

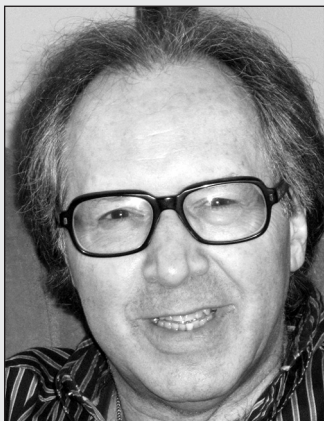
New Look to an Old Course? No Need to Panic!

Errol Craig Sull

It is always comfortable and relaxing for the online educator: starting another session, another quarter, another semester with the same online course you've previously taught—and the course looks and feels the same! Oh, sure, there may have been a tweak here or a trim there, but overall it is an old friend; the course you just finished teaching. But

then it happens: you learn your course will be fully redesigned and revised—not only a new look but also new content. Oh, no! This can be stressful, unnerving, and dispiriting, but it does not have to be. In fact, it can be refreshing and invigorating—and a wonderful opportunity! Here's how:

- **Read all materials on new course structure—and save it:** You will be receiving e-mails and other info relating to the course revision/redesign. Of course, read all that comes your way, but also save each item in a "New Course" folder on your computer. But just saving it without using it won't do you much good—be sure you read it over (more than once!) ... and compare the changes described to your present course. This latter suggestion is important; it gives you the opportunity to begin getting used to the new course and to outline changes you intend on making to your teaching the course. There are great opportunities here for new or expanded teaching strategies and materials!
- **Attend all training for the revised course —#1:** This is a given, but something that is easy to miss (unless it is required). Nearly all online schools



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offering new versions of an old course will hold webinars for faculty to discuss the nuances—big and small—of the revised course. Not only will valuable information be offered, but you also have the opportunity to ask questions and get clarification in live time. Keep in mind that, no matter how thorough the information and training for a revised course may be, there will always be additional questions asked or clarification needed simply because each person has a different approach to teaching.

- **Attend all training for the revised course—#2:** Being active in the training is important, and this can be summed up in three actions: (1) ask questions when you need more info—and be sure to listen and/or view what your colleagues offer: there will be valuable information that will only enhance your smooth teaching of the new course; (2) download any items that are made available relating to the reconfigured course; (3) take notes: no doubt the presentation will be recorded and archived for later view, but rather than going through the entire webinar again, taking notes on what is most important to you will save time. (Certainly, visit the recording if you are unsure of any note you took!)
- **Thoroughly explore the course prior to students having access:** No matter how much information and training you are given for a new course, nothing gives you a better sense of your course than “hands-on” exploration of it. First, take a tour in every nook and cranny of the course (as you do, ask yourself, “What questions might my students have on the course layout, assignments, etc.?”)—you want to become as familiar with the course as a tour guide would of a city! (And although your school might require you to submit a checklist of items required to set up your course, again, this is a checklist—not an intimate stroll through the streets of your

course!) And if you find an area where you might need a bit more of a reminder, make a note to keep yourself on track.

- **Make note of any errors, oversights, vagueness, and “confusions”:** The first release of a reconfigured course is akin to the release of a first edition software: it is Revised Course 1.0. And just as software releases patches and updated versions to correct errors and oversights, so, too, will future “editions” of your course no doubt correct oversights and errors, as well as items that need clarification. Take notes on anything you believe could be improved—the folks in charge of the revision will welcome these, as what is ultimately important is a smooth, enjoyable, and substantive course for the students. A first edition of a new course is always a rough edition—help it strive toward perfection!
- **Use reminder software or a notepad to keep track of important dates:** Online education has a variety of important dates all faculty must know: when faculty postings are to be made, the dates for student e-mails and reminders, due dates for assignments, and others. With a revised course these may have changed, and you don’t want to miss any, so use reminder software (memotome.com is a great one—and it’s free) or a schedule pad to be sure you don’t miss any “must” days to do this or that. And don’t just stop with “this has to be done”—include those additional postings and other items that you want to do to help the students’ experience. Relying fully on your mind will inevitably result in some dates missed—something you never want.
- **Anticipate what materials students will need for assignments—not day by day:** It can seem much easier to post materials and announcements and emails to students as a new week arrives—yet doing this “now” approach

to teaching a new course can have negative results for students and you. As an example: if you are teaching an English course, and the students must begin using research including references in a Week 3 essay, do not wait until Week 3 to give them information on how to correctly use citations (in-text and references or works cited page), but rather introduce it in Week 1 so students have time to get used to it, to experiment with it. Teaching “by the seat of your pants” can take away from students’ learning, from their willingness to submit assignments (they might be intimidated or downright scared of this new learning creature!), and from your overall effectiveness in the classroom. So when looking over your course before students arrive decide what you can offer them ahead of certain assignments to better prepare them for the assignments.

- **Offer additional materials as are allowed:** No course can be fully inclusive in the materials that have been included in that course. Why? Each student is different, each faculty member is different, and these equate to enhancements of or additions to materials that come with the revised course. Depending on the course set-up and school guidelines, additional materials from faculty can be added attachments in the course, attachments to student e-mails, information in e-mails and announcements, minivideos, live chats, and/or other items. Go with the flow; use the possibilities that do exist for giving students added materials, and when you do always make those materials the kind that will do the most good for the most amount of students. (If one or two students are having repeated difficulty with understanding what caused the Civil War, for example, it would probably be more beneficial to write and/or call each student with more clarification.)
- **Do ongoing outreach to your students to help eliminate confusion:** Outreach to students is always important, but this becomes especially crucial with a revised and redesigned course. Although some students may not have been used to another course design, the course should be approached as a new one, even if but one student had an older design/format of the course. And if all students are used to this course redesign (because it appeared in previous courses they took) still do extensive outreach: as this is Revised Course 1.0 there might be vagueness, inconsistencies, incorrect info, or disconnects (that will no doubt be corrected in Revised Course 2.0)—and you want to be sure students are as informed and “unconfused” as possible. And don’t forget: where your school allows it, also make outreach phone calls; this is a personal contact that can have much better results than e-mails or texts.
- **Stay in contact with your supervisor:** There are many reasons for staying in touch with your supervisor when a revised course is launched: let the person know of any “oops!” you discover in the new course; offer suggestions that might make Revised Course 2.0 a bit smoother and less confusing; if you want to add something to the course but are unsure if you are allowed to do so—ask; for any information you receive on the course revision or redesign but are unsure of any part of the info, touch base with your supervisor for clarification. You always want to give the impression of having your supervisor in the know about any new items you intend on including in the revised course ... and to ask for any clarification so you don’t guess ... wrongly!
- **Makes notes on additional problems encountered/suggestions for improvement while the course is live:** Only once your course is “live,” with students wandering about and assignments com-

ing due, will you chance upon new problems, difficulties, or confusion in the shape of vague wording, items mentioned but left out of the course, disconnects in assignments, et cetera. that were not discovered while the course was in a “ready” state. Keep an ongoing list of these, and as soon as one appears—and you are positive it has not already been addressed—let your supervisor know. You are a main cog in

helping Revised Course 2.0 become a version of the course that is easier, more enjoyable, and more effective than Revised Course 1.0!

Remember: When a restaurant changes its menu, we adapt. When a TV show loses our favorite character, we adapt. When a football team returns with a new roster, we adapt. That’s what we do!