

# Introduction to the “Ask Errol!” Columns

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**Y**ou have written me from all 50 states and some foreign countries, asking for suggestions, insights, information, and ideas on a variety of distance learning topics. I have responded the best I could: my only focus in writing this column is to share my knowledge and experience of distance learning so you and others around you can become the best online educators possible! It is obvious I will never run out of questions nor a variety of topics, so I look forward to more in the years ahead. The questions I have here are the ones most people have requested; as others have, I hope you find my responses of value.

## **FACULTY-SUPERVISOR CONCERNS**

### **TEACHING ONLINE PART-TIME WHILE WORKING A FULL-TIME JOB**

*Errol, your tips and insights on teaching online have been really helpful over the years. As this year comes to an end I wanted to thank you, and tell you how much I look forward to your columns in the coming year. And it is the coming year that has me asking you for help! Although I've been teaching online for several years, it is a part-time endeavor for me; I do have a full-time job (in the area of accounting). Recently, I received a big promotion, and this will entail visiting some of our accounts in Europe, Australia, and Latin America. I enjoy teaching*

*online, but, of course, my full-time position must take priority. What do you suggest about my teaching out of the United States?*

First, thanks so much for the positive feedback—it's nice to know my efforts are helping folks! Distance learning is fun, but it also offers many challenges, and I always hope my experience in the field will be of assistance to others. Regarding your question, congrats on the big promotion—it sounds like the year ahead will be an exciting one for you. Teaching out of the country can be a bit tricky, but there are a few items that can make it easier. First, remember the time zone differences; I've known many distance learning educators who vacationed out of the country, forgot the time zone differences, and missed important all-faculty webinars or student presentations they were to do. (Often, watches and smartphones have world clocks on them to keep you on top of the time, and you ought to set alarms to remind you of important deadlines.)

If you need make any calls from out of the country, nearly all major phone companies have special plans where you can have a limited amount of minutes that allow you to call from out of major countries. (I don't know the cities you'll be visiting—check with your phone provider.) Regarding ongoing interaction with your students, such as emails, class announcements, and feedback on assignments, it is your call as to whether you want students to know you are out of the country. But I'll give you my two cents here: minimize, if not totally eliminate, your being out of the

country, as it can be a distraction for the students. (There is an exception: you are teaching accounting, and what you experience with a different country's accounting practices might prove valuable to your students. In this case, your letting them know about being out of the country stands to enrich your course!) Finally, be sure you have a strong and reliable internet connection—and that you bring a converter that allows you to use another country's wall socket. Best of success in your new adventure!

### CONTACTING A SUPERVISOR REGARDING SUGGESTIONS FOR COURSE IMPROVEMENT

*I have been teaching online for 6 years, and for 5 years it has been the same economics course. While I really enjoy online teaching—my “regular” job is an economist for a bank—I have increasingly become frustrated with the course I am teaching: again and again I have found areas where the course can be improved, for both the students and the faculty teaching this course. I want to let my supervisor know this, but I also don't want to have someone look poorly at me, perhaps costing me future teaching assignments. Any suggestions?*

Your question is more common than you can imagine, and there have been instances when faculty members have made suggestions for course improvement, but their approach in doing so had them come across as arrogant, as a “know it all”—obviously, not good. The best approach is twofold: how the question is couched and writing to the appropriate person. First, begin with positives, and include your experience as a professional economist (although this would work for any profession), such as, “As a professional economist for X years I can definitely appreciate the overall value of Y course's layout, content, and assignments.” Once you have done this, as well as included a

few other positive comments about the course in your role as instructor, then offer something such as, “I am very committed to offering my students the best learning experience possible in X course, and would like to offer a few suggestions that I believe could enhance what is already a really good course.” The wording here is crucial: in making the suggestions you are doing so to improve a course you deem already good (you don't want to ruffle a fragile course developer's ego!).

When you complete this be sure it goes to the right person. In most instances it would be your direct supervisor, but here's a tip in writing this person: send a “pre-suggestion email,” that is, an email that indicates you'd like to offer some suggestions to improve X course (including a sentence or two indicating you believe it to be a good course), but don't know to whom such information should be sent. You are doing this for two reasons: (1) Showing your respect for the school's chain of command; (2) Letting the supervisor prepare that person for such a detailed email from you. (Note: Some schools have a preset link in the course or email address to send course improvement suggestions; be sure to check for one of these.

### SHOULD A DISTANCE LEARNING INSTRUCTOR BREAK PROTOCOL?

*I was in an online facultywide meeting, and the provost spoke for a few minutes. He discussed a new program that sounded exciting, and I would like to write him, indicating as much, also volunteering to help out when it is launched (it has to do with student retention, and I have some ideas that might be an asset). He ended very politely, but never invited anyone to contact him. What would be my best course of action?*

It can be so tempting to “reach out and touch someone,” especially if that someone is a college provost, president, or other

senior administrative official. But we must be careful that it doesn't appear we are breaking the so-called chain of command; we don't want our direct supervisor to feel slighted or—worse—become upset with us. And this can become an especially-complex problem when you were never invited to contact the person, such as you mentioned. The smart approach is to ask your supervisor if it is okay for you to write the provost; your supervisor may say it is fine or may know something you don't that makes contact at this time not the right thing to do. This gives your supervisor the (right) impression you "play by the rules," but are also eager to become even more involved in your school. And if the contact does take place the provost will know your name and enthusiasm, always two good things!

### STEPPING OUT OF LINE WITH COLLEGE POLICIES

*I can tell you I am desperate, Errol, and that's why I'm writing you! There is something I want to do with my school—with my course—but I don't know if I dare ask anyone in my school. What is this scary item? I have an idea that I believe would result in much more student engagement in my Discussion boards, but it does not rest within our school's stated guidelines. It's not a teaching strategy that would anger or upset students, in fact it's just the opposite. But I'm afraid that if I broach this with my supervisor he'll be more watchful of my every move, and maybe he'll feel I'm not a team player, and it would perhaps put my job at risk. I certainly enjoy teaching, and I only want to incorporate this strategy to help my students. Your input would be much appreciated.*

Kudos to you for wanting to go over and beyond in your teaching efforts! You are the type of teacher schools appreciate ... mostly. I ended that last sentence with "mostly" because there are instances when

a school will have set policies, and faculty must stay within those set policies, creativity and good teaching strategies be damned. Of course, this is a great example of not being able to see the forest for the trees—what makes a good school great is having faculty like you who are intuitive and want to push students to be better.

So ... what to do? First: jot down your idea, then make a list of all the positives that can come from it. But right next to this you want a list of any possible objections that come to mind which might be thrown at your idea—and then write the solution or answer to each challenge. Finally, you want to put this in an email form, with an opening paragraph that begins by saying how dedicated you are to the students and school, that your teaching has always taken into account school policies—but you'd like to offer a suggestion that while not within school guidelines could result in much higher student Discussion engagement. Add that you respect your supervisor's advice, and would like his or her thoughts on what you've outlined. This approach allows you to present the idea in a most positive manner, while also indicating your respect of the supervisor and continued willingness to always teach as per school preferences. I believe you'll get a more "thumbs up!" result from this effort than you might think!

### HOW MUCH IS TOO MUCH REACHING OUT TO A SUPERVISOR

*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 emails 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 communication, 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 email, text, and phone—that could add up to quite a bit. An email 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!

#### **MAKING EXTRA EFFORTS IN THE CLASSROOM KNOWN TO A SUPERVISOR**

*Errol, this may sound like a question full of aggrandizement, but it's really about security—doing what I can to be sure I'm continually hired at my online school. I'll be honest: I really need this part-time teaching gig. The money from it helps me out with expenses, as I live in a rather expensive city, even though I have a fairly well-paying, full-time job as an accountant. I put everything I can think of into teaching my students, and I want to be sure my supervisor notices the extra touches and efforts I do in*

*my class. Any suggestions as to how I can make this happen?*

Two items that are no big deal: that you teach part-time, as an adjunct, and that (it seems) your primary reason for teaching is the paycheck. Let me quickly add: the ONLY reason I say these are not important is because you give the impression you really go all out for your students—the #1 focus all teachers should have, of course. As for your question, three items to share: (1) Your supervisor is probably in your class more than you realize, and thus much more aware of most (if not all) you do. (2) Don't hesitate to drop a note to your supervisor, with the approach there are many small things you do in class to help your students, and ask for his or her input (a somewhat backdoor way of listing all that you do in class!). (3) If your school has opportunities for faculty presentations volunteer for one, and use your efforts in the classroom as a "Best Practices" approach. Do this, and you'll be known only as a great teacher—not a paycheck teacher!

