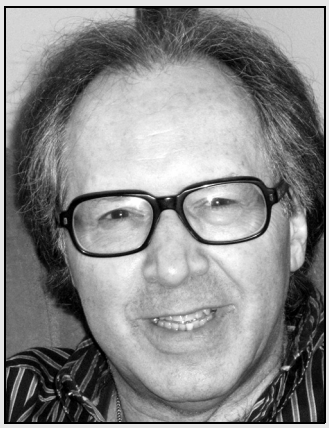
Ask Errol!

Errol Craig Sull

Distance learning has been around for quite some time, and one would think that all its wrinkles, hiccups, potholes, and cracks would be smoothed out and mended over by now. But such is not the case—and such will never be the case. For online education has very real and active human elements: students, teachers, supervisors, et cetera. Each of these can bring something new to solve, something unusual to untangle, something perplexing to "unconfuse." Distance educators in all 50 states and several foreign countries bring these to me nearly every day, and I'll do my best in each column to at least get a few more put on the "no need to worry about that again" shelf!



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Here are the items for this column, along with my suggestions.…

Errol, I have a good—I might even say great!—relationship with my supervisor (at our school they are known as senior faculty), and he appears pretty open to receiving e-mails and texts, and sometimes phone calls from, me, all unsolicited. But lately I have begun to wonder if I'm doing too much, if I am overstepping my bounds, so to speak. He has not said anything to me, but I don't want to reach a point where he thinks, "Oh, no—it's him again!" Any suggestions?

You raise a complex question, and one that many people have asked, in various forms. There are two variables to consider: the personality of your supervisor—and your personality! Regarding the former, you simply develop a feel for what he has said to you about receiving unsolicited input, his overall openness, and the tone and text of his responses. Together, these can tell you much about his appreciating all or some of your communication with genuine sincerity. On your end, are you reaching out to him partly because you want him to like you? If the answer is yes then stop some of your communication: your efforts in the classroom and in school, as well as at least some of your communi-

cation, will tell him you are an asset. Two other items: (1) Be sure you have looked everywhere for the answers to any questions you might be asking or suggestions you are making—you don't want him coming back with a "Did you look here?" response. (2) Although I don't know how often you reach out to your supervisor, you do mention e-mail, text, and phone—that could add up to quite a bit. An e-mail can be answered at one's own leisure, but texts and phone calls can simply be intrusive: be careful of these. The bottom line: balance is the key in reaching out to your supervisor!

First, Errol, I owe you a big thanks—these "Ask Errol" columns over the years have given me valuable insight and info, courtesy of you and the questions asked by my fellow distance learning instructors here and there. They have helped make me a better online educator. Now, it's my turn to reach out to you with a problem I've experienced since I began teaching online almost 10 years ago: students who want to post to Discussion after a Discussion week has ended (the school does not allow this, with certain exceptions) and students who post their essays (I teach American History 201) after the due date, but give me this and that excuse as to why late points should not be deducted. I'm sure you've encountered this in your teaching career—how do you handle it!

Well, I have to begin my response by saying a huge thanks for the compliment! It's always nice to know that what I offer does help others become stronger online teachers; I assure you I'll keep trying my best. Now, as to your question, yes, it's common, and one reason is it's human nature: wanting to get something posted for those valuable grade points, the more the better. Let's begin with Discussion: because of the input I receive from online educators throughout the United States and abroad I know that schools vary in their policies of exceptions to the "can't post after a Discussion week closes" rule. Nearly all make exceptions for military personnel on deployment or folks who can't post because of a natural tragedy, such as, tornado or hurricane. Sometimes they can simply post to the week, other times they have to do it through an incomplete. As you know, you'll find students who fall outside these exceptions, and there are two things you must do to make certain this never again is a conundrum for you: (1) Consult any faculty handbook you have on rules regarding late postings to Discussion; (2) For any gray areas let your supervisor give you the answer. As for late written assignments, it's pretty much the same, although here—according to what you say (and this is true in most schools)—students can post late, but X points will be deducted. There usually is more leeway on the instructor's part. But one final important piece of advice: when students cannot post a late Discussion or must have points deducted for a late written assignment remind the students that one or two poor grades never make a final grade, and reach out to the student showing you are interested in helping him or her stay on task.

