

# Ask Errol!

**Errol Craig Sull**

The questions continue to come because teaching online brings new adventures, new challenges, new situations, new students, and new guidelines. This mix can result in a bit of confusion at times, and that's why I'm here—to help, as much as possible, to keep you on a stable course in your distance education teaching efforts. Please keep writing! I look forward to hearing from you.

This issue's items include one on group assignments that I have touched on in the past but give a more thorough response

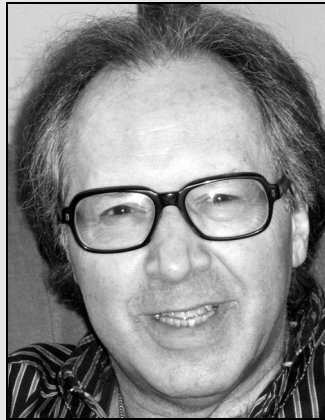
this time because of the problem's complexity.

## LOOKING OVER AN ASSIGNMENT BEFORE IT IS DUE

*I enjoy giving my students detailed feedback, Errol, and quite some time ago I started incorporating one of your suggestions to tie my feedback into the job market. My subject is environmental science, and it lends itself well to employability as it is so timely today. But I have a problem—perhaps it more rightly should be called grey area?—where my penchant for giving my students feedback, and feedback that can remind them of its value outside of the classroom, is causing me distress. I have some students send me their essays ahead of the due date, asking if I could give them some input or to “see if I’m going in the right direction.” One part of me says yes, the other no; can you give me some guidance on this? Thanks!*

First, I'm glad to see you are yet another online educator who knows the value of linking course content—and especially assignments—to that “real world” of work! It really does make students understand the course is for far more than a grade.

As for your question, you are right—it is a grey area, and there is one overriding important item to consider: fairness to other students. Specifically, if you fully, or



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nearly fully, give the type of feedback you'd give when grading the assignment it becomes a leg up on other students, that is, the student to whom you gave the substantial feedback will have had, in essence, feedback on a draft which he or she then corrects and turns in as the final. Immediately, this brings up the question: how fair is this to the students who only turned in their assignment without asking for extra help? And then there is the flip side: trying to give guidance to students so they better understand a concept, an idea, insight, or information. When I have students ask me to look over predue assignments I go for this approach, as I can give broader information (that gets their critical thinking into gear) with suggested resources to help them. Also: when students have had the benefit of my feedback on previous assignments, I point out suggestions I made on those assignments for help. (There is an exception to this: on occasion I will have a student who does really poorly in the course—I teach English—and I know that my giving substantial early feedback will be more in the line of teaching rather than “doing.”) What is most important in offering help for students who ask for early feedback is making sure they do the “work,” and they have not simply sat back and let you get a good grade for them!

## HOW TO BEST MANAGE A SHRINKING GROUP

*Errol, I'm the chair of our economics department, and each time I receive an issue of Distance Learning I scan articles I feel would be valuable for my online faculty. I've done many, and I can see a difference in their efforts since I started doing this a few years ago, so thanks! Of course, that's not the primary reason I'm writing, I have a problem that occurs on a more regular basis than I anticipated. In our freshman and sophomore courses students have at least one group assignment. Faculty offer sugges-*

*tions to the students on how best to manage a group project, but sometimes a group in a course shrinks from five or six in a group to two students, and the instructors nearly all the time keep these small groups. When the instructors don't, they disband the group, placing the students in other groups. Can you offer any suggestions on how to reduce this “shrinking group” problem?*

It's nice to see my efforts with *Distance Learning* are proving helpful to your faculty; thanks for letting me know! I'm hopeful what I'm about to offer you on the group situation will also serve you well. There are a few items I don't know from what you've told me, for example, how does your faculty assign students to a group, what input do faculty give the group members on a regular basis, and what expectations are made of each group member. So, I'm just going to go with general info, but info that I know works nearly all the time, and the big one is how members are assigned to a group. Many faculty members do this alphabetically, and while this is easy it also may lead to more than one group member being not very active in the class and/or not doing well in the class. As a group goes on, and calls for input from each member, it can be easy for someone not to contribute (this can cause “shrink” in having, in essence, “ghost members” of the group, or it can be the final push to have a student drop the course). The solution to this is twofold, but it takes more time: (1) Assign members to a group where there is a mix of strong class “leaders” and those who are weaker; (2) Be sure to “buddy-up” a strong member with a weak member in the group. These two approaches will help that group shrinkage problem.

There are three additional items that can keep the groups more stable: (1) Have the students in the group—not the faculty member—choose a group leader; his or her responsibilities are to assign member responsibilities, keep in touch with members, and develop a timeline for when

certain parts of the assignment are due. Let it be known that any problems with a group member should be reported to you—you can call and/or text/ and/or email the student to give further guidance. (2) Have faculty members set up group Discussion threads or wikis where the group can meet on a regular basis to discuss the assignment. This way, what is going on is visible 24/7 to the faculty member, and action on noncontributing members can be taken more quickly. (3) Be sure the faculty member gives guidance on a regular basis, and always gives a kudo comment to each group member who posts—this serves as great motivation to keep the group members intact.

One final overall comment, and I make this not knowing if your faculty already do it, but just in case they don't: be sure the groups understand that group projects are

more the norm in the business world, and what they do in the class group project is great reinforcement for what they will be doing in "the real world"! (By the way: Remind faculty to never leave only two students in a group. This defeats the real purpose of a group: having input from a substantial number of students. Having a group with only two students pretty much defeats this purpose, as well as placing more responsibilities of the assignment on the remaining members. There is one exception: unless this major shrinkage occurs near the end of the course—by then there should have been sufficient input and assistance from more members.)