## **CREATIVITY CONCERNS**

### **INTRODUCING NEW PRESENTATION SOFTWARE IN THE CLASSROOM**

*Thanks so much for the information you've given me and other online teachers over the years. It's been really helpful, and I often finish reading a column with material I had not previously considered, and I'm hopeful the same will happen this time.*

*My problem is more of a challenge, as I want my school to accept my use of Prezi in the live presentations I give my students (two per week, as I teach an online graphics design course), but the school always uses PowerPoint. When I made the suggestion to use Prezi—presentation software that I believe to be a step beyond PowerPoint—I was told "no-one is really familiar with it" and "perhaps later on when it becomes more*

*common." I am very familiar with Prezi (I could teach others), and know its use is on the increase in educational environments. How do I get my school to use Prezi?*

Prezi is but a small example of a larger problem that at times can appear widespread on college campuses: technology that continues to grow at a rapid rate, but colleges and universities that are slow to adopt it. There is some justification for this approach: what may seem "cool" and "whiz bang" to an online educator might not yet fit with a school's overall ability to incorporate same into its information technology platform; and there might not be enough people at the school familiar with the program to allow for troubleshooting and training of other staff. (A good example: although Word 2013 has been out for nearly 2 years some schools still accept Word 97-03,07, and 10.) Obviously, there are educators like you who know well the substance, value, and inner workings of a program, and thus can easily make it work with their students.

What you did not mention is whether your school has forbidden you to use Prezi; if not then you can use it, and showcase its use for the rest of the school. However, if you were told flat out not to use it I'd take a three-part approach: (1) Make a Prezi that shows the value of using a Prezi. You have an ideal situation where you can use the product you'd like to incorporate as a way to present its value. Important in this presentation—and I base this on experience, as I have done hundreds of PowerPoint, Prezi, and other presentation-type software webinars—is to include its value over the use of PowerPoint, the most common problems (and how they can be corrected), and your ability to take a topic from your class and easily explain it through Prezi. (2) Be sure this goes to the right person, as you don't want it ending in the "dead letter" office of your school! (3) Write a nice email to your supervisor, telling him or her your idea—and qualifications in using Prezi—and asking for the right person to send your presentation.

Postscript: Thanks for the complimentary words!

## SHARING SELF-CREATED MATERIALS WITH OTHER FACULTY

*Errol, you seem to be good at resolving other online educators' teaching conundrums, and now I have one! I teach an American history course, and over the years I've developed several fact and tip sheets that have proven quite helpful to my students for understanding various subjects in the course as guidelines for assignments. Sometimes, my students have mentioned these to other online faculty in our school, and some have written to me asking if I would mind sharing them. I am flattered, and I had no problem in sending them what they asked, and from the feedback I have received from them I believe these would be helpful to other faculty as well. Without sounding like a braggart, how do you suggest I approach my supervisor about telling her of my interest?*

As you probably can guess, many college textbooks are outgrowths of what you mention: faculty members creating various "help sheets" for their students. You don't specifically mention if yours are only related to American history or if they also include more general tip sheets, such as how to study, time management suggestions, et cetera. I mention this because if only American history write to your supervisor, sending along a couple samples, indicating how they came to be, how other faculty requested them and their comments, and why you think they might be of use for other faculty in your department. If you also have created some general study guides include two of these as well to your supervisor, asking her if she believes they might be helpful to all faculty. Two important items: (1) Check your writing before sending them—you want no typos and only good English! (2) Never write something like, "These would be helpful"—that is not your decision to

make. Rather, suggesting they might prove beneficial is much better—you always want to remember you are the online faculty member who does answer to someone who makes decisions for other faculty in your department (and has a better idea of what resources would be of use or could be distributed to schoolwide faculty).

### USING CREATIVITY TO MAKE A CLASSROOM MORE INVITING TO STUDENTS

*My question is one I know you've discussed in several columns, on several different subjects, but it's one I believe that can always use more input: making my class more inviting to my students. Certainly, I have the options of using different-colored fonts and highlighting, as well as changing the size of my fonts, and I try to use language that just reads more inviting. Yet I know there must be more I can do—does your experience offer any tips in this area?*

Student engagement is the #1 concern of distance learning educators, and I have written several columns directly or indirectly focused on this subject. There is a variety of items that can be done in a classroom to make it more inviting—you've touched on one, the look of your text through size, color, and style of fonts. But also your language is critical—not only must it be uplifting but also somewhat “cool,” that is, you don't want to come across as a staid academic, as there is nothing interesting about this type of writing. But writing that is more conversational in tone (you do mention this!) and always is motivating and looks to help students is more interesting.

Also, if you have the option of using videos—making your own or posting others—that highlight different subject areas of the course and relates the course to the “real world,” do this! The visual, especially if it moves, keeps students involved. Of course, the use of cartoons, creating puzzles, and writing mini rap songs—all relat-

ing to your course (and if allowed by your school)—also makes a course more tantalizing. Finally: keep doing outreach—individual emails and, if acceptable, calls; these really will help you connect to the students and make your course more inviting!

### IMPROVING THE USE OF VIDEOS FOR ONLINE STUDENTS

*I teach science courses, Errol, and to illustrate how a theory or principle or piece of information can be used in everyday life I often show the students a movie or two throughout the course. The students really like this, of course, but recently a supervisor pointed out to me that I should make better use of the films I show so they better integrate with the course material, but never offered any meaningful suggestions. Can you give me some ideas?*

This is a question I have had tossed my way in different formats: not only using movies but also music, TV shows, and poetry/short stories/plays. Each presents a golden opportunity to expand students' critical thinking while also highlighting the overall course subject or areas of the subject. I've used movies on many occasions for American literature courses I've taught, and integrating them with the course material proves very helpful to the students' understanding of the material while also tickling their thought processes. Try these: (1) if students are given something to read, then see a movie based on that reading material have them do a short essay that notes the differences between the two, asking which works better and why; (2) does the material presented in the movie—that relates directly to your course—realistically reflect on what the material could do in “real life,” and if not why not/and if yes how could the students see this material helping in the future? (3) in looking at the movie what makes the material more exciting than what it appears to be in the course—and what new insights have stu-

dents gained on the material in the movie they did not get from the course? (4) could the students see ways the material could be used in a different way in the movie—and how? Why do they think it was not used in that way? What might be the outcome of a scene, a character, or the overall theme if it was incorporated in this unused manner? Each of these makes a movie an important segment of a course, for it expands the materials role in the course and in the outside world, that is, the material studied becomes *real and pragmatic*

## DETERMINING THE USEFULNESS OF OUTSIDE RESOURCES

*Errol, more than once you have either improved my efforts as an online educator or prevented me from making a foolish mistake—thanks on both counts! Now, I'm coming to you with what I can best describe as a "sticky wicket" of my teaching: how do I decide what outside resources to use and which ones to ignore? I know the basics of ignoring .com and most .net and using school guidelines for external resources, but there are so many that seem like they would be helpful for my students—do you have any input on this?*

Thanks much for that opening sentence—it is yet another bit of info that tells me my suggestions are helpful! As to your question, before the internet it used to be so much easier to determine what could or could not be used to help students as additional resources (and by this I mean resources beyond what are prestocked in a distance learning classroom). But the internet makes it so easy to find resources, and just about anyone can toss up something that looks, smells, and tastes like a resource—but is it one that can legitimately be used in a classroom?

