

Ask Errol!

Errol Craig Sull

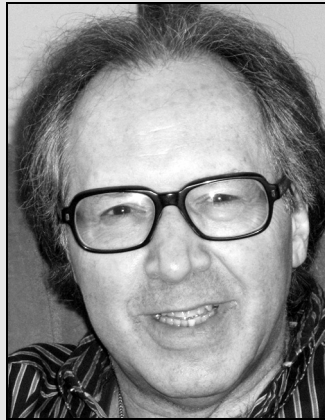
The year goes on, my distance learning colleagues, and with it comes new challenges, old challenges with two twists, and the same old, same old challenges that just seem never to go away. We strive to be our best, of course, meeting each of these with enthusiasm, vigor, and interest, for we know our students expect nothing less from us. Depending on what you have encountered this edition's column incorporates one, both, or all—and I continue to offer

my insight, experience, and knowledge to help you meet these challenges. Here are this issue's selections, and my responses ...

WORKING WITH REPEATING STUDENTS

Thanks, Errol, for the great teaching tips over the years! My supervisor receives Distance Learning, and he always shares your columns with his faculty. We have learned much, and I know I've become a better online educator from many of your suggestions. And I hope to continue that with a challenge I've encountered on a fairly regular basis, but can't find much info on how to deal with the problem: working with students in my course who are repeating the course. I've done what I think are the best approaches and what my supervisor suggested: contacting them, and doing so on a regular basis, making certain my e-mails are all positive and indicating I'm available to help them. But there must be something I'm missing—can you help me?

Wow—your beginning of this request almost had me blushing! I so appreciate your kind words, and all I can say is that I hope my many years' experience of teaching online can help others become better online educators. Comments like yours are the motivation I need to keep it going! As for your question, teaching repeating students is a challenge, to be sure, and I can sum up my answer to you in one word:



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

OUTREACH! This is in caps for a good reason: these students need extra care and contact, and it takes much effort and time from the online educator. (Remember, you can't simply call the student into your physical office for a chat!) The initial reaction of most distance educators to seeing they have repeating students on their roster is a negative one because they know there is a good possibility these students will not be active in class or will turn in subpar assignments.

What to do? Follow these steps (teaching these repeating students—I call them “R” students—is a specialty of mine), and I can assure you a larger portion of your repeating students (I quickly add: not all) will become more active in class, submit assignments (and in a more timely manner), and pass your class: (1) Outreach, as you indicated, but using a combination of individual e-mails and phone calls, with that positive approach you also mentioned. The phone call is extremely helpful, for it becomes an extremely personal interaction with the student. And you might also learn of a problem the student is having that will better help you understand and work with him or her. (2) When a repeating student does turn in an assignment or post to discussion be sure you not only give positive feedback but use something the student wrote or said as a positive example to the class; this helps boost the repeating student's confidence. (3) Stay in touch with these students' advisors; they might be able to give you insight to the students that will help and/or can be another party to help motivate the students.

HAVING ENGAGED STUDENTS HELP OTHER STUDENTS BECOME ENGAGED IN DISCUSSION

My question relates specifically to discussion, Errol, and each time I teach a class there are some students in my weekly discussion threads who are extremely active. Not only do they do a nice job in responding

to the primary post but they also go out of their way to give nicely detailed responses to other students' postings in discussion. What I'd like to do is harness the energy and enthusiasm of these “worker” students on a more formal basis so they can become, in essence, my student aides in discussion. Any ideas?

Ah—the students you mention are the stuff of discussion dreams, at least for the online educator! To have students who do exactly what we'd like them to do—nice main postings and good responses to classmates—is something for which we wish a formula existed that we could easily bestow on all students! Since that is not in the wind anytime soon, let's do what is proven to get these students “working” for you in discussion: (1) Be sure you write these students—individually—to thank them for their efforts, and tell them how much you especially appreciate their activity with other students. Then go on to mention how much more effective and alive it makes discussion when they do this, and you hope they continue it—and how important it is to the class. (2) Do not go overboard in discussion praising these students—this might make other students feel you are shoring favoritism and/or intimidate other students from posting. (3) Have a comment in each posting you do to students in discussion on the value of being involved in discussion as it relates to the workplace (a general announcement to the class and/or e-mail on this is also helpful). This takes the importance of discussion posting outside the class and makes it far more than something only for a grade; it becomes training for their professional careers.

SHARING SELF-CREATED MATERIALS WITH OTHER FACULTY

Errol, you seem to be good at resolving other online educators' teaching conundrums, and now I have one! I teach an American history

course, and over the years I've developed several fact and tip sheets that have proven quite helpful to my students for understanding various subjects in the course, as guidelines for assignments. Sometimes, my students have mentioned these to other online faculty in our school, and some have written to me, asking if I would mind sharing them. I am flattered, and I had no problem in sending them what they asked, and from the feedback I have received from them I believe these would be helpful to other faculty as well. Without sounding like a braggart, how do you suggest I approach my supervisor about telling her of my interest?

As you probably can guess, many college textbooks are outgrowths of what you mention: faculty members creating various "help sheets" for their students. You don't specifically mention if yours are only related to American history or if they also include more general tip sheets, such as how to study, time management suggestions, etc. I mention this because, if yours are related only to American history, write to your supervisor, sending along a couple

samples, indicating how they came to be, how other faculty requested them and their comments, and why you think they might be of use for another faculty in your department. If you also have created some general study guides include two of these as well to your supervisor, asking her if she believes they might be helpful to all faculty. Two important items: (1) Check your writing before sending them—you want no typos and only good English! (2) Never write something like, "These would be helpful"—that is not your decision to make. Rather, suggesting they might prove beneficial is much better—you always want to remember you are the online faculty member who does answer to someone who makes decisions for other faculty in your department (and has a better idea of what resources would be of use or could be distributed to school-wide faculty).

Remember: Batman could work okay by himself, and Sherlock Holmes would no doubt do a good job solo, but how much more effective with Robin and Watson!

health professionals are more interested in health than in “tele.”

In the fields of educational technology and distance education, there is a tendency to embrace new technological tools—even drones—as important, and in some cases even necessary. Learning about the hardware and software that make the machine function are the fun parts of being an instructional technologist and distant educator. Vendors can be crafty. They sometimes “manufacture” uses of their products. However, when new technologies are introduced, it is the role of the professional, not the vendor, to determine

their appropriate educational application—and their importance to the field.

And finally, as Thoreau said “Beware of enterprises that require new clothes.” In the meantime, let’s all go fly our drones.

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