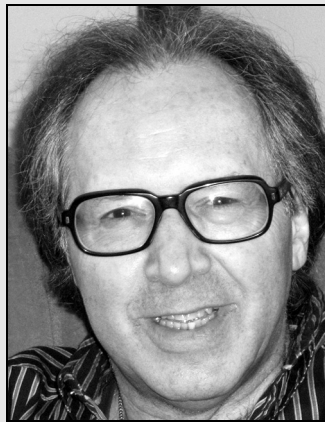


When Online Faculty Supervisors and Faculty Get Broken—And the Fixes!

Errol Craig Sull and Kathy Embry

Ah, to be viewed as really effective as an online supervisor of faculty or an online faculty member—how wonderful is that! And what exactly does “good” mean? We can be counted on

to be dependable, on top of our supervising or teaching game, knowledgeable in the school areas we are supposed to know, to not make mistakes that can have minor or serious repercussions. But online faculty



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supervisors and online faculty are human; they make mistakes, have oversights, say or write the wrong or muddy items, get stressed out or depressed. Yet all is never lost: to correct any miscue, mistake, or morale issues almost always can be done, so you can be right again in the “land of distance learning.” This is your guide to help when you stumble in your online supervisory or teaching efforts!

To give that balanced view that is so important, I’ve again asked my supervisor, Dr. Kathy Embry, to coauthor this column. She offers that view I could never give: possible errors/mistakes an online faculty supervisor could encounter, and how to correct them. I, of course, will do the same from the online faculty member’s perspective. Many of you who have read my columns know the wide variety of problems online faculty have encountered and sought my input on how to correct them. My experience, as well as input from other online faculty, allowed me to answer each. What I was not able to do, however, was answer the several questions online faculty supervisors asked me about the same subject. Now, what Kathy and I deem as the five most important on each side are presented—we certainly hope these assist!

[Note: You will, no doubt, list one or more problems areas Kathy and I have not covered; it would be impossible to list them all! What I have included are the ones I have received the largest number of times; what Kathy has included are those she feels are most egregious. Please don’t hesitate to send yours to me—errolcraig-sull@distancelearning.com—so we can include them in a follow-up column.]

Our “oops” ... and how to “un-oops” them ...

SUPERVISOR

- **Giving unclear or incorrect directions or guidance.** Improperly communicating instructions to faculty—whether by

phone or email or via a synchronous or recorded meeting or training—can result (at a minimum) in the wrong action being taken by the faculty member. The impact will vary dependent on the message itself and whether it is related to policy or procedure, dates or deadlines, or classroom guidance.

How you can best handle such a problem.

If the issue impacts the entire faculty group, correcting it can be as simple as 1-2-3: the supervisor (via email) must (1) apologize for the oversight, (2) admit to the error, and (3) provide the correct information or instructions. A fourth step may also be necessary, depending upon the impact of the issue—follow-up to ensure faculty have clarity on the correct guidance. If incorrect information was provided to one instructor, the supervisor should resolve via a phone call or synchronous chat. Faculty will respect a supervisor who is honest, able to admit their error, and can provide resolution in a timely manner.

- **“Scolding” a faculty member.** Taking this approach for an infraction—something an instructor did wrong or incorrectly (or not at all), rather than taking a “how can we fix this?” approach can result in feelings of insecurity and possibly even resentment on the part of the faculty member. An insecure, scared, or resentful faculty member is one who may lose their trust and faith in the supervisor, and thus not give their all to the student, classroom, and institution.

How you can best handle such a problem.

At a minimum, the supervisor must smooth the waters by asking the instructor his viewpoint to try and understand how the infraction occurred. This understanding will help guide the supervisor to point out what was done correctly and

then to fill gaps in understanding. Additionally, giving words of encouragement and motivation for improvement will ease the instructor's insecurities and assuage any feelings of "being in trouble." Above all else, the supervisor must not manage by fear—the goal is not subservient faculty members, rather to have faculty members who will want to ask questions, understand appropriate procedures, and seek guidance from their supervisor.

- **Not offering enough oversight to faculty.** The impact of providing too little oversight could result in underperformance or misunderstood expectations on the part of the faculty member. A supervisor who does not offer meaningful and regular feedback could unknowingly blindside instructors who believed their performance was exceeding expectations or (at a minimum) meeting expectations, thus placing the faculty member in an unfair and uncomfortable position.

How you can best handle such a problem. Communication and clarity are key to ensuring expectations are met and/or understood by the instructor. How these expectations are conveyed can vary based on the comfort level of the supervisor and the faculty member, although expectations should always be presented in writing at some point. If the discussion occurs via phone, a follow-up email to recap the conversation is imperative. Additionally, if performance expectations can be outlined via a job aid or instructional sheet, both the instructor and the supervisor will have guidelines on which to fall back.

Summary from the supervisor. The suggestions offered rely on effective communication to "right the wrong,"

so to speak. Supervisors should always opt for clarity, positivity, and motivational messaging when communicating with faculty. Neither supervisors or faculty are immune to mistakes; however, faculty can be put at ease when supervisors show they are human, as well as understanding and having empathy for their instructors.

FACULTY MEMBER

- **Accidentally releasing FERPA-sensitive information.** FERPA—a federal law—is the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, and, in a nutshell, protects certain rights of the student. The most egregious educational violations of FERPA are for an educator to send items such as grades, student disabilities, and course progress to anyone other than the student (or an advisor, if authorized). Yet mistakes do happen—and in the online classroom, where all student records and information are maintained online, the possibility of violating FERPA is increased. It is important to be fully aware of what FERPA covers at your school; be sure to ask your supervisor for specifics on this.