Here are some guidelines to keep in mind: (1) *What your school allows*. Each school is different, from leaving it up to the instructor to not allowing any outside

resources (unless they come from the school's library). Be sure you follow this—and when in doubt ask your supervisor; (2) *The "usual suspects" to use as guidelines*. Credibility can be determined by author or organization credentials and age of the resource (a good rule: if possible not older than 5 years); (3) *Domain extensions*. As you point out, .com and many .net are commercial, and thus are not credible (but there are exceptions—read through the resource carefully), but .gov, .edu, and .org are nearly always reliable. There are also .biz (for businesses), .mobi (if the resource is for use only on a mobile device), and .US, .UK, et cetera (for country designations)—these must be looked at individually to determine their validity; (4) *Pay attention to the pop-up ads*. Some websites may be perfectly fine, but there may be pop-up ads that accompany them that simply are not suitable for a classroom; (5) *Specificity for the assignments, items, et cetera*. When all the previous guidelines say "okay," always be sure you are not posting a resource that is so general a student has to go through all of it to find helpful info: either be sure the resource is specific or let the students know exactly where to go in the resource to save the time and frustration!

## GENERAL TEACHING CONCERNS

### HAVING ENGAGED DISCUSSION STUDENTS HELP OTHER STUDENTS BECOME ENGAGED IN DISCUSSION

*My question relates specifically to Discussion, Errol, and each time I teach a class there are some students in my weekly discussion threads who are extremely active. Not only do they do a nice job in responding to the primary post but they also go out of their way to give nicely detailed responses to other students' postings in discussion. What I'd like to do is harness the energy and enthusi-*

*asm of these “worker” students on a more formal basis so they can become, in essence, my student aides in discussion. Any ideas?*

Ah—the students you mention are the stuff of Discussion dreams, at least for the online educator! To have students who do exactly what we’d like them to do—nice main postings and good responses to classmates—is something for which we wish a formula existed that we could easily bestow on all students! Since that is not in the wind anytime soon, let’s do what is proven to get these students “working” for you in discussion: (1) Be sure you write these students—individually—to thank them for their efforts, and tell them how much you especially appreciate their activity with other students. Then go on to mention how much more effective and alive it makes discussion when they do this, and you hope they continue it—and how important it is to the class. (2) Do not go overboard in Discussion praising these students—this might make other students feel you are shoring favoritism and/or intimidate other students from posting. (3) Have a comment in each posting you do to students in Discussion on the value of being involved in Discussion as it relates to the workplace (a general announcement to the class and/or email on this is also helpful). This takes the importance of discussion posting outside the class and makes it far more than something only for a grade; it becomes training for their professional careers.

### **REMINDING STUDENTS NOT TO FOCUS ON ONE OR TWO POOR GRADES**

*I’ve been teaching online for almost 6 years and have read each of your columns, but cannot remember one that addressed this subject: students who become discouraged, and sometimes no longer participate in a class, because they received on or two poor grades. I remind them to look at the big picture, that is, the entire course, but these one or two grades become so much a focal point*

*for them that this experience seems to overshadow all other assignments. Is there anything else I can do?*

I smiled when I read your question, as I had planned on addressing this problem in my next column, but you asked it so I am addressing it now! What you describe is certainly not new, and in the online course it can be more potent as the student cannot walk into your office (unless you are teaching a hybrid course) to discuss his or her poor assignment showings—whether at your request or the student’s. Too, online education makes it quite easy for a student to constantly check his or her running grade for the course in the online gradebook, an immediate reminder of one or two assignments that did not go so well. There are several approaches you can take to help students get by this “My life is over because I did poorly on X assignment!” mentality.

(1) Tell all students to never focus on one or two grades; many grades in a course equal a final grade. You mentioned you are doing this for individual students, but it’s helpful to have a sheet that keeps this up front for all students, in addition to attaching it to any feedback for a student who does poorly on an assignment. (2) Remind students to always use your feedback on assignments to improve future assignments. Rather than look at the comments, then forget about them, the total comments on an assignment can equate to each student’s personal study guide. (3) Always let students know: If more clarification is needed on your assignment feedback always ask; tell them, “I want you to improve, and thus I’m happy to give you additional input.” (4) Another reminder: Many successful students from your school and graduates from your school did poorly on one or two assignments—but went on to receive their degrees and secure excellent professional employment! (5) Something like this is always a good motivator to post: “Albert Einstein failed a math course, Harrison

Ford (the Academy Award-winning actor) failed a philosophy course, Charles Darwin failed a biology class, Ang Lee (the Academy Award-winning director) failed his college entrance exams—but all of these famous folks (and many more) persevered and succeeded. SO CAN YOU!”

### HANDLING A STUDENT WITH OVERLY-FRIENDLY AND TOO CONSTANT COMMUNICATION

*Thanks so much for all the great info over the years, Errol, and Happy New Year! I do have one problem—more of an annoyance, really—and thought you might have some suggestions. One of my students has become somewhat attached to me, sending me emails just to say hello and let me know what’s going on in her life. This also extends to instant messages, phone calls, and texting (which I have been using for a few years to foster better communication with my students). What complicates this is she seldom mentions anything relating to class—and I am male! I have been polite, not wanting to cause any waves with the student, but this is getting out of hand, and I don’t want it to affect my job. What can I do?*

I appreciate your kind words; it’s always heartening to know my efforts are helpful to others. Now the situation you mention is by no means uncommon, and most schools with online courses have guidelines to handle this kind of problem. (Be sure to check with your supervisor—you don’t want to overlook them if they exist.) It is well-known that students can become enamored with their professors—especially online, given the asynchronous environment of this learning (students believe they are “invisible,” and thus it is easier to communicate with a professor)—for a variety of reasons. Most common, however, is the caring and always-available authority figure that most instructors appear to be. Also, they can be counted on for correspondence responses that are

friendly and positive. Together, these ingredients make for a perfect storm of what you describe: a constant bombardment of nonclass-related correspondence from one student.

The first step you must always take is to make your supervisor aware, including sending all communication that has occurred—including yours (you always want to appear “above board,” but you also want to protect yourself in the event of student backlash). Remain polite, as you have, but in an email to the student (better than a text or instant message as it is easier to forward to your supervisor) explain how much you appreciate her enthusiasm for the class (not for you!), but there are so many students you must limit any communication to course-related items. If this does not stop her then again contact your supervisor: he or she may need to contact the student. (Note: do not call the student: [a] no matter how good your intentions the student may perceive a call as a personal interest on your part, never good; [b] there is no record of the phone call, and you do want to a record of as much correspondence as possible with the student.)

### RESPONDING TO STUDENTS WHO HAVE NOT BEEN ACTIVE DUE TO EXTREME PROBLEMS

*Errol, I reach out to my students on a constant basis, through emails, texting, and phone calls, and this has helped me create a good bond with many of my students. Although corresponding on many issues—nearly all related to the class—over the years I’ve had some students reveal some rather disturbing reasons as to why they have not been more active in class or why they previously failed the course. Domestic abuse, being homeless, divorce, severe family illness or death in the family, the students’ major disability, and house burned down are some of these. I try my best to*

*respond, but sometimes I think there is more that I could do. Any help you can give me would be greatly appreciated.*

It wasn't until I started teaching online, and thus had more email and pretty much first-time phone contact with students, that I started hearing similar info from my students. A few items: (1) Check to see if your school has any policy on whom to contact in the event of a problem that sounds life-threatening. (I once had a student who told me she was so depressed she was contemplating suicide. I immediately contacted the student's advisor, who contacted the police in her area; they checked on her, and determined she did need help, which she received.) (2) Tell the student how you will help him or her overcome the challenge to being more involved in the classroom—and when I say “tell” I mean through one of the means you mention: a phone call. That personal exchange is crucial in getting to student to, in essence, lean on your shoulder with classroom work. This often takes more than one call, but in my experience this helps the majority of these students. (3) Never—and I mean NEVER—get into any discussion about the personal problems the students have; that is not your role. Only focus on how you are going to work with the students to overcome the problems for better class involvement. (4) Cover yourself: let your supervisor and the student's advisor know of the problem any student relayed to you. Doing all of these suggestions will allow you to have the best efforts with these students while knowing you've done everything on your end to help them and yourself.