You've had several columns, Errol, on incorporating messages or reminders in assignment feedback that takes the assignment out of the classroom and into the student's world of work. I like this idea, and since you first mentioned it I have incorporated it into my classrooms, and student feedback to me tells it is appreciated by them. But what do you do? How do you make it work? I know that any tips you have for me would enhance my efforts. And thanks!

Many, many students approach a course—no matter the subject—with only a final grade in mind, and believing the assignments are only for the course, leading to a final grade. The course ends, goodbye course, here's my final grade—and it's on to the next one. But it's been shown again and again—in my classes and other educators' classes—that indicating to students how their coursework is valuable in

the professional world makes that work in the class more important and more "real," and this often results in better class engagement, improved focus on getting the assignments right, and more timely submission of assignments/postings to a Discussion board. In giving feedback, there are several ways to incorporate the tie-ins to what I call "the real world": (1) A summary paragraph at the end of the feedback that gives a general connection to the professional world (and even better if you know that student's major); (2) Taking a few items that the student has incorrect and/or right, and indicating how they would be needed on the job; (3) Including quotes from well-known professionals and executives who speak of your subject's importance in his or her specialty, and including it in your feedback; (4) Asking your students to give you an example of how one item in the assignment will be of use in their fields of work (and even giving extra credit if your school allows for that). Use one, some, or all of these—but each one does get positive results: I guarantee it!

Remember: TVs deliver entertainment and news, robots go shopping and piece together cars, computers offer ties to the world, cars take us almost anywhere—but all are silent until nudged, coaxed, steered, and directed by the human input that makes them work … and can make them better.

- identification of those willing to act on the vision;
- development of plans to guarantee short term successes—successes that are widely publicized;
- agreement on the process to combine successes; and
- development and adoption of successes into models for addition implementation.

At the heart of the plan and process is the role of stakeholders, especially designers, professors and trainers. Certainly, leaders can and must support the transformation process, but those expected to implement changes—the designers, teachers, professors, and trainers—are the groups who will determine success.

The ingredients of a successful, distance delivered academic program include:

- a committed and strong organizational leader;
- an assessment and statement of need;
- a technology plan with a detailed program for implementation of distance education;
- a steering committee lead by faculty that includes stakeholders such as students, staff, administrators, and alumni
- a detailed timeline;
- a formative and summative evaluation plan;
- a course design model, such as the unit-module-topic approach;
- a full-time faculty person to implement the plan;
- an instructional designer with media production skills;
- a provision for a help desk for students and faculty;
- a distance education policy manual for use by students, faculty, and most important, support staff;
- a course management system and media production facilities and equipment;
- templates for syllabi and course components; and
- a budget.

Some examples of approaches for developing distance delivered programs that have not been successful include:

- Buying a program from a vendor with little or no stakeholder involvement.
- Placing a distance delivered program's management in a support group that is not part of the mainstream of the organization.
- Developing the distance delivered program by creating a different set of policies than those of regular organizational polices. Or, not appropriately modifying existing policies to meet the needs of the distance delivered program and its students, such as not modifying the services of the institution that are needed outside of regular business hours.
- Attempting to develop online programs as profit centers, rather than ones that are valued similarly to traditional programs.
- Staffing the online programs with part-timers; an institution's commitment to any program can easily be determined by examining the staff and the budget.

And finally, the creation of new programs and different ways of providing learning opportunities is exciting and important business. As Daniel Burnham is attributed to have said, "Make no little plans, they have no magic to stir the blood."

Reference

Simonson, M. (2012). Designing the "perfect" online program. *Distance Learning, 9*(2), 76–74.