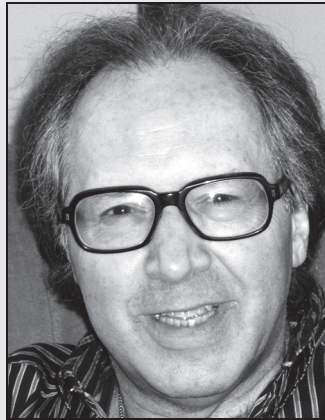


# Ask Errol!

**Errol Craig Sull**

And here we are again—more questions from distance learning educators wanting to do the right things in their efforts to teach! In the many years I have been teaching online I can't get comfortable with my knowledge of this profession, for new wrinkles, new hiccups always come along. The three featured this issue are challenges I've heard from a wide variety of folks who teach via computer. I look forward to hearing from you! (Please send me your questions to [errol@distance-learning@gmail.com](mailto:errol@distance-learning@gmail.com).)



**Errol Craig Sull**,  
Full-Time Faculty, English,  
American InterContinental University.  
E-mail: [ESull@aiuniv.edu](mailto:ESull@aiuniv.edu)  
and [errol@distancelearning@gmail.com](mailto:errol@distancelearning@gmail.com)  
(for column submissions)

Here are the issues—and my suggestions.

*I can tell you I am desperate, Errol, and that's why I'm writing you! There is something I want to do with my school—with my course—but I don't know if I dare ask anyone in my school. What is this scary item? I have an idea that I believe would result in much more student engagement in my discussion boards, but it does not rest within our school's stated guidelines. It's not a teaching strategy that would anger or upset students, in fact it's just the opposite. But I'm afraid that if I broach this with my supervisor he'll be more watchful of my every move, and maybe he'll feel I'm not a team player, and it would perhaps put my job at risk. I certainly enjoy teaching, and I only want to incorporate this strategy to help my students. Your input would be much appreciated.*

Kudos to you for wanting to go over and beyond in your teaching efforts! You are the type of teacher schools appreciate ... mostly. I ended that last sentence with "mostly" because there are instances when a school will have set policies, and faculty must stay within those set policies, creativity and good teaching strategies be damned. Of course, this is a great example of not being able to see the forest for the trees—what makes a good school great is having faculty like you who are intuitive and want to push students to be better.

So ... what to do? First: jot down your idea, then make a list of all the positives that can come from it. But right next to this you want a list of any possible objections that come to mind which might be thrown at your idea—and then write the solution or answer to each challenge. Finally, you want to put this in an e-mail form, with an opening paragraph that begins by saying how dedicated you are to the students and school, that your teaching has always taken into account school policies—but you'd like to offer a suggestion that while not within school guidelines could result in much higher student discussion engagement. Add that you respect your supervisor's advice, and would like his or her thoughts on what you've outlined. This approach allows you to present the idea in a most positive manner, while also indicating your respect of the supervisor and continued willingness to always teach as per school preferences. I believe you'll get a more "thumbs up!" result from this effort than you might think!

*First, a little clap of the hands to you, Errol, for the efforts you've extended in this column. Many of my faculty and I look forward to your columns, and I have kept one issue of Distance Learning on my bookshelf, the one that featured 100% of your columns. Your advice has been invaluable to me.*

*As to my question, it's a somewhat dicey subject: how do I effectively and appropriately go over my supervisor's head in writing to my dean? By no means do I want to do this to complain—my supervisor AND my dean are both outstanding in what they do in our school. Rather, the dean asked me to give suggestions for a new course under consideration (he knows I taught one similar to it at my previous college), and asked for me to give input. He also went on to say that he expects much back and forth between us to help in developing this course. My faculty manager has always told me to copy her on all correspondence, but I know*

*how busy she is, and from the correspondence I've thus far had with the dean it seems pointless to copy my faculty manager on every email. As the real meat of this project won't begin until the fall I thought I might get a suggestion or two from you.*