## HOW TO DEVELOP ASSIGNMENTS THAT GOOD BEYOND SAME OLD-SAME OLD

*I'm pretty sure I can count on you to give me some solid advice on a challenge that has been perplexing me for years: how do I develop assignments for my students that go beyond the same old-same-old multiple*

*choice, fill in the blanks, and “Write an essay on X.” My subject is math, and I have looked at many websites and read a few books on teaching math to online students, but have come away with not many ideas that I believe would really test the students' knowledge and critical thinking, as well as make the assignment not so standard. Any help you can give me would be appreciated.*

This is a favorite subject of mine, as it immediately takes me back to “the olden days” of college when assessment (of course, that word was never used—it was always “test”!) never was inviting, and seemed more about rote memorization than anything else. Yet developing assignments for students in the online environment offers so many possibilities for assessments that are interactive, offer the importance of a subject beyond classroom studies, and can be more Socratic in their approach than mere memorization or “yes” and “no” answers. The most important key in making this all work is to know the answer to one crucial question: “What do I want my students to learn from this assignment?” For it is the online educator who only thinks of students receiving grades on an assignment, and not a far-reaching purpose of the assignment, who presents an assignment worth little.

Fortunately, there is much that can be done. Some examples (and these can apply to any subject, not just math): Ask students to relate a topic, theory, equation, approach, et cetera, learned in class to a real-world, on-the-job situation.; develop a story with a challenge where students must demonstrate some aspect of what they have learned to overcome the challenge; look for a news story where the subject being taught is the focus; ask students to incorporate the course subject into the story where it becomes an important and natural part of the story; search for interactive exercise websites that feature your core subject; most of these are free and open for use to the public; have students use a combo of essay and other forms of

presentation (blog, PowerPoint or Prezi, YouTube, game, play, etc.) to present their understanding or support of a topic. And as for multiple choice, fill-in-the-blanks, and other such assessments that are necessary at times spice them up a bit by using current language, real-life situations, or a bit of humor—this makes the “medicine” go down easier!

## STUDENT WITH A POTENTIALLY DANGEROUS PROBLEM

*Like many faculty members, I have had students send me emails with a host of excuses as to why they have not been participating in class, why they have not turned in assignments, et cetera. And also like many faculty members the excuses are pretty much the same: death in a family, really sick or in the hospital, internet down—the list goes on. But in the 4 years of teaching online I have never received an email like one I received from a student a few weeks ago: in it she stated there were so many things going wrong in her life she saw no reason to go on with her life, and ended the email by saying goodbye to me! I won't lie: this scared the hell out of me, and I immediately forwarded it to my supervisor, who thanked me, and that was the last I heard from him. Is there anything more I should have done? Any thoughts you can offer on this would be appreciated.*

Sadly, I have heard similar stories from many other online faculty around the country and abroad, and I've also experienced this a few times. Situations like this seem to be on the increase, and psychologists and college advisors have reported the same, and more often than not the blame seems to be a combination of increased pressures in our society to succeed and students unable to handle rather complex situations in their lives. But no matter the utter urgency of a student's email or your desire to “do good,” we must remember: we are NOT psychologists or

school advisors, and thus there are actions we cannot take or should not take for legal, ethical, and/or school policy reasons. This means never respond to such an email with advice to the student, other than to tell the student to contact his or her advisor, and letting the student know you will also be doing the same with your supervisor and the student's advisor.

The first step you took was the correct one: letting your supervisor know. But when you do this do not simply paraphrase or summarize the student's email, but rather forward the email in its entirety: you do not want any part of the student's email to be misinterpreted by you. Also, in your email to the supervisor always ask: “Should I also forward this to the student's advisor?” Nearly always you will receive a go-ahead on this. Finally: if you do not hear back from the supervisor or the advisor on the outcome, do write one or the other a simple follow-up note—it shows you care (while also perhaps giving you direction on what more you can do to help the student in your class—if the student returns).

## HELPING STUDENTS TO TURN IN ASSIGNMENTS

*My problem is one that plagues each one of my online teaching colleagues—there are about 300 of us at my school—and I'm sure it's no different in any other online course: how do I get students to submit assignments on time or to submit assignments at all? About the only incentive I've yet to offer them is money, but I feel that even if I did that it wouldn't make much of a difference. Do you have some magic key or secret formula that make this problem go away?*

Let me start by responding to your last sentence: no—I have no magic key or secret formula, and I don't know of anyone who does! But the problem can be minimized, and first we must understand the three major reasons why student

assignments are late or just not submitted: (1) Believing an online course has no deadlines, and thus is pretty open-ended when it comes to deadlines (and it seems these same students do not read the assignment deadlines in class); (2) The balancing act many students have in their lives, such as family and employment; (3) Not understanding an assignment, and thus being scared of turning it in.

Is there anything that will make these all go away? Never. But there are some approaches that can be taken to increase student submissions and increase timely student submissions: (1) Post reminders in class and email reminders—this has been found to be the most helpful; (2) Give students resources for time management—and a free software reminder site (Memo to Me—<http://www.memotome.com/>—is a great one) can also be an exceptional tool (3) Offering additional help in understanding assignments (through PowerPoint or screenshot examples of what you seek), a video of explaining an assignment, then showing how to correctly do an assignment, and a phone call to those students having problems, perhaps learning of problems outside the class that may be getting in the way (and that you can work around with the student) or giving a more personal explanation of an assignment.

### ENGAGING SO-CALLED “GHOST STUDENTS”

*From what my colleagues and supervisors tell me, Errol, my problem is a common one, and there seems to be no answer to it! For each of my online classes I have students who are listed on my roster, but no matter what I try I cannot reach them, and I have no communication from them. Emails, texting, instant messages (we have that in our school), and phone calls have produced nothing (I leave voicemails when I can, but some of these students have voicemails that have not been set up, voicemails that are*

*full, or voicemails that have yet to be activated). And even though I was initially strongly against using texting I finally tried it, but again to no avail. Is there any magic formula or secret key you know of that would help me reach these students? Thanks for your time.*

You hit on one of the biggest frustrations of online educators, what I call “ghost students”: as you described, they appear on the roster, are not dropped from the course, and that’s it—no communication of any kind, no matter what is tried. I certainly have these in each of my classes, and I, too, have tried each of the communication methods you mention. There are three additional methods I came up with that have resulted in some limited success: (1) *Using their advisors.* When I have not been able to communicate with these students “no how, no way” I have reached out to their advisors for help. Sometimes, the advisors know things about the students that explains their silence (at least I have an answer!) or they have been able to contact the student, and then have the student contact me. (2) *Sending audio files.* This, of course, takes time to create, as a separate audio file must be created for each student. But when I do this I have had a bit of success in turning a “ghost student” into a live student—and “a bit of success” is certainly better than no success. And one of the keys to having this succeed is by using a funky subject line, such as, “I’ve attached an audio file for you, Joseph, because you live in Colorado Springs!” (3) *Sending an email with what seems like a weird subject line!* For example, I might write, “Cathy, you live in Glendale, California, home of the Museum of Neon Art! Read this email for my reaction to it :)” Yes, it’s a rather long subject line, but it does what I want—offers a “hook” that I hope will result in the student reading the email, and eventually reaching out to me. Let me give you the caveat to these three suggestions: I’ve kept detailed records on the success I’ve had, and it stands at 17%! But the way I look at

it that's 17% more students engaged in the course than had I not tried these methods, so for me it's a win.

