

The Great Pitchman

Selling Distance Learning to the Hesitant Student

Errol Craig Sull

This is a column that is long overdue, and one I've had many calls to write: giving solid reasons why a student taking an online course for the first time should welcome it, not fear it. As much as online education has become commonplace there are still many students who have not experienced an online course, and this step into uncharted

waters can appear somewhat daunting at first. Of course, we who teach online know the many plusses of an online class. Take the points I've outlined here and share them with your students: no doubt at least a few will probably be new to online education, and one or items I've listed make hit home with them.

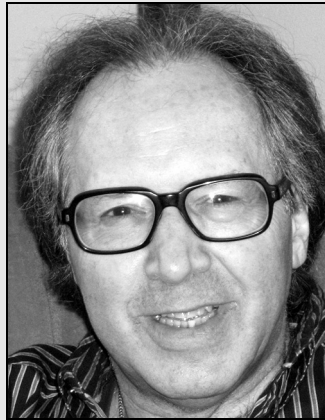
How to have a great time with online education:

EMBRACE THE COURSE

You'll be taking an online course, so don't fight, don't complain—love it! This may sound weird, but if you approach the course with a mindset of "This is really going to be cool!" you'll find a better focus on the course innards and less concern about "Oh, man—an online course: what do I do now?!" Bottom line: dive in, with the idea this is going to be one of the best learning experiences you've had—because it can be!

THE MORE FAMILIAR, THE MORE RELAXED

New city, new job, new school—all can make you a bit unnerved, all can make someone feel a tad frazzled. Taking your



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

first online course can be the same: suddenly, there is no door, there are no seats, there is no physical professor. Yet just as with anything new, the more we get to know it the more comfortable we feel. So ... explore every nook and cranny of your online course—read thoroughly the syllabus—get to know due dates—find course and school resources and (if applicable) the eBook text—learn how to contact the professor, how to submit assignments, how to handle discussion postings. All this will quickly make your first online course seem like a neighborhood where you've lived a long time!

GREAT SUPPORT—AND 24/7

"How do I do this?" ... "This assignment is a bit confusing to me" ... "Oh, oh—this live link in my course does not open!" ... "Can you explain this feedback comment on my assignment more thoroughly?": these and many other questions and "unexpecteds" may come up in your online course—but help is available for what seems 24/7! You can call or e-mail (and sometimes text and instant message) your instructor at any time, with a prompt response—technical support is usually available any time of the day—and helpful videos, fact sheets, and/or frequently asked questions (with answers) postings abound throughout the course. And you always have a great safety net: your advisor. This friendly and helpful person will be with you throughout your years in school, and is a constant resource for questions, concerns, and problems.

REVISIT, REVISIT, REVISIT

Ah, how nice to have available every word mentioned by a professor, each discussion posting of classmates, all feedback on assignments, every school library book—and all readily accessible in one easy-to-navigate location! Your online course gives you this, as everything that is associated with your course is always available in print, video, and/or audio. And since this

all exists on your computer screen there is no wandering, to travel, no wait time, no "Do you remember what was said?" Every component of the course—no matter how big or small—is quickly available to you.

IMPROVE YOUR WRITING ABILITY— NO MATTER THE COURSE

There are two life skills where you are judged by others nearly every day: public speaking and writing. And writing—good writing—is a skill you need for every course you take, as well as on an almost daily basis in the professional world. In an online course you are always writing: major assignments and discussion postings, e-mails, and possible group summaries, interactive personalized learning system questions, quizzes, et cetera. These equate to a whole bunch of writing, and while your professor will give you feedback on some to help you improve (and more, depending on the course, such as English), other course-related writing you do will be practice, with sometimes feedback from classmates. All of this will help you become a better writer—and a writer judged nicely by others!

LEARN HOW TO EAT ANXIETY AND STRESS FOR BREAKFAST

An online course doesn't differ much from other courses in the anxiety and stress getting in assignments and working toward a good grade produce. There are so many nice options, however, that can minimize any of these negatives you might feel. First, as much as possible, have an environment around you where it's more conducive to doing your online course—this brings about an "Ah!" factor. Next, always look for outlets to relax the mind and/or body. These could be as simple as stretching, watching a TV show, or eating a piece of chocolate to taking a walk, going to the gym for a workout, or playing with a baby/having an activity with a family member. Any of these will put you back in your

online class more relaxed. And stress and anxiety? Well, they will have melted away!

DISCUSSION: A BIG PLUS FOR “THE REAL WORLD”

Discussion in an online course is often referred to as the “heartbeat” of the class, and for good reason: it is live interchange between students and students, between students and professor. And when you post to discussion your responses should never be “That’s good,” “I agree,” “Nice idea,” et cetera, as comments like this tell the person reading your post ... nothing! Rather, you want to give the same type of feedback you’d like to receive from others: detailed, so it can prove helpful. This is the feedback you are expected to give colleagues in the professional world—discussion feedback that can really help with a problem, a product, a customer—anything relating to the business. Discussion in an online class is perfect training ground for this, so remember: make your posts intelligent and well-thought-out posts—these are what your classmates and professor will respect, these are what your work colleagues and employer will appreciate.

YOU CAN FORGET ABOUT THE EVILS OF NATURE

“I don’t want to leave for school today: the snow is coming down quite heavily” ... “Oh, no, it’s really, really raining—and I don’t have an umbrella to help me off to school” ... “There is a mudslide that cut off access to my school—how do I get there” ... “It’s 5 below zero with a fierce wind—no way do I want to venture out to school today”: these and other weather-related comments are fairly common when one is attending a school with a physical presence of classrooms. But when taking an online course all of these evils of nature sit quietly on a shelf, as you have your entire course—your entire school—on a computer screen just a few inches in front of you. Sure, networks go down every now

and then, but they quickly pop up—and you’ve lost very little time in the classroom. You can smile!

TAKE IT WHEREVER YOU GO

Our society is more mobile than ever, traveling from city to city, country to country; moving from one job to another; having hobbies and outside interests causing us to go hither and yon; and we leaving one neighborhood in our city and taking up residence in another neighborhood. “Back in the day,” before online courses, you couldn’t do much with your class unless you were at your school or home ... but as Zorba the Greek once remarked, “That was then, this is now”! With an online course you can take it just about anywhere: to the tops of mountains, inside parks, during a lunch break, on a fishing jaunt, to a baseball game, from a previous house to a new one, on the job—the list is almost endless. And added to laptops and tablets are school apps that make your course as available as your cell phone is with you. All of this results in an online course that is convenient to take—and gives you more time to do it.

TIME EXPANDS— BUT DO MANAGE IT

An online course allows access on an anytime, anywhere basis—but this seemingly endless supply of time always has finite endings: due dates of assignments and discussion postings, as well as “must do by” date for other class activities. A great way to stay on top of this is by creating a timeline for yourself—it will tell you when to do the class readings, to start and submit assignments, to post discussions, etc. It’s your little guide to keep you on track with each component of your online class—you never want time to get the best of you, but rather you want to be the one controlling it.

Remember: Something is new until you touch it, then it becomes old, familiar, and like a good friend.

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Michael Simonson
Charles Schlosser



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