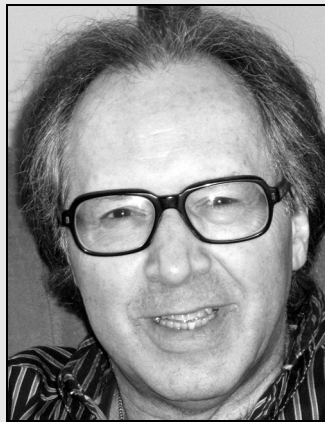


The Beginning Connection in an Online Course Crucial!

Errol Craig Sull

All online courses have a beginning—an obvious statement, right? Yet what the distance learning educator does in the first few days in a course can go a long way in setting the tone for the entire course, and getting students initially excited, motivated, and enthusiastic about being in your course.



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When this happens assignments have more meaning and are not only turned in but turned in on time; discussion threads begin with much participation; and students understand you really want them in your course. This contact and motivation by you has to continue throughout the course, certainly, but it is in your course's early days where you have the opportunity to connect or disconnect with students.

The suggestions below will result in a strong connect ...

A WELCOMING ANNOUNCEMENT AND EMAIL MUST BE SPECIFIC ... BUT ALSO WARM, INVITING, AND MOTIVATING

That first announcement and class email from you to the students is crucial, for they set the tone for students as to the why, what, when, and why of you. Too black-and-white, too cold and it can immediately turn off students; but too warm and fuzzy students can get the idea the course will be a cakewalk, that they don't have to take it seriously. You need a balance. Begin with a joyful and enthusiastic welcome, but then lead into some specifics of the course you

want to be sure students know. And always end on an upbeat, caring, and enthusiastic tone. Remember, this is an online course: anything you write in the course can be seen by students throughout the course, so this first class email and announcement must be crafted very carefully.

IMMEDIATELY CONNECT THE COURSE TO THE “REAL WORLD” OF EMPLOYMENT

Many students come into a course looking at the X number of weeks they’ll be there and wanting a good grade at the end. But when students understand the course’s importance to their major, professional goal, and / or current employment this often results in students having a different mindset for the course: it will be valuable far beyond “just a course.” A general mention of this in the welcoming email and announcement is certainly good, but more effective is an individual email to each student and an announcement in class with its only focus on the connection between the course and the professional world. This can serve as a great early motivator, and one of which students should be reminded periodically throughout the course.

BE SURE TO LET STUDENTS KNOW YOU WELCOME THEIR CONTACTS—AND YOU WILL BE CONTACTING THEM

In the online environment students see their computers, their tablets, their laptops, and/or their smartphones as cold pieces of equipment through which they take your course, but you are the umbilical cord, bringing guidance, motivation, and connection to their computers. Be sure they know how much you not only welcome but look forward to their emails, calls, et cetera, and let them know you will be reaching out to them. You want students to

feel their course delivery products are alive—and you are the one making it come alive. Knowing this early on in a course can go a long way in making students feel more comfortable in the online environment—and in your course.

COOL TIP #1: OFFER STUDENTS A “RATE YOURSELF” AT THE BEGINNING

This is a great way for you to immediately have an idea of how students feel about their strengths and weaknesses with your course content, as well as an early way to establish contact with a student. Make as chart of all the course components you want students to learn, then have columns such as “Very Strong,” “Feel Comfortable,” “Okay,” “Somewhat Weak,” and “Definitely Need Improvement.” Have a section on the bottom that says something like, “Write additional comments about any concerns, joys, or questions you have about our course!” Depending on your school, there are several ways to deliver this: as a non-graded assignment, a discussion thread, or as an email to students (having them check off the appropriate boxes, then returning it to you). It’s human nature: people like checking boxes, and the result is you will receive a nice number of student replies.

COOL TIP #2: USE PAST STUDENTS’ POSITIVE COMMENTS AS MOTIVATORS

There are two approaches to this little tip, but both result in what we look for when buying a product online: peer reviews! You will no doubt have some nice comments about your course at the end; save these, then use them as motivators at the beginning of your next course. (If you don’t have permission to use the students’ names leave them out.) Also: toward the end of each course you can ask students to write short motivational notes for students

coming into your next class (ask if their names can be used – and be sure your school is okay with this.) Just like we feel more comfortable purchasing a product that has rave reviews students will feel more comfortable being involved in your course with reviews from students already finished with your course.

GET INTO THE HABIT OF ADDRESSING STUDENTS BY NAME

Far too many faculty forget this small but so-important teaching strategy. Remember what was said above about the cold environment of that electronic course delivery system; well, calling each student by name in an individual correspondence goes a long way in humanizing the course. It gives students the impression you care, that you don't regard the student as merely an I.D. number. And don't forget: make sure you have them address you by name (not merely "professor" or "instructor")—this helps establish a bond between you and the students. (As for me, I've always had students call me by my first name: I don't feel titles earn me more respect, only the way I interact with my students. That's a personal decision on my part, of course!)

GIVE A PERSONAL STORY OR TWO ABOUT YOURSELF THAT IS MOTIVATING

Personal stories are great, and should be used throughout the course. They humanize you, of course; you don't want students regarding you as some untouchable god on a mountain who looks down at the little people called "students"! Rather, you are a human, they are human—giving a bit about your background helps establish that. But take it one step further: start off with a story where you did not do such a great job or get a good grade in a course

that relates to your course subject; let the students know how you overcame that initial disappointing effort, and how you ended where you are now. This is great motivational stuff, and helps set the tone that anyone can have a bad grade or a poor start—and that anyone can overcome it.

DO NOT IGNORE THE WORLD SURROUNDING THE STUDENTS

We live in unprecedented, crazy, stabbing times: first COVID-19, then George Floyd (and similar incidents); each person has been affected by one or more of these events. Letting the students know you are aware of this, that you hope all are well, and that you are available for chats or other correspondence to speak about their feelings is important. An online course can be a safe place, but it also should not pretend the outside world does not exist. (And depending on what you can/cannot do in your class you might want to create an assignment around a negative part of society to which you know students will react.)

DON'T HESITATE TO USE SOME QUIRKY ITEMS TO SHOW STUDENTS THE COURSE CAN BE FUN

It makes no difference the course: English, chemistry, economics, math, et cetera—students know from reading your syllabus there is work ahead with readings to be done, assignments due, and perhaps discussions in which to participate. Starting off a course with something fun, such as creating a crossword puzzle (that perhaps introduces the course or a first assignment), penning a rap song (introducing students to the course), giving them a cartoon or puzzle (making sure each relates to your course): any of these state your course is work and fun, a nice combo to be greeted by when first starting an online course.

MAKE IT A POINT TO CONTACT EACH STUDENT INDIVIDUALLY PRIOR TO THE COURSE'S BEGINNING

Students receiving an individual welcome email from their instructor is a pretty nice thing. It tells the students you are genuinely interested in them, that you look forward to working with them in the class. This is also a great opportunity to tell a bit about yourself, asking students to share some of their background, and to attach that rating sheet I mentioned above. Certainly, you are not the course, but you are the guide, the mentor, the facilitator, the conductor, the shepherd: what you say

and do early on in a course can go a long way in getting students off on the right foot with engagement and excitement about the course. And here's a little extra: if your school allows it and you have the time—call your students! Hearing your voice, your tone of enthusiasm can go a long way in establishing an early and strong student-instructor bond.

REMEMBER! Springtime offers so much hope for a garden's birth, yet it must be fertilized, watered, hoed, and tilled to ensure the months ahead bring vibrant blossoms, stunning colors, and verdant grass.