## **NEW TO ONLINE TEACHING CONCERNS**

### **NEW ONLINE INSTRUCTOR REQUESTS HELP IN WORKING WITH REPEATING STUDENTS**

*It's been along year for me, Errol, and I speak here of distance learning. I'm rather new to teaching online, and in each of my classes I've had students who previously failed the same course. This I did not expect, and I find that I'm teaching, in essence, two different kinds of students, and I fear I'm not giving the repeating students the kind of assistance they really need. (By the way: if I compare their passing rates to students taking the course for the first time there is a stark difference: 27% versus 71% for the nonrepeating students.) I teach American history, and any help you can give me would be appreciated.*

Ah, are you asking the right person this question! About a year ago I decided these repeating students—I'll call them "R" students—were not getting the focus they needed, so I requested one of my classes be made up of 100% "R" students. This has made a huge difference, and while I'm not suggesting you do that, there are a few things I've learned that can help. First, outreach is crucial—via email, to be sure, but if your school allows it also by phone call. And ask each student why he or she had trouble with the course previously—many will tell you why, and often you'll get information that can better help students in your current course. Also, the constant outreach shows you care—letting students know you are always there to help them is crucial. Another important aid for these students: create a step-by-step guide to completing each assignment, ending by showing what

an assignment should resemble. All students in your course will benefit from this, but especially the R students: many times, they get confused by or need more clarification on assignment directions. Finally, as you see any of these students faltering in class—either not turning in assignments or doing very poorly on assignments—be sure to reach out to them, reminding them of their goal for a degree and the importance of your course in the professional world. Do these suggestions, and I know your passing percentages for R students will increase!

### **MAIN POINTS OF A WELCOME LETTER**

*What has me confused is a staple of every online course: that first letter, the so-called "Welcome Letter." I've been teaching online for 1 year, and it seems that everything I think students ought to know before starting my classes I toss into my welcome letter, but when I read it over it is really, really long! Trying to look at this as if I were a student it could appear intimidating, and I don't really know if my students read the entire letter or if they do read it how much of the info really stays with them. Is there a formula of some sort for writing the "perfect" welcome letter?*

Without question that "Welcome to My Course!" announcement—and often also usually sent out as a group email—is crucial, for it sets the tone for what students can expect in the class (read: your personality and teaching style) and what the professor considers most important in the course. And as you mention, having such a letter that is too long can translate into one not read or items in the letter glossed over. While each such letter is subjective to each online educator there are some guidelines that should be the architecture of any welcome letter: (a) the letter should begin with a friendly and enthusiastic paragraph that welcomes the students, offers your excitement for teaching the course, and tells students you will give them everything they need to do

well—and all they must give in return is effort; (b) the next paragraph should mention the bullets that follow are especially important to the course, but other announcements have been posted that expand on additional components of the course (this way you are, in essence, dividing your welcome letter into easily digestible bites); (c) use color, bolding, italics, and highlighting for important points—this not only emphasizes their seriousness but breaks up the black-on-white, black-on-white, black-on-white that can become boring; (d) end the letter by letting students know you really want them to succeed, you look forward to working together, and you are always open for their questions and comments (via email, of course, but also phone if an option). Note: Don't let that welcome letter simply sit there, to be forgotten after a couple of days; refer to one or more of its contents throughout the course—this spotlights the welcome letter's importance.

### HOW CAN SOMEONE NEW TO ONLINE TEACHING HAVE THE BEST EXPERIENCE?

*I'm new to online teaching (this is only my second semester), and most of my background is as an accountant (which continues to be my main profession). Although I am teaching college freshmen basic math, my only previous teaching experience was as a volunteer for a citywide math program focusing on underachieving junior college students. Being hired to teach a subject in which I am knowledgeable is exciting and motivating, but also a challenge, as I want my teaching to be interesting and meaningful to my students; I want to keep them engaged; and I want their overall experience in my classroom to be a successful one. I certainly know the course material, but how do I become a really good distance learning math teacher? Thanks in advance for any help you can give me.*

Welcome, welcome, welcome to distance learning—it is a great career, as you have no doubt discovered, the efforts you put in are more than rewarded by what your students gain! As for your question, wow: books—including mine—have been written on the subject, but I'll offer you the most important tenets that lead to successful online learning. There is much more than what I offer here, but these are great starters. (And if you do need more input don't hesitate to drop me an email.

The suggestions: (1) Be enthusiastic—it's catching, and students are more prone to be engaged. (2) Be timely in all correspondence; allow no more than 24 hours for responses to students. They need to know you are interested and care. (3) Be a constant presence: students may be taking an online course, but you are what allows it to breath. (4) Relate all subject material and assignment feedback to "the real world." Students need to know they are not taking a course/studying a subject that is only important for X number of weeks and a final grade, but rather extends into and is of use in the employment scene. (5) Give assignment feedback that is positive and motivating; this spurs on students to improve and to embrace assignments. (6) Use your profession. You teach math, so give examples of its use from your experience; share math puzzles and cartoons; and offer current news that relates the math—all of this makes the subject more interesting and important.

### TEACHING STRATEGIES CONCERNS

#### STRATEGIES TO PREVENT STUDENTS FROM SUBMITTING ALL WORK ON THE LAST DAY OF CLASS

*I had a situation I've never previously experienced, and although the matter has been put to rest I'd like to find out how you*

would have handled it, what you might know about other distance learning instructors coming across similar situations, or any additional thoughts on the subject you have, Errol. Recently, I finished teaching an 11-week online course in 19th Century American History, and the class consisted of three major essays, weekly discussion board postings, five quizzes, and three journals. One student was silent all class, and although I sent him several emails during the class I never heard from him, until the last day of class. He told me he wanted an incomplete, as he learned he was suffering from depression, and that's why he did no work and did not respond to my emails. Although my school has a rather generous policy toward incompletes, I felt his coming in on the last day and with no class activity did not qualify for any incomplete. My manager backed me up on this, and I gave him an F for the course.

You'll be happy to know that the situation you describe is much more common than you might think. Indeed, there are students who believe an online course means no deadlines, and assignments can be turned in at any time. Of course, we know this is not true—and I don't know of any online course where this can occur. But let's get down to preventing this in the future. (And let me add: there are schools that have strict deadlines on when work can be submitted, and what happens when it is not. This eliminates many of the situations you describe—but even with this always make sure the students are aware of the incomplete policy.)

First, make sure you post a class announcement on Day 1—also sent to the class as an email—indicating the Incomplete policy and that no student can expect to pass the class or receive an incomplete if all work/nearly all work is turned in on the last day or in the last week of class (if your policy differs do change the wording). Also, in the announcement I post I mention doing this is just not fair to other students who get in their work on a regular

basis. Finally, let the class know that if a problem presents itself with turning in any assignments to reach out to you—and to be sure to answer any individual emails you send to students. Once the course begins, as you come across students who have not participated write the students but also copy the students' advisors: not only does this give you double backing (that you did all you could do) but the advisors may know some info about the students you don't. The more up front you are about your policy on no shows and incompletes, and the more you reach out to students and their advisors, the fewer problems related to this you'll have at the end of class.

#### STRATEGIES FOR A CONNECTING COURSE SUBJECT TO THE WORLD OF EMPLOYMENT

*Errol, your columns have been a boon for our department, but I've always been curious about one item you've mentioned several times: connecting courses to the world of work. I can think of an easy way to do this: simply mentioning how a course, for example, physics (which I teach), is important in a job setting (which I do). But I know there must be a whole "bunch" of other ways to do this. Would you share, please? Thank you!*

Tying the course into that "real world" is crucial, for it makes the course much more than something merely academic and only good for a grade. And once this is successfully done students react very positively to it. You are doing one of the keys: reminding the students of how a course ties into the job setting. Beyond this, here are a few other suggestions: (1) In a Discussion thread ask students to share how the course or a subject in the course relates to their goals/their work—students enjoy talking about themselves, and this gets them more active and reminds them of the tie-in. (2) When possible, include photos, stories, and video clips of the professional

world where the knowledge of your course becomes crucial—this immediately reminds students that the course extends far beyond XX number of weeks. (3) Creating a PowerPoint or a similar presentation with a focus specifically on the course's relation to the job market allows you to structure the connection exactly as you'd like it—and the colors and slides are fun for students. (Too, if the capability in your classroom exists, create videos with the same focus.) (4) Include quotes from folks in an industry that explain or mention the importance of your course subject in the world of work or the world in general. (5) Search your library for links to the employment scene, and remind students of these: while these may not be specific to your course subject they do remind students of the school's tie-in to the professional scene. Use one or more of these suggestions—they will make your students more interested in your course!

