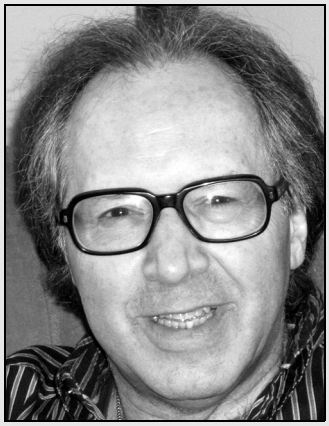
Ask Errol!

Errol Craig Sull

The year 2017 is alive and well with distance learning hither and yon, and its complexities, the great variety in instructor backgrounds, a myriad of differences in schools' guidelines and emphases, and a plethora of student demographics equate to ongoing challenges, obstacles, quandaries, and difficulties that need resolution and closure. I won't have definitive solutions for each of these, but I'll continue to try my best in giving you suggestions that will improve your instructional efforts. Please: continue to write me so many in the United States and abroad can benefit from your concerns. Meanwhile, this issue's selections, and my responses …



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I was in an online facultywide meeting, and the provost spoke for a few minutes. He discussed a new program that sounded exciting, and I would like to write him, indicating as much, also volunteering to help out when it is launched (it has to do with student retention, and I have some ideas that might be an asset). He ended very politely, but never invited anyone to contact him. What would be my best course of action?

It can be so tempting to "reach out and touch someone," especially if that someone is a college provost, president, or other senior administrative official. But we must be careful that it doesn't appear we are breaking the so-called chain of command; we don't want our direct supervisor to feel slighted or—worse—become upset with us. And this can become an especially complex problem when you were never invited to contact the person, such as you mentioned. The smart approach is to ask your supervisor if it is okay for you to write the provost; your supervisor may say it is fine or may know something you don't that makes contact at this time not the right thing to do. This gives your supervisor the (right) impression you "play by the

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rules," but are also eager to become even more involved in your school. And if the contact does take place the provost will know your name and enthusiasm, always two good things!

Thanks so much for all the great info over the years, Errol, and Happy New Year! I do have one problem—more of an annoyance, really—and thought you might have some suggestions. One of my students has become somewhat attached to me, sending me e-mails just to say hello and let me know what's going on in her life. This also extends to IMs, phone calls, and texting (which I have been using for a few years to foster better communication with my students). What complicates this is she seldom mentions anything relating to class—and I am male! I have been polite, not wanting to cause any waves with the student, but this is getting out of hand, and I don't want it to affect my job. What can I do?

I appreciate your kind words; it's always heartening to know my efforts are helpful to others. Now … the situation you mention is by no means uncommon, and most schools with online courses have guidelines to handle this kind of problem. (Be sure to check with your supervisor—you don't want to overlook the guidelines if they exist.) It is well known that students can become enamored with their professors—especially online, given the asynchronous environment of this learning (students believe they are "invisible," and thus it is easier to communicate with a professor)—for a variety of reasons. Most common, however, is the caring and always-available authority figure that most instructors appear to be. Also, they can be counted on for correspondence responses that are friendly and positive. Together, these ingredients make for a perfect storm of what you describe: a constant bombardment of non-class-related correspondence from one student.

The first step you must always take is to make your supervisor aware, including sending all communication that has occurred—including yours (you always want to appear "above board," but you also want to protect yourself in the event of student backlash). Remain polite, as you have, but in an e-mail to the student (better than a text or IM as it is easier to forward to your supervisor) explain how much you appreciate her enthusiasm for the class (not for you!), but there are so many students you must limit any communication to course-related items. If this does not stop her, then again contact your supervisor: he or she may need to contact the student. (Note: do not call the student: [a] no matter how good your intentions the student may perceive a call as a personal interest on your part, never good; [b] there is no record of the phone call, and you do want to a record of as much correspondence as possible with the student.)

I'm new to online teaching (this is only my second semester), and most of my background is as an accountant (which continues to be my main profession). Although I am teaching college freshmen basic math, my only previous teaching experience was as a volunteer for a citywide math program focusing on underachieving junior college students. Being hired to teach a subject in which I am knowledgeable is exciting and motivating, but also a challenge, as I want my teaching to be interesting and meaningful to my students; I want to keep them engaged; and I want their overall experience in my classroom to be a successful one. I certainly know the course material, but how do I become a really good distance learning math teacher? Thanks in advance for any help you can give me.

Welcome, welcome, welcome to distance learning—it is a great career; as you have no doubt discovered, the efforts you put in are more than rewarded by what your students gain! As for your question, wow: books—including mine—have been written on the subject, but I'll offer you the most important tenets that lead to success-

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ful online learning. There is much more than what I offer here, but these are great starters. (And if you do need more input don't hesitate to drop me an e-mail.)

The suggestions: (1) Be enthusiastic—it's catching, and students are more prone to be engaged. (2) Be timely in all correspondence; allow no more than 24 hours for responses to students. They need to know you are interested and care. (3) Be a constant presence; students may be taking an online course, but you are what allows it to breathe. (4) Relate all subject material and assignment feedback to "the real world." Students need to know they are not taking a course/studying a subject that is only important for X number of weeks and a final grade, but rather extends into and is of use in the employment scene. (5) Give assignment feedback that is positive and motivating; this spurs on students to improve and to embrace assignments. (6) Use your profession. You teach math, so give examples of its use from your experience; share math puzzles and cartoons; and offer current news that relates the math—all of this makes the subject more interesting and important.

