

Creating the Balanced Yet Exciting Online Classroom

Errol Craig Sull and Irvin Peckham

Teaching online has many interesting facets and components to the environment, several of which I have explored in the past 6 years of writing this column. What I—and many of you who have written me—have found especially intriguing is when we “meet” our roster for the first time for the most part all we have are names (some schools also include pics and some bio info), and thus any initial judgment on the who, what, and where of these students rests in these names (and perhaps that extra “stuff”). It is only during the first week—especially in discussion threads and e-mails we receive—that students are “fleshed out” with a sense of their socioeconomic, employment, and geographic backgrounds. And herein lies a possible problem: skewing our teaching—perhaps not even being aware we are doing it—based on our perceptions of the students’ lives outside of our bits and bytes classrooms. This can be dangerous, as we do not want a bias to slip out, no matter how unintentional it might be. So, what to do? We can understand how we can better “teach blind,” that is, teach as if the students are all equal, save for their personalities, and become more aware of what we offer each student in any feedback and correspondence.

I have invited a friend and colleague, Irvin Peckham, director of the first year

writing program at Drexel University, to assist me with this topic. His text on the subject, *Going North, Thinking West* (2010), expertly and thoroughly explores social class inequities in the teaching of writing, although his approaches and strategies can easily be implemented into any subject taught online. For the online classroom can become a veil where students’ backgrounds are revealed, yes—and often through the writing they produce for their professors’ assignments—but the never-really-physically-interact-with-the-student environment lends itself to a fertile ground given to instructor’s assumptions of the students’ backgrounds, and thus their abilities in the classroom. At best, this is a crapshoot—and we as online faculty never want to approach any teaching situation with guesses. Hence, this column—an opportunity to better understand what can go wrong when social class and critical thinking cross paths in the online classroom ... and how to keep it in check.

PART I: UNDERSTANDING HOW WE CAN GO WRONG—IRVIN PECKHAM

- **Background.** I cannot pretend to the expertise Errol and many of you may have in online teaching because I have

never taught a fully online class and am a relative newcomer to the online environment. I taught two hybrid courses in the spring of 2014 at Louisiana State University before I came to Drexel in the fall of 2014 and have taught two hybrid courses since then.

I organize our classroom and writing activities to promote a community of writers. All of our writing is directed to the group in a communicative model, students writing back and forth to each other, writing essays and readers responding in an act of authentic communication to the writers—not as critics with the purpose of helping the writer to improve his or her writing so that he or she can turn in a polished performance to the teacher for a grade, but as people responding to one another as people, responding to what they say, not how they say it while recognizing the dialectic between what and how. In essence, we create writing as circulation, writing as communication, a true discourse rather than a fake performance. Needless to say, we do this by largely avoiding the pedagogically unsound practice of grading student writing.

- **There are concerns that prompt a focus on a balanced classroom.** The virtual world of course has its advantages, ones well known to the readers of this column. Errol has wondered about how the virtual world might disadvantage already disadvantaged social groups. The educational environment is already structured to disadvantage the working and minority classes. I and many others (Anyon, 1980; Apple, 1982; Bourdieu, 1984; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Lareau, 2003; Rose, 1989; Shor, 1992; Willis, 1977) have written extensively about the social reproduction function of education through a sleight of hand, a pretense of opportunity being in reality a tool of oppression. One has only to remark on the fact that middle-class English is the coin of the realm in educational environments. I have made the case in *Going North Thinking West* that other structures, like fetishizing argument in writing classes, depersonalizing writing, rewarding pretense over being, privilege the dominant classes as well.
- **There can be a preconditioning learning difference between classes.** I am working under the assumption (Bourdieu, 1984) that social groups gravitate toward their own: thus, middle-class teachers are more inclined to reward students who are clearly middle class (Tate, 1998) than those who are working class or of a different skin color. It is also well known that class is embodied. We can pretend that we are class and race indifferent, but people from one class almost imperceptibly recognize members of a similar or different class—how one dresses, how one talks, how one gestures, how one eats, what one knows, the music one values (Bourdieu, 1984)—and prefer to associate with people from the same social group. This is why working-class academics have to pretend to be middle class, risking the well-known imposture syndrome (Dews & Law, 1995).
- **There can be a tendency of teachers to socialize students into behavior focused on an educational system.** Those of you who work in online only or hybrid environments should at least consider the ways in which seeing students only through their textual representations of themselves once more gives the edge to the privileged classes. We can see ways in which virtual education democratizes merely by offering classes to students who geographically cannot afford literal education scenes. Quite possibly through textually representing themselves, working-class students can *appear* middle class.
- **There can be a tendency to correct students' language when in fact the teachers are correcting the students' social class.** So there's the question: from stu-

dents' texts only, from the way students handle online assignments, by the way they "perform" if you are asking them to perform—to what degree are you rewarding their social class membership with your grades in your class?