And by the way: thanks so much for the pat on the back—I'm glad my columns are helping your faculty teach online!

### STRATEGIES TO WORK WITH STUDENTS WHO CONTINUALLY MISS ASSIGNMENT DEADLINES

*Errol, all I can say is a bunch of thanks to you from my peers and me! We've been reading Distance Learning for quite some time, and have learned some valuable info from your columns. And I do have one question, a situation that's been bugging me for quite some time. I'm no different in this from any other online educator, I suppose, but I have some students who continually miss deadlines of assignments. It seems that no matter what I do—multiple emails, even phone calls—the deadlines are still missed. Our school has a policy of X percentage points deducted for every week a student's assignment is late, and I just hate to do that to a*

*student, but I have no choice. Do you have any suggestions? Thanks!*

First: thanks so much for the positive feedback! It's important for me to hear such comments, by no means for my ego (although it did put a smile on my face!), but rather because it lets me know my efforts in these columns are doing what I intend: helping others become even better online educators! Now, as to your question, it's one that has been around since the first online course debuted many, many years ago. Many students believe an online course simply has no deadlines because the course is available 24/7. Add to this there is no physical building to access, and the online classroom—and its deadlines—can become somewhat invisible.

From what you write you are doing the two most important items to get students to submit or post on time: numerous emails and phone calls. But in the emails it is crucial you play to the students' initial reason for being in your course: as a component to obtaining a college degree. And always indicate that you understand the student has other things going on in his or her life, but passing your course is certainly a major cog in the student's life—and getting in assignments on time goes a long way in making that happen. Be sure to ask the student if there is something going on in his or her life that might be getting in the way of a smooth stroll through your course: family emergency, illness, deployment, et cetera all can impact the student's best intentions. (This makes correspondence with the student's advisor very handy!) Here is where the phone call is especially important, as students will often tell you about problems in their lives more readily in that call than in a somewhat cold email. By no means can you turn around all your students, but doing what you have been doing, yet also adding what I suggested should result in more timely submissions. I know it certainly has worked for me!

## TEACHING STRATEGIES FOR STUDENTS NEW TO ONLINE LEARNING

*I must admit that when first coming to distance learning I was naïve in many ways about the student demographic taking these courses, and one area in which I was way off the mark was believing every student would quickly adapt to and certainly not be intimidated by the online course environment. Boy, was I wrong! Again and again I had to gingerly, carefully, and specifically walk many students through the “hows” of the course layout, as well as such basics as attaching a file and saving an assignment. Fast forward 4 years into this teaching adventure, and I believe there must be shortcuts to cut down on the extensive amount of time and effort I put into my primer for newbies to online education—are there?*

Yours is such a common comment and question that it easily has vaulted into one of the top three of all time! But I was no different than you and many others in this regard when I began teaching distance learning 21 years ago, and along the way I have stumbled across several strategies that have greatly minimized my work in this area, while decreasing student anxiety, and increasing their engagement in class. One of the most important of these is to take the various difficulties with which these nervous students have presented you, and incorporate them into a very warm and inviting “I-know-some-of-you-might-have-technical-problems-with-our-course-but-I’m-here-to-help” welcoming message on Day 1 of class and a sheet that offers tips (and perhaps videos and/or audios) on various technical aspects of the course, such as, how to attach an assignment, where to find assignments, how to save a file, et cetera. Both of these have been extremely successful for me.

Here are some additional tips:

- ask for student “aides” who are willing to help the technologically challenged students (fosters more student engage-

ment and camaraderie, strengthens the professor-student bond);

- throughout the course, occasionally remind students you are available for technical assistance, post a resource sheet in class with contact info students might need (especially the information technology department);
- offer info and websites to help with time management and organization;
- always remind students that everyone has a first day or week, and thus everybody begins by learning how to do something, not being born knowing how to do something; and
- every now-and-then send an email to those students who initially displayed this lack of technical prowess, mentioning you just wanted to see if all was going okay.

The bottom line of all these suggestions: a class that, overall, is more comfortable taking online classes, and thus have a more positive and successful experience with it.

## TEACHING STRATEGIES TO NO-SHOW STUDENTS INVOLVED

*This is a problem that I know plagues every online educator, and I keep hoping to read of some magic approach or the discovery of a previously unknown teaching strategy, but nothing is happening as I write you. My problem: no matter the efforts I put in I continue to have some students who remain on my roster as being active members in my classes, but they have not showed their involvement in any component of the course. This means they don't turn in assignments, they don't participate in discussions, they don't respond to my emails. Do you have any suggestions? Thank you.*

You are right, of course: the problem you describe is systemic, and has been a challenge since distance learning was first birthed, pre-computer in the 18th century and post-computer from the 1960s. And

while this ongoing hiccup in online learning shows no sign of going away soon, advances have been made that minimize the number of no-shows. As you do not mention what approaches you have tried what I offer may have already been explored by you, but here are pedagogies that have proven most successful: (1) Call the person; so often a call can create that personal connection that a no-show needs. Also, you may learn of a serious problem that has occupied the person so much the course has been on a secondary level of importance, and thus you may find a way to help that person around the problem so he or she can continue in the course. (2) Learn what you can about the background of a no-show: there might be info in the course, but also ask your supervisor and the no-show's advisor; when you get this information contact the no-show, using the info to better explain the course's importance and to better connect with the student. (3) Contact the student's advisor, and ask that person to contact the no-show; also, the advisor might have some info you don't that might prove helpful in getting the person to be an active part of the course. (4) If you learn of something that is not private about the no-show (for example, current employment, hobby interests, etc.) create a discussion thread that somehow connects to one part of this info, then send an email to the email letting him / her know—and how you would appreciate it if the person would lead it off. Nothing is foolproof, of course, but each of these has resulted in getting no-shows alive in courses!

### TEACHING STRATEGIES FOR GETTING STUDENTS TO UNDERSTAND THE PROCESS OF LEARNING

*I have a curious, straight-to-the-point question: how can I better get my students to understand the process of learning, that is, what approaches they can take to better*

*embrace the material in class for the long term where it will help them far beyond our course, rather than students simply learning lessons in a course to receive a good grade, case closed. I am becoming more and more frustrated with my methods of teaching, and I believe there are major changes I need make to better help students understand and carry out the process of learning. Yes, I've read books and articles online on the subject, but from what I've read of your columns, and, quite frankly, what others have told me about you, I figured you might have a few tips to make this work.*

Wow—that question is a huge one, to be sure, but it is not isolated, by any means. We made the shift from teacher-centered learning (where students watched videos and listened to what a professor lectured) to student-centered learning, where the student works on his or her own to solve problems, formulate questions, brainstorm, et cetera. Still, the question is there: how do we get students to better employ methods to do all this student-centered learning so what they do learn is an active part of their brain, and is there to be used throughout their lives? While there have been many strategies offered, there are a few that keep coming up as sure-fire successes in helping students to better understand the process of learning.

Try these: (1) Have students think about learning material or a subject in a new way, i.e., this can go from the opposite of what is being taught (thus giving their brains active involvement in deciding why what they are learning is correct) to putting into play—doing—what is being taught. (2) Use “reality-based education”: have students take what they are learning and apply it to the real world of employment, specifically where they now work or where they'd like to be employed. This takes the learning into an active, noncontrolled (read: classroom) environment—and thus extends its life beyond the course. (3) Have students take their life experiences and relate them to the course mate-

rial: how can this information help you on a personal level? What personal challenges can get in the way of this information staying with you? What don't you like about what you are learning? The more they talk about it the stronger becomes the adhesive that holds the material to the brain for the long run. (4) Go beyond the course materials in the learning process: time management, organizational tips, etc. can be a huge help in getting students to create a healthy process of learning.