Well, I've read your columns, and they've proved useful, Errol, but I never expected to write you for assistance! My online teaching experience equates to 11 years, all with the same school, on a part-time basis, in the discipline of history. I teach at a rather traditional school in that little of the syllabus discusses the importance of my subject beyond the years and genre of history I teach, early 19th century American, and we were never encouraged to go beyond these parameters. Because it was the school's approach I always went along with this, and, quite frankly, I need the job. But a new president has come on board, and one of her approaches is to encourage us to (in her words) "extend your course subject beyond the classroom." This is exhilarating, and I have some ideas on how to do this, but could your experience help me out?

Let me start out with a simple statement: I'm happy to help you! It's great when any school—online or face-to-face—has a specific dictum of showing students the importance and relevance of a course subject beyond the class. As for American history—specifically, 19th century—it can easily be related to its impact on society, culture, politics, and economics (showing specific examples), and introducing the various connections to these subjects that has led into the 21st century. Also, bring in the arts (dance, literature, movies, theater, music, songs, etc.), fads, and criminal justice: all have been impacted by history or had an impact on history, and all have found their way into shaping today's arts, fads, and criminal justice. Finally, ask your students for input—what in 19th century America stands out for them and/or have them pick one "item" they can trace to either an important result in America or the world. (And by the way: I peeked at the Internet, and it offers a nice variety of activities, puzzles, strategies, and games related to teaching 19th century American history!)

Remember: Nouns say so much by themselves, but calling in the help of adjectives and adverbs really enhances their efforts!

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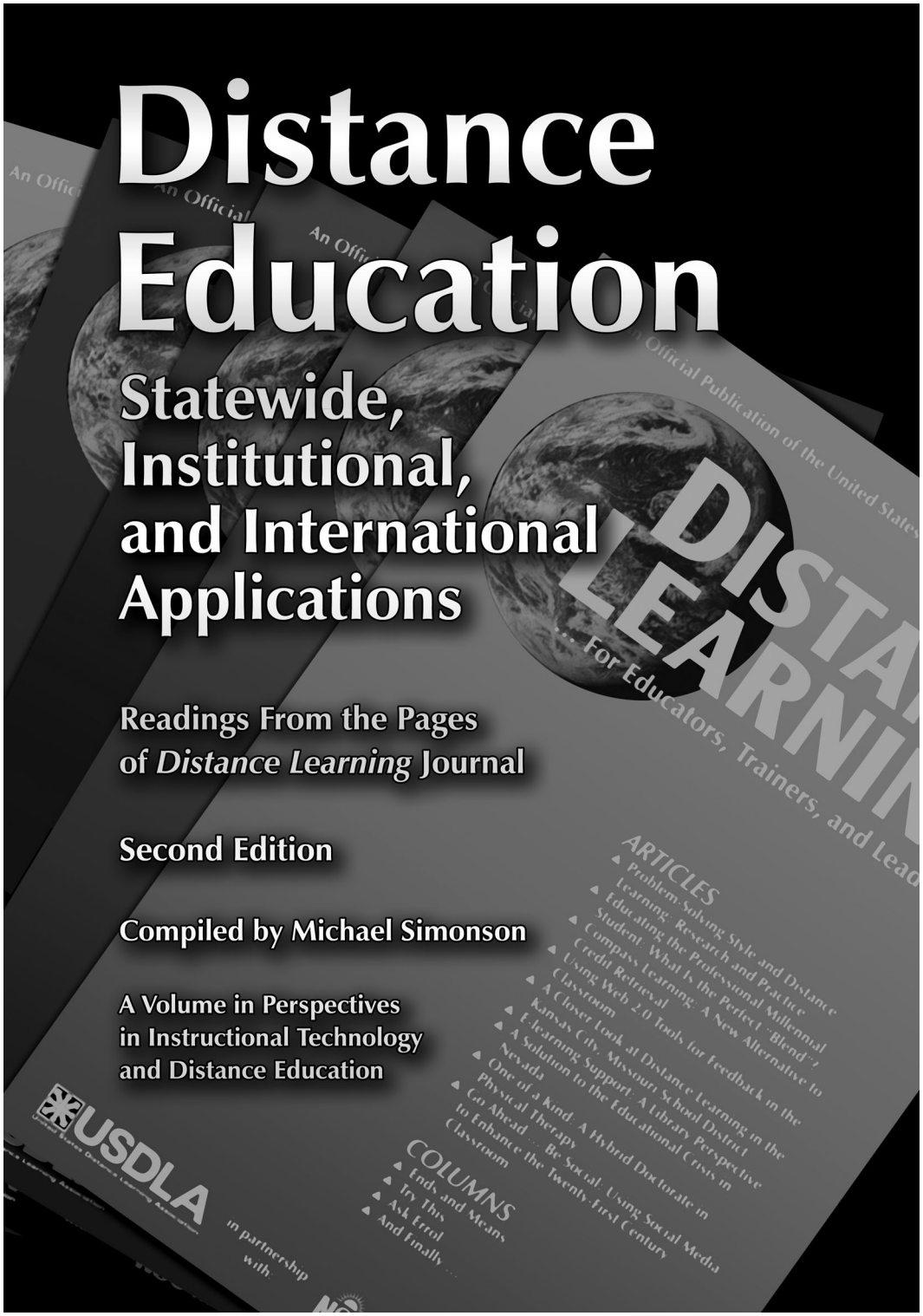

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And Finally *… continued from page 60*

model, a rubric, or a formula to help the organization decide what is the right amount of distance education for it?

Most would agree that in almost any training or education organization there are some elements that should be delivered at a distance, and it is likely that few if any organizations should do everything online. So, somewhere between 1% and 99% is the correct amount of distance education.

Is this a topic that needs discussion, and perhaps research? This journal would love to publish information about the "too much/too little" quandary.

And finally, quandary is a state of perplexity or uncertainty, especially as to what to do, a dilemma. As William Blake said, "You never know what is enough unless you know what is more than enough."

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