- **There can be a tendency of instructors to overlook some students because the students are only seen through their instructors' eyes—not through the students' selves.** As a writing program administrator, I have fielded several complaints from nontraditional (i.e., seriously working-class) students in online classes about their frustrations with negotiating the directions for activities in online classes, their lack of connections with their teachers, their feelings that a teacher simply was not "there." To what degree do members of the working classes need "presence" in ways that professional-managerial class students, used to travel, moving from culture to culture, engaging in online activities with supercharged hardware from two and a half on do not?

PART II: HOW TO MAKE ONLINE TEACHING NEUTRAL YET REMAIN EXCITING—ERROL CRAIG SULL

- **Look for "tells" of your students.** To develop a teaching strategy that is balanced—that is, reaches to and embraces all strata of students—we must look to our students' writings in first week introductions, early assignments, e-mails received, items discussed, and vocabulary employed, as well as phone conversations. The more we know about each student's background the better assured we can be of knowing how to reach and include all students so all feel an important part of the class.
- **Be aware of the vocabulary used in all correspondence.** It is natural for the language with which we usually incorporate in our formal writing to be the language we offer our students in all correspondence and feedback. Yet we must remember that #1 rule of all writing: one writes for the reader. Thus, our vocabulary can become inviting, friendly, easy to comprehend, and professional yet conversational—or cold, pedantic, and more geared for scholarly publications than to guide an online classroom. And because the online learning environment is nearly all about the written word our choice of vocabulary becomes especially important, as it can be read throughout the life of our course.
- **Look for examples and illustrations that cover a broad base.** We must remember that one huge benefit of distance learning is its reach to all socio-economic corners, and the anonymous environment of the online class—that is, we seldom see and/or hear our students—equates to a possibility of anyone in our class having a background we did not expect or consider. Thus, when we choose examples, illustrations, and videos to highlight or explain various points in our classes it is important these represent a wide spectrum of society. It is important we present an inclusive, not exclusive, online class.
- **Solicit and incorporate discussion feedback from a wide base of students.** Too often, one can find a student with a weak educational and social foundation more hesitant to become involved in online discussion than a student who transitioned to our course with a strong educational credentials and a solid social backdrop. Of course, it is often difficult, if not impossible, to know this, yet no matter: we must reach out to all students in discussion, including the shy, anxious, and quiet ones.
- **Use "reality-based" education for a wide variety of professions.** I have written often of what I term "reality-based" education: tying course assignments, discussion, and subjects to the world of

work. This places the online course in the context of an experience valuable for all of life, rather than merely for a grade and assignments in X number of weeks. However, we must be cognizant that once students leave our course and for those who graduate from our school their professional journeys can go in any direction: farmer, technician, educator, civil employee, physician, et cetera. We must, then, use a wide variety of employment possibilities in our reality-based education tie-ins—this not only touches more students but also offers our teaching as one that is global in scope, rather than narrow.

- **Use students' own writing to illustrate the power of what they say.** This point can be a touchy—and sometimes difficult—one to achieve, depending on our subject. If teaching writing, for example, there is the obvious tendency of instructing the students in how to “get it right,” that is, write in a manner that seeps of education, knowledge, and learning. Yet other subjects, such as biology, mathematics, and economics may have far less emphasis on sentence structure and more on formulae, theorems, and theories, and details of items “microscoped.” In all areas studied, however, the online classroom gives us tremendous power to see and feel the impact of students' words as the students first use them—and continuing on through our input to improve their writing (no matter the course subject). We must allow ourselves to feel the students' messages about themselves

through their writings—and offer motivation and encouragement to their messages, no matter the amount of improvement needed in their writings.

Remember: We can easily spot the dolphins, whales, and sharks in waters—but must never forget that shrimp, bass, catfish, and mackerel swim there, too.

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