### TEACHING STRATEGIES FOR EXTENDING A COURSE SUBJECT BEYOND THE DISTANCE LEARNING CLASSROOM

*Well, I've read your columns, and they've proved useful, Errol, but I never expected to write you for assistance! My online teaching experience equates to 11 years, all with the same school, on a part-time basis, in the discipline of history. I teach at a rather traditional school in that little of the syllabus discusses the importance of my subject beyond the years and genre of history I teach, early 19th century American, and we were never encouraged to go beyond these parameters. Because it was the school's approach I always went along with this, and, quite frankly, I need the job. But a new president has come on board, and one of her approaches is to encourage us to (in her words) "extend your course subject beyond the classroom." This is exhilarating, and I have some ideas on how to do this, but could your experience help me out?*

Let me start out with a simple statement: I'm happy to help you! It's great when any school—online for face-to-face—has a specific dictum of showing students the importance and relevance of a course subject beyond the class. As for American history—specifically, 19th century—it can easily be related to its impact on society, culture, politics, and economics (showing specific examples), and introducing the various connections to these sub-

jects that has lead into the 21st century. Also, bring in the arts (dance, literature, movies, theater, music, songs, etc.), fads, and criminal justice: all have been impacted by history or had an impact on history, and all have found their way into shaping today's arts, fads, and criminal justice. Finally, ask your students for input—what in 19th century America stands out for them and/or have them pick one "item" they can trace to either an important result in America or the world. (And by the way: I peeked at the internet, and it offers a nice variety of activities, puzzles, strategies, and games related to teaching 19th century American history!)

### TEACHING STRATEGIES FOR INTERACTING WITH STUDENTS WHO PLAGIARIZE

*Errol, I need your help with an area that is especially common to we who teach online: plagiarizing. Our school has very clear-cut guidelines on what should be done if a student is caught plagiarizing by a faculty member, but I've also found that most of my students who have plagiarized have done so inadvertently because they simply did not know the correct way to cite a source or—in some instances—were taught that it was a form of flattery to include other folks' work straight on. If I follow my school's guidelines for each of my students who has plagiarized it could really hurt the "innocent" ones—any suggestions?*

You raise a problem that is probably the biggest problem online educators face simply because the internet is so easy for students to use, and there is so much information on the web. And, of course, you are right about the punishment: it can range from automatic failure of a course or expulsion from school to a warning by an academic integrity-type department of the school. I've been teaching online for nearly 23 years, and my columns bring in emails from online educators in all 50 states and

several foreign countries—and in all of this I have never come across any school that is eager to fail or expel a student. What is the best approach is to remind ourselves why we teach: to improve the knowledge of our students in this or that subject—and related areas (such as study skills)—to help them effect positive change in their lives beyond school. One of these areas is how to avoid plagiarizing.

What I do—and what I recommend you do (if your supervisor signs off on it—always ask first)—is to let the student know you are aware of what he/she did, ask the student why it was done, and if you are satisfied that it was unintentional allow the student to resubmit the assignment. (Of course, cases will come up where the plagiarizing is obvious, and thus more forceful steps must be taken.) One word of advice: for any course always have, on Day 1, info about plagiarizing, and how to avoid it.

## STRATEGIES FOR WORKING WITH REPEATING STUDENTS

*Thanks, Errol, for the great teaching tips over the years! My supervisor receives Distance Learning, and he always shares your columns with his faculty. We have learned much, and I know I've become a better online educator from many of your suggestions. And I hope to continue that with a challenge I've encountered on a fairly regular basis, but can't find much info on how to deal with the problem: working with students in my course who are repeating the course. I've done what I think are the best approaches and what my supervisor suggested: contacting them, and doing so on a regular basis, making certain my emails are all positive and indicating I'm available to help them. But there must be something I'm missing—can you help me?*

Wow—your beginning of this request almost had me blushing! I so appreciate

your kind words, and all I can say is that I hope my many years' experience of teaching online can help others become better online educators. Comments like yours are the motivation I need to keep it going! As for your question, teaching repeating students is a challenge, to be sure, and I can sum up my answer to you in one word: OUTREACH! This is in caps for a good reason: these students need extra care and contact, and it takes much effort and time from the online educator. (Remember, you can't simply call the student into your physical office for a chat!) The initial reaction of most distance learning instructors to seeing they have repeating students on their roster is a negative one because they know there is a good possibility these students will not be active in class or will turn in subpar assignments.

What to do? Follow these steps (teaching these repeating students—I call them “R” students—is a specialty of mine), and I can assure you a larger portion of your repeating students (I quickly add: not all) will become more active in class, submit assignments (and in a more timely manner), and pass your class: (1) Outreach, as you indicated, but using a combination of individual emails and phone calls, with that positive approach you also mentioned. The phone call is extremely helpful, for it becomes an extremely personal interaction with the student. And you might also learn of a problem the student is having that will better help you understand and work with him or her. (2) When a repeating student does turn in an assignment or post to discussion be sure you not only give positive feedback but use something the student wrote or said as a positive example to the class; this helps boost the repeating student's confidence. (3) Stay in touch with these students' advisors: they might be able to give you insight to the students that will help and/or can be another party to help motivate the students.

## TEACHING STRATEGIES FOR WORKING WITH STUDENTS IMPACTED BY NATURAL DISASTERS

*I'm writing this to you at about 2 in the morning, after one more very frustrating email from a student in Mexico who was impacted by an earthquake there, and wrote to tell me she cannot get in her assignments on time. But she is not the only one like this: Hurricane Harvey and Hurricane Irma brought similar emails—and two phone calls—from students, and I also had two students affected by the fire in Los Angeles! This is an unprecedented number of natural disasters in such a short time, but it has played havoc on folks who teach online. My question: what can I say to these students aside from something like "Hang in there," "I understand," and "Don't worry—I'll work with you!" These seem so trite. Do have any experience with such students that could result in some info for me and others like me? Thanks, I really appreciate it!*

Your question came very close to missing the submissions deadline, but I'm glad it came! You're right: online courses have been impacted like perhaps never before over such a short period due to the hurricanes, earthquakes, and fires. (And, yes: I have had many interactions with students whose lives have been turned upside down by such events.) This has put many, many online educators into territory they've previously not experienced: working with/interacting with students impacted by these natural disasters. You are right: the expressions you mention are worthless—they give the indication of someone who just doesn't know what to say—or do. There is little we can do to right the mess these uglies of nature can do to our students, but we can give the impression of teachers who truly care.

First, when disasters like this occur almost always schools immediately come out with missives indicating penalties for late submissions are waived, incompletes

have already been approved (for those who have difficulty with their courses due to unexpected interruptions), and students can submit all assignments throughout the course. If not, and you have the authority to do this—do it! Also, when reaching out to these students let them know you will help in whatever way you can to make it easier for them to complete the course, but also stress they should try, as much as possible, to stay active. Additionally, email each of these students, and next call the affected students—whether or not they respond to your email—so they know you really are there for them. For any student whose life has been disrupted by a natural disaster it is a given he or she must know the course faculty member is a compassionate and "I've-got-your-back" human, rather than a mere mélange of cold bits and bytes.

## MISCELLANEOUS

### KNOWING THAT A COURSE NEEDS TO BE WRITTEN—HOW TO HANDLE IT

*Our courses are given to us, and we have to work within the set-up of the course (I teach math). I suppose this is true of all online educators, but I'm not sure, as I've only taught online at my current school. Anyway, my problem is one that frustrates me quite a bit: the course could be much, much better—the students often get lost in it or confused by the language of the assignments, and I find myself constantly having to explain assignments to students or remind them where to find this or that component of the course. Making the decision to do something about it is new for me, and I really don't know how to go about it (nothing has ever been mentioned about changing this course at our school). What should I do?*

Remember that the final writing and publishing of a college online course can have one, two, or more authors, plus an

editor or two along the way. This translates into one or more folks' ideas of how a course should be presented in all its parts—assignments, weekly topics, readings, et cetera. And the text you and your students read in every corner of the course also emanates from this course author/those course authors. The end result is a course that simply may not appear “perfect” for every faculty member teaching it. I've written or rewritten many online courses, so I know the process well—and the complaints and grumblings that can come from faculty teaching the new or improved course.