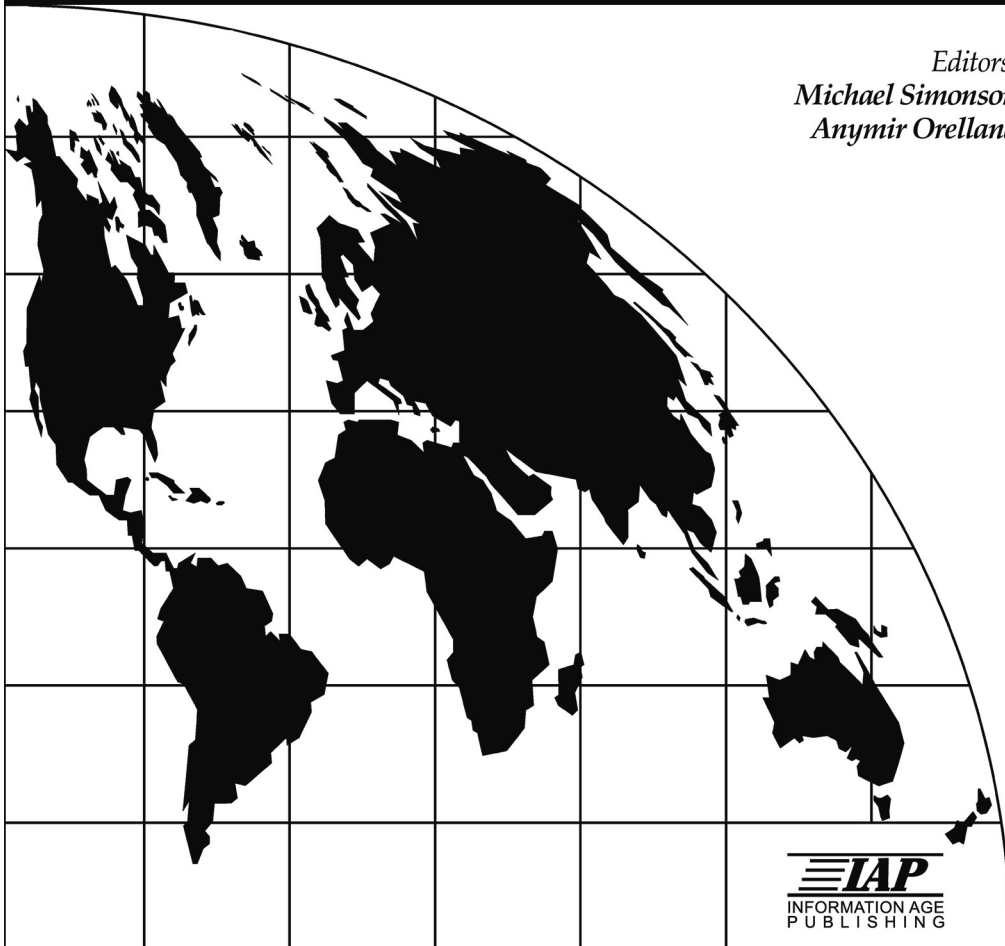
*Remember:* Reaching out for help can make the thought process go from "I think I know," "I haven't a clue," and "What'll I do?" to "Got it!"

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ence. Let's call this list "The Big Five." Here they are.

First and probably most important is the *rule of thirds*, that states the frame of the image to be sent should be divided into thirds horizontally and vertically, and most major elements of the frame should be placed along one of the thirds lines ... for example, a desktop should be roughly along the bottom horizontal third, and a large map in the background should have its upper edge along the top horizontal third line. Most important, the speaker should be placed over the left or right vertical line. The speaker should not be centered. The most powerful centers of interest in a static videoconferencing frame are where the vertical and horizontal lines cross.

The second guideline is to *simplify* the frame—avoid clutter and distractions. An open book on the table behind the speaker can be a prop if it relates to something being talked about, but often the book becomes a distraction. Distant viewers wonder what the book is about instead of listening. Clocks and calendars are the best (worst) distractions.

Third is *lighting*. The frame should be bright and clear. The source of the light should be in front of the speaker. Windows and other light sources should not be behind the speaker.

It can be interesting to experiment with lighting, such as placing the source of light to the left or the right of the speaker, or to have less light illuminating the background, thus making the background less obvious.

Fourth, emphasize the *center of interest*. Most often in videoconferencing the speaker is the center of interest, so place the speaker's eyes at camera level, and

near the top horizontal rule of thirds line. Minimize the space above the speaker's head, too. Do not shoot over the head of the speaker. Generally, telepresence is enhanced when only the speaker's head and shoulders are shown.

The fifth guideline is *depth*. Placing the speaker up against a wall is terrible. Almost as bad is having the speaker with the "whole outdoors" or "whole classroom" behind him or her. Compose the speaker so he or she fits into the location where the videoconference is being held. Offices can be wonderful sets, but they need to be carefully organized. If the bookshelves are on the left behind the speaker, then place the speaker on the right rule of thirds line. With the bookshelf on the left and the speaker on the right the frame is also balanced.

Certainly, these Big Five do little justice to the vast data about how to create visually appealing images, including effective telepresence scenes. Eugene Debes from Eastman Kodak is credited with being the modern disciple of visual composition, and Frank Dwyer from Pennsylvania State University is the father of visual literacy. Dust of your old college photography textbook, or go to the library and look over the TIME/LIFE coffee table books on photography. They are great.

*And finally*, as Wordsworth said 150 years ago, "I have felt a *presence* that disturbs me with the joy of elevated thoughts."

## REFERENCES

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- Moore, D., & Dwyer, F. (1994). *Visual literacy: A spectrum of visual learning*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Educational Technology Publications.