How you can best handle such a problem. There is one umbrella "must do" that most of these overriding problems have in common, and a FERPA "uh-oh" is certainly one of them: immediately let your supervisor know. [NOTE: In the overwhelming number of instances when a FERPA indiscretion has occurred, the faculty member first learns of it through a student, an advisor, or a faculty supervisor. When your faculty supervisor is not the first to be aware of this, then he or she must be notified—you want to acknowledge the

error, not pretend it didn't happen or—worse—it's no big deal!]

As to whether the aggrieved student should be contacted, the answer is more complex than a simple “yes” or “no.” I asked this question to 10 of my regular readers, and they responded with seven different approaches, all mandated by their schools. This translates into making sure you know your school's protocol if you accidentally violate a student's FERPA privacy—we are speaking of federal law here, and thus every school will have strict guidelines covering FERPA to protect themselves and guide their faculty.

- **Writing something—in Discussion or other Assignment—that a student takes as racist, biased, et cetera.** The online environment has everything online, and this includes instructor's posts in Discussion, on written assignments, and other assessments; in emails and other in-print means of corresponding with a student; through course Announcements; and through any videos or posted audios the instructor has created. Thus, unlike hearing something live and having it quickly disappear into nothingness, the types of communication I have described are “forever” in an online course. If we happen to accidentally post a disparaging word, phrase, sentence, personal thought, or visual, the students can visit it ... again and again. And remember this, too: it's always possible we write something we believe is innocuous, but one or more students may take it the wrong way. When an instructor does this, the repercussions can be extremely serious, for a student can easily report this to an official at the school but also local police and attorneys.

How you can best handle such a problem.
The first way to minimize the effect

of such a problem is by taking precautions to be sure it doesn't happen! This means take the time to read—and reread—what you wrote before posting it for students to see (or hear if an audio file). Too often, faculty can be in a rush to “just get it done,” and this means not taking the time to proofread. (And two tips: [a] the best way is read what you wrote is aloud—you can hear disturbing words you might not have picked up with a silent read. [b] do not rely on spellcheck—there are many instances when faculty have done this, and because spellcheck knows nothing about the context of a word, the software inserted a word that simply insults.)

But after the fact—the offending material has already been posted to students, and one or more students called your attention to it—calls for immediate damage control. First, apologize to the students; let them know with the thousands of words you write every day, you take care to be sure none are offensive; what they read was simply a typing error. (Or, the case of you thinking something was okay, but one or more students gave it a different meaning, mention how they perceived it was not what you had in mind, and explain what you did mean to convey.) Also, add that when students look at all that you have posted in class, they will find no other examples of insensitive postings, simply because you are sensitive to all students. Finally, always let your supervisor know what happened and how you handled it: it's much better that person hears it first from you than rather a dean, advisor, provost, or legal department!

- **Sending an email with an angry tone—or worse—to an online faculty supervisor and/or a student.** Emotion can be a

double-edged sword: wonderful, elated, positive emotion in an online classroom can translate into enthusiasm, engagement, and motivation for students. But the other side can cause real trouble for the online faculty member—a dashed-off email or other communication to a student or faculty supervisor that simply shouts “I am angry!” can easily be the end of the teaching career at your school.

How you can best handle such a problem.

As previously mentioned, first prevent such a problem from happening—take some time before you send off that angry tome, and always think of the consequences if you do. And if it’s too late—some faculty have even hit “Submit” when they did not mean to do so, but rather were proofreading their writing!—immediately apologize, reminding students or your supervisor that’s not who you are, and previous interactions can attest to that. (And if a student has mentioned your not-so-nice posting to his or her advisor, be sure you also write to the advisor.)

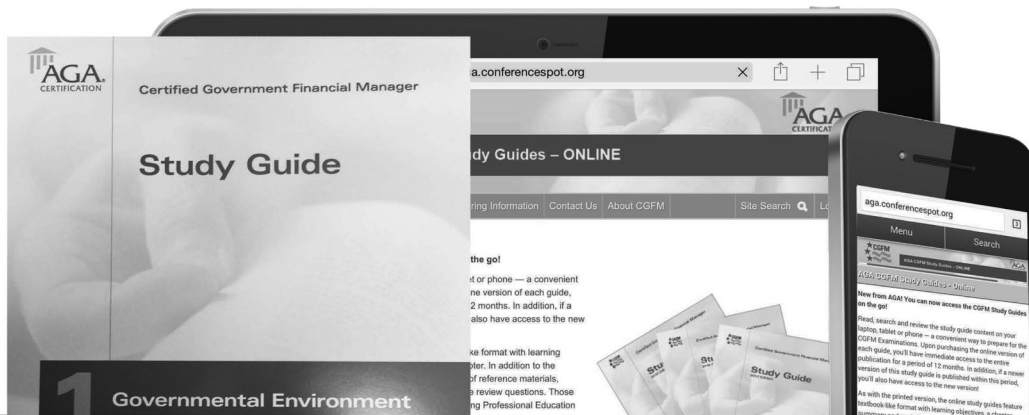
One other item. I’d like to say that the suggestions I offer here are not la-de-da, that is, they will not take care of any angry correspondence sent out. This is simply not the case. In every school, there are lines that cannot be crossed, and if they are, you could quickly find yourself looking for another teaching job. So ... do what I suggested: take some time ... breathe in, breathe out ... reread what you write before sending it!

Summary from the faculty member. As pointed out, mistakes happen, but there must be an immediacy in correcting them, as well as communicating the oversights and corrections taken or asking for guidance on how to proceed. Of course, nearly all major faculty errors in a class can be prevented through patience, proofreading, and persistence: always be a faculty member who looks beyond the now.

Remember: Potholes can prevent an otherwise enjoyable view of country scenery; immediately filling them will keep the disruptions to a minimum.

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