When there are minor items that don't sit well with you—a typo here, stilted language there, perhaps an assignment or two with confusing language—that is not enough to warrant a full course revision. Rather, send your suggestions—never a complaint!—first to your faculty supervisor, always talking (first) about the positives of the course, then add where some minor corrections need be made to result in an even smoother course. But in the case you describe—it appears the entire math course needs a major overhaul—take the time to list each item in the course that you feel could be improved, why it is a problem for the students and/or you, and that you would be happy to help out in any revision of the course. And if you have comments from students—in emails or other postings in the class—where students have complained about some area of the course, and you feel the complaint is justified, include those comments, too. You must be as thorough as possible, because what you offer are the questions someone in your school will ask you. (Also: if possible, find out if other instructors teaching the course are having the same problems; include this—but not by name, unless you have permission.) Submit this Need for a Course Revision Worksheet to your faculty supervisor, as you always want to go through the chain of command; he or she will give you directions on what next to do.

## BEING SELECTED TO PRESENT AT FACULTYWIDE WEBINARS

*First, Errol, a big thanks for the columns you have offered; many have proved helpful in allowing me to transition from a newbie online educator a few years ago to someone who is pretty comfortable in doing it. And now that I relaxed in the classroom I'd like to offer some of my experiences and teaching strategies and suggestions to other faculty through the various online faculty webinars the school's training division offers throughout the year. My problem is that I've noticed the folks selected all have been teaching here longer than I, and I want to know if you have any suggestions to further my cause before I fill out a formal proposal.*

Well, thank you for letting me know my columns have proved helpful to you—and I hope this one does as well! Faculty, as you know, are better when they receive input, suggestions, and information from colleagues, and thus many welcome the facultywide presentations you mentioned. I have given several dozen of these, and can share several items I have done over the years that have helped me—and other colleagues—get tapped to give a presentation. Of most importance is to be sure to respond directly and exactly to the information requested in the proposal form. Many folks have made the mistake of going off on a tangent, and this does not help their case for being selected.

Your email did not mention what professional involvement you have in the subject on which you want to present, but if you do have any professional expertise be sure to include it in your proposal. Additionally, if you have any published writing on the subject mention it: the more you appear as an expert—or at least quite knowledgeable—in your subject the better. Finally, do find a way (if not asked) to include in your proposal why your presentation would prove helpful for your school, including the specifics of its importance to faculty and students. You may not

get selected the first time you apply, but what comes out of this nonselection (never look upon it as a rejection!) is your name is now known to the personnel in the training division. Meanwhile, be sure you look to better your strengths in your field(s) through more professional involvement, publication, and developing new class strategies for teaching—eventually, you will receive a positive response!

## TRANSITIONING INTO A COURSE DESIGN

*Thanks so much for your columns! There have been several over the years that have helped me, even though I've been teaching online for 10 years, and thought I "knew it all." Now something has come up I've never encountered, and I thought you might have some insight. We were recently told that in 6 months our courses would have a total redesign, and it was indicated there would be some sort of instructor guide to help us navigate the new course layout. Certainly, this would seem important, but is there anything I can do to remain proactive on this?*

Thanks for the positive feedback! It's always nice to hear that my columns have proved helpful, for that is my only goal with each one. As to your conundrum, it is quite common for schools to redesign and rewrite courses: new technology may come along, new pedagogical approaches to a course may result in a rewrite, and a better course layout to help in making the subject more relevant may have a new course look.

There are a few items you can do: (1) Attend any all-faculty meetings, even if not required. There is a good chance the course redesign may be brought up, by the presenter and / or by one of the attendees. Any new info on this will prove helpful to you. (2) Ask your supervisor for additional info he or she might have, and volunteer to a part of any pilot group that might be selected for an early tryout of the course

redesign; (3) When the new course guide hits you go through it carefully, making notes on anything you don't understand or may not seem to work smoothly in the course. This is New Course 1.0—and it's quite possible "patches" might be needed! (4) As you begin to teach in the new course layout take notes on how your students react to a new item in the course versus an old item in the previous course layout—report these (if you find a problem,) to your supervisor or any link that might be set up for such reporting. Doing these will show you to an online faculty member who really cares and is really involved—two qualities any school always appreciates!

## BEST TIPS FOR USING A SCHOOL'S ONLINE LIBRARY

*I think one of the most underused resources at our school is the online library. Because it exists in my class as simply a link it is fully dependent on me to encourage students to use it and for students to find it on their own. Yet this resource can be helpful for students in so many ways: research, of course, including minilessons on how to correctly cite sources and learn what makes a source credible, but also extensive databases and links in such areas as study skills, English, math (and many other courses), and employment. Can you offer some tips on how to have students use the library on a more regular basis? Thanks!*

I've often remarked that librarians are my heroes, and I don't say this glibly: through my undergrad and graduate studies the library, and thus the librarians, made my efforts in achieving degrees much easier. But it was only after I discovered how great they could be that I embraced them. What needs to be kept in mind is many students take a minimalist approach to their online studies, that is, what is not required or what does not result in a grade simply is not necessary—

and I know of no school where a student receives grade points for visiting the library. Yet it is crucial for a student's learning, and once a student discovers its value he or she has the same reaction I did: "Wow—this is great!"

Do this: (1) Create a guide to the library that can be posted in class, and if your school allows it make a video guide—students will quickly gravitate to this; (2) If your online librarian agrees, have him or her visit your class through an online chat session where the librarian can give the students a virtual tour; (3) Take some of the library's links—such as time management, writing, job search, plagiarism, citations, et cetera—and make a little chart for the students to remind them on these links' value in and outside the course; (4) Encourage the library's use in assignment feedback, course announcements and emails, and in discussion posts. Also, if the library has announcements of workshops and tours be sure to post these; (5) If you have live chat sessions with your students mention the library in each, and use one to feature the library. Doing some or all of these will drive home the importance of your school's library, and have students begin to recognize it as a necessary and important tool for their learning.

#### GIVING THE RIGHT BALANCE OF COMMENTS IN AN ONLINE WEBINAR

*Errol, like most online faculty (I presume), my school holds occasional webinars to offer information on the school or to chat about best practices in teaching. The faculty members are invited to share their thoughts in the chat box, and because the names of the attendees are listed it quickly becomes apparent who is not contributing, who is contributing a bit, and who is really involved. I fall into the last category, and*

*it's because of three reasons: I seem to have much I want to say on the various topics, I enjoy "talking" with my colleagues, and I know it looks good to my supervisor (who is always in attendance) to see my name so often. But my question is when is often too often? At times I look at the chat box, and it seems that my name appears again and again—with no other faculty member's posts between my posts. Is there such a thing as posting too often?*

I can easily identify with your conundrum, as I, too, easily fall into that last category you mention! It is quite easy to take over these conversations, and the information offered will be nearly always solid contributions, not "doughnut conversation" to simply take up space and give the impression one is interested—when the person really is not. There is a balance to be maintained—sometimes, it is simply better to hold off so a look at the chat box will not give the impression you are a "chat bully"! I divide my posts into three types: (1) *Posts that offer substantive information.* These are my longest posts, and when posted they receive the most response because they address the topic being discussed, usually offer something insightful, and don't give the impression I am trying to turn the conversation around to my philosophy of teaching. (2) *Posts that support others.* It's important to acknowledge posts from peers that give nice info, suggestions, et cetera. Not only is this the right thing to do but it also shows others you are a team player. (3) *Posts that offer a bit of humor now and then.* I do this about a half dozen times during one of these webinars because they humanize me and add a bit of levity to what is usually a serious conversation, and this break is appreciated. But like I said at the beginning, the key is balance, and sometimes it takes one's attending a few of these presentations to find the right balance.