to tell the student to contact his or her advisor, and letting the student know you will also be doing the same with your supervisor and the student's advisor.

The first step you took was the correct one: letting your supervisor know. But when you do this do not simply paraphrase or summarize the student's e-mail, but rather forward the e-mail in its entirety: you do not want any part of the student's e-mail to be misinterpreted by you. Also, in your e-mail to the supervisor always ask: "Should I also forward this to the student's advisor?" Nearly always you will receive a go-ahead on this. Finally: if you do not hear back from the supervisor or the advisor on the outcome, do write one or the other a simple follow-up note—it shows you care (while also perhaps giving you direction on what more you can to help the student in your class—if the student returns).

GETTING STUDENTS TO UNDERSTAND THE PROCESS OF LEARNING

I have a curious, straight-to-the-point question: how can I better get my students to understand the process of learning, i.e.,

what approaches they can take to better embrace the material in class for the long-term where it will help them far beyond our course, rather than students simply learning lessons in a course to receive a good grade, case closed. I am becoming more and more frustrated with my methods of teaching, and I believe there are major changes I need to make to better help students understand and carry out the process of learning. Yes, I've read books and articles online on the subject, but from what I've read of your columns, and, quite frankly, what others have told me about you, I figured you might have a few tips to make this work.

Wow—that question is a huge one, to be sure, but it is not isolated, by any means. We made the shift from teacher-centered learning (where students watched videos and listened to what a professor lectured) to student-centered learning, where the student works on his or her own to solve problems, formulate questions, brainstorm, et cetera. Still, the question is there: how do we get students to better employ methods to do all this student-centered learning so what they do learn is an active part of their brain, and is there to be used throughout their lives? While there have been many strategies offered, there are a few that keep coming up as sure-fire successes in helping students to better understand the process of learning.

Try these: 1. Have students think about learning material or a subject in a new way, that is, this can go from the opposite of what is being taught (thus giving their brains active involvement in deciding why what they are learning is correct) to putting into play—doing—what is being taught. 2. Use “reality-based education”: have students take what they are learning and apply it to the real world of employment, specifically where they now work or where they'd like to be employed. This takes the learning into an active, noncontrolled (read: classroom) environment—and thus extends its life beyond the course. 3. Have students take their life experiences

and relate them to the course material: how can this information help you on a personal level? What personal challenges can get in the way of this information staying with you? What don't you like about what you are learning? The more they talk about it the stronger becomes the adhesive that holds the material to the brain for the long run. 4. Go beyond the course materials in the learning process: time management, organizational tips, et cetera, can be a huge help in getting students to create a healthy process of learning.

HELPING STUDENTS TO TURN IN ASSIGNMENTS

My problem is one that plagues each one of my online teaching colleagues—there are about 300 of us at my school—and I'm sure it's no different in any other online course: how do I get students to submit assignments on time or to submit assignments at all? About the only incentive I've yet to offer them is money, but I feel that even if I did that it wouldn't make much of a difference. Do you have some magic key or secret formula that make this problem go away?

Let me start by responding to your last sentence: no—I have no magic key or secret formula, and I don't know of anyone who does! But the problem can be minimized, and first we must understand the three major reasons why student assignments are late or just not submitted: 1. Believing an online course has no deadlines, and thus is pretty open-ended when it comes to deadlines (and it seems these same students do not read the assignment deadlines in class); 2. The balancing act many students have in their lives, such as family and employment; 3. Not understanding an assignment, and thus being scared of turning it in.

Is there anything that will make these all go away? Never. But there are some approaches than can be taken to increase student submissions and increase timely

student submissions: 1. Post reminders in class and e-mail reminders—this has been found to be the most helpful; 2. Give students resources for time management—and a free software reminder site (Memo to Me—<http://www.memotome.com/>—is a great one) can also be an exceptional tool; (3) Offering additional help in understanding assignments (through Powerpoint or screenshot examples of what you seek), a video of explaining an assignment, then showing how to correctly do an assignment, and a phone call to those students

having problems, perhaps learning of problems outside the class that may be getting in the way (and that you can work around with the student) or giving a more personal explanation of an assignment.

Remember: The experience of watching a movie on the big screen is fun—but it's made even more enjoyable watching it with someone close, the addition of other folks in the audience, some popcorn on which to munch, and a drink to sip.