

# The Best Online Courses Are “Corral Courses” Build Them for Student Success

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**T**he obvious question: just what is a “corral course”? Each of us who teach online has such a course, but many are not aware of it, and certainly most do not know how to effectively use it. These are the courses where we can wander with our creativity and ideas and teaching strategies to do whatever we want—as long as all of this stays within the “corral” of guidelines, rules, and regulations set by your school and supervisor. At first it sounds limiting, but it can be just the opposite: liberating, exciting, refreshing. And this is a nice prescription for the motivation we need to enjoy our teaching.

Here is how to make yourself into a stellar online corral course instructor ...

## **SEE HOW MUCH “ROPE” YOU HAVE**

Having a corral course can be fun, invigorating, creative, student successful, but it is important to be aware of the course boundaries. The school and your supervisor have set guidelines for you, and they were set in place often with reasons for which you were not privy. No matter—you are given leeway, but you are still tethered to what you are allowed to do and what you cannot do. Every school has an

“instructor’s guide”—refer to it; and always be on the lookout for new “thises and thats” that come to you via email, course evaluations, supervisor chats, and faculty webinars. All of these update your corral limit: adhere to it.

## **DO NOT GO ROGUE**

Each online faculty member dives into a course with a variety of experiences, teaching strategies, and ideas of how to teach. This can be hugely exciting, so much that it can take you into that dangerous territory of not being a team player, of being that faculty member who thinks more about doing what personal interests need be explored, how you can make a name for yourself. Check your ego at the log-in for your courses: play by the rules, stay in your corral. Everyone will be happy.

## **USE ALL THE “COLORS” YOU ARE ALLOWED TO USE**

Search your course for what the school has implanted to help teach: a library? a textbook? videos? audios? interactive software? others? And there is your quiver full of information and experiences and

websites; some of these will no doubt fall within what the school allows. Two rules to remember here: (1) Take a global approach for all the resources you have at your disposal, i.e., mix and match them for the best effect throughout the course; (2) Be sure any you wish to include can be included.

### **DO NOT BE A NAMBY-PAMPY**

Ah, the conservative online educator: he or she only does what the school offers in a course, and is skittish—possibly afraid—to put any personal stamp on a course. While this may seem like the safe way to go it is just the opposite: the truly valuable online educator is the one who can see the twists and turns to be created within the school resources, while also injecting his or her personal tweak of professional experience and subject knowledge into that allowable corral. This is the combo that has a supervisor saying, “Yeah, that instructor is a keeper!”

### **MAKE USE OF YOUR “BAKER STREET IRREGULARS”**

Sherlock Holmes often called on his loosely assembled band of young men to help him solve crimes; they were known as the “Baker Street Irregulars.” Likewise, in your students there lurks the potential for new ideas, suggestions, and information you had not previously considered. Sure, you are “the teacher,” they are “the students” ... but they can offer so much to improve your quality as distance educator. As a simple example: one student may ask for clarification on some assignment feedback you gave, and this could lead to a new handout or video or audio or class email that becomes a permanent part of that quiver I mentioned. By the way: besides what students offer “out of the blue” ask them for suggestions: you will gain much.

### **ASK WHEN YOU ARE UNSURE— NEVER GUESS**

You have a supervisor for many reasons, and one of these is to give you a definitive answer (with an explanation) of that which you are not sure. Taking a chance that your guess as to what you can do is right falls into dangerous territory. If you are wrong two “strikes” immediately happen: (1) You went ahead with something that was not allowed; (2) You did not seek out the advice of your supervisor in a gray area—something that is never good. When you do ask you will not only receive the correct approach but also a little note in your supervisor’s email that reads something like, “Thanks for asking me!” Translation: you done good :)

### **ALWAYS KEEP YOUR FOCUS ON THE STUDENTS**

It is always about the students, of course, and while we may be satisfied that everything we do is within the confines of our corral we also do not want to willy-nilly toss out X, Y, or Z simply because you can toss out X, Y, or Z. Take the time to see what works best within each “section” of your course corral; this could be what is ideal for a specific assignment, a specific unit, or a specific week. The downside is this approach takes more time, but being a superb online course corral instructor equates to taking whatever time is necessary to get your teaching strategy spot-on for the students.

### **KEEP AN ONGOING LIST OF THIS, THAT, AND THE OTHER THING**

“That worked wonderfully!” and “I don’t think that turned out so good” are two phrases often repeated by really great online instructors. They say that trial and error have occurred—and continue to occur—to discover the best mix of teaching strategies, approaches, ideas, and information. But if you only try to remember them

most will fade. Do keep an ongoing record—a log—on your computer of the anything and everything you tried, wanted to try but did not, and tried but did not work out so well, with details for each. This will make teaching your course corral much easier the next time around!

### **TAP INTO YOUR CREATIVITY— AND THEN SOME**

Push yourself beyond your comfort zone when it comes to being creative. We are always looking for that next “mouse-trap” that will engage our students, help our students, guide our students, motivate our students. Stay on top of your professional field. See what others in your teaching field are doing. Become a member of a professional organization in your field of expertise. Attend conferences where you can meet and share with other online instructors. No doubt some of what you

create will not be allowed in your course corral, but enough will that will give it an ongoing vibrancy—always a good thing.

### **ALWAYS REWARD YOURSELF AT SUNSET**

You put in much time to build and strengthen your course corral; it is not easy, and constant vigilance is required. Each day—yes, each day!—reward yourself for the effort you have put in, and the success that is coming out of it. A milkshake, TV show, sitting under the stars, a mindless TV show, et cetera. Do something that says, “I’m pretty good at creating my online course corral, and now I have earned a bit of a reward.” Your brain will smile—and relax.

*Remember:* Coloring inside the lines only means there are lines we can not cross—it says nothing about the palette of colors from which we can choose to color.