Well, let me begin by thanking you for those nice thoughts regarding my columns. I am touched, and it's always good to know that my suggestions have helped others! As to your question, the answer is an easy one—but it needs a bit of explanation. Yes: do copy your supervisor on your exchanges with the dean, no matter how small they might be. There are a few reasons for this. First, as you point out, your faculty supervisor told you to copy her on all correspondence, and unless you've left out some exceptions to this, that would include—especially—interaction with the dean. Second, it's nice for your faculty manager to know how highly the dean thinks of you and your ongoing involvement with the project; something like this always improves your standing as "not just a run-of-the-mill" faculty member! Third, copying your faculty manager and the dean shows you can be trusted to follow protocol, always nice. One last item: you could reach out to your faculty manager and ask her if she does want you to copy her on all correspondence with the dean; she probably will, but just asking her shows you are thinking of protocol and would never "go behind her back"!

*I had a situation I've never previously experienced, and although the matter has been put to rest I'd like to find out how you would have handled it, what you might know about other distance learning instructors coming across similar situations, or any additional thoughts on the subject you have, Errol. Recently, I finished teaching an 11-week online course in 19th century American history, and the class consisted of three major essays, weekly discussion board postings, five quizzes, and three journals. One student was silent all class, and although I*

*sent him several emails during the class I never heard from him, until the last day of class. He told me he wanted an incomplete, as he learned he was suffering from depression, and that's why he did no work and did not respond to my e-mails. Although my school has a rather generous policy toward incompletes, I felt his coming in on the last day and with no class activity did not qualify for any incomplete. My manager backed me up on this, and I gave him an F for the course.*

You'll be happy to know that the situation you describe is much more common than you might think. Indeed, there are students who believe an online course means no deadlines, and assignments can be turned in at any time. Of course, we know this is not true—and I don't know of any online course where this can occur. But let's get down to preventing this in the future. (And let me add: there are schools that have strict deadlines on when work can be submitted, and what happens when it is not. This eliminates many of the situations you describe—but even with this always make sure the students are aware of the incomplete policy.)

First, make sure you post a class Announcement on Day One—also sent to the class as an e-mail—indicating the

Incomplete policy and that no student can expect to pass the class or receive an incomplete if all work/nearly all work is turned in on the last day or in the last week of class (if your policy differs do change the wording). Also, in the announcement I mention doing this is just not fair to other students who get in their work on a regular basis. Finally, let the class know that if a problem presents itself with turning in any assignments to reach out to you—and to be sure to answer any individual e-mails you send to students. Once the course begins, as you come across students who have not participated write the students but also copy the students' advisors: not only does this give you double backing (that you did all you could do) but the advisors may know some info about the students you don't. The more up-front you are about your policy on no shows and incompletes, and the more you reach out to students and their advisors, the fewer problems related to this you'll have at the end of class.

*Remember:* Cakes need sugar, fondue begs for cheese, a whiskey sour must have lemon juice, hot chocolate asks for milk: without these helpers the foods and drinks would be boring, flat, and so-so.

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# Quarterly Review OF Distance Education

RESEARCH THAT GUIDES PRACTICE

*Editors:*  
*Michael Simonson*  
*Charles Schlosser*



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Some techniques that engage learners are:

- Group projects. Students really do not like group projects, but some team learning in a class can promote engagement.
- Peer reviews of assignments. While instructors often say they do not like the use of peer reviews, once again, a modest use of this approach can bring students from isolation to partnerships.
- Multiple channels of communication. The use of a number of interaction activities is almost always popular, and promotes engagement.

Specific instructional activities include welcome audios and videos, interviews of classmates by classmates, systematic and regular communication such as the Monday Morning Memo, posting of assignments for class viewing, and group examinations.

One note: the use of social media to promote engagement in an online class may not be the best idea. Because social media promote social engagement, using these media for educational engagement may promote a frivolous aspect to the learning process. Certainly, more study of social media in online learning is needed.

*And finally*, to engage, first design, then present. Remember: as Euclid supposedly said, there is no royal road to learning.

ENGAGEMENT OF A LEARNER IS DEFINED AS EMOTIONAL AND INTELLECTUAL INVOLVEMENT OR COMMITMENT—THE PARTICIPATION IN LEARNING ACTIVITIES VIA INTERACTION WITH OTHERS IN MEANINGFUL WAYS.