

Ask Errol!

Errol Craig Sull

We are in the midst of 2020, and it has been a strange year for distance learning due to COVID-19. Many folks have suddenly become online educators when they previously had no thought of that as a “profession”; and we who have been teaching online for some time may have found our expertise tapped into by others wanting assistance in teaching online. Yet beyond these new wrinkles the old ones remain—challenges and hurdles in the distance learning world that has remained a solid

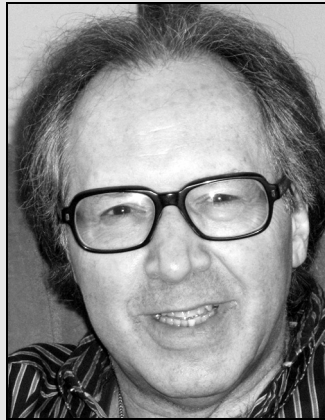
one. Many online educators keep coming to me, and I will continue to give you my best ideas, suggestions, and information to help online teaching efforts be smooth, productive, and enjoyable. (Please send your queries—erroldistancelearning@gmail.com—by September 15th for our next issue.)

I bring you this issue’s queries ...

HOW TO BEST STRUCTURE THE LAST WEEK OF AN ONLINE COURSE

My question might seem like a silly one, Errol, but it is one that has been plaguing me for some time. My subject is criminal justice, and I’ve been teaching it online for about 5 years. When I come to the last week of my course there are certain procedures I am required to do by my school: entering final grades, being sure all student assignments have been graded, and checking the course for any broken links or text information (inserted by the school) I think needs be changed. On my own, I post a class “thanks for being in my class” announcement, that I also send as a class email. But are there other items I should be doing that can make my last week in the course a strong one? Any tips you can give me would be appreciated.

In various forms I have received a question like this over my many years of writing this column, and the short answer to



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your question is a strong— yes! That last week in a course has nearly all students eager to get to the finish line, of course, but the last week also presents a grand opportunity for you to go out with a bang. Here is what I suggest: (1) Send individual emails to each student in class, thanking him or her for being involved, reminding the student of the course's importance in the world of work, and asking students if there are any last minute questions they have. (2) For those students who have done a fairly good job in your class ask them to pen short notes of motivation you can use at the beginning of your next class—this “peer review” can go a long way in initially making students in a beginning course feel more comfortable. (3) Leave your students with something fun—in my classes, I write an end-of-the-course rap song and post a couple of cartoons that underscore an area or two of my subject, English. (4) In your general announcement to the class, with the same sent as a class email, ask for any suggestions on how they feel the course could be improved. (5) This is optional (your school might/might not allow it): post an audio or video that somewhat sums up what you have in your class “goodbye” announcement/email—this personal touch can be a very strong reminder of you/your commitment to your students. These items will make that last week strong; they will have students leave on a high note; and they will show students you are still as enthusiastic about the course as you were during the first week!

WHAT BASICS ARE NEEDED WHEN ASKED TO REVISE A COURSE

Simply stated, Errol, your columns have been great for my department and me. It's not just the information, which is top notch, but our department, bioethics, is new at our school, and while the majority of our online instructors have extensive experience in the

profession several of us, including me, had not previously taught online. So, your columns have become somewhat of a guide for us, and that's been great.

As for my question, the dean of my department asked if I'd be interested in taking on the revision of one of the bioethics courses. This is something I've never done, but I was honored to be asked, and of course I accepted. I was told to do some thinking about what I'd like to do, then to start writing in the fall. As far as the subject goes I have no problem with that, but can you give me some kind of a template to follow in developing this revised course?

Well, thanks so much for the positive feedback on my columns. It's always a joy for me to hear they have helped my online colleagues, and I'm especially pleased that your department has used them to help you improve your approach to distance learning for your students. Don't hesitate to drop me a note if I can be of further assistance.

As for your question, I've done several course revisions, and these have led me to develop the steps I need take to be sure I do a solid job when it comes to the writing: (1) Jot down where in the course you feel improvement is needed; after each item list a detailed “why” (this is not only for you but also a question you would definitely be asked by your dean; (2) Do research on courses like yours—while you know well your subject none of us can know everything about our subject. Others may have new info or new twists on info you know; also, seek out any courses like yours other schools are offering—you may find assignments, strategies, layouts, etc. that would work well within your revision; (3) Think of any past problems or challenges the current course has brought your students, other faculty who teach it, and you—there will undoubtedly be ideas that can help in your revision; (4) Before writing simply jot down a few reminders to make the course lean, to not include an overabundance of text, to make the assignments meaningful

for the students in the course and beyond, and to use—if possible—audio and / or visual to engage and highlight various parts of the course; (5) Give yourself a timeline—you don't want to wait until there is only 1 week left to complete the revision, as this will not give your best work; make it a point to work on the revision nearly every day, in small chunks; (6) After you have completed your first draft of the revised course read it over carefully for your best writing (especially proofreading) and to be sure nothing has been left out; (7) If possible, share your draft with a few of your colleagues, asking for their input—they might be able to offer some suggestions you had not considered or overlooked. I promise: these will help get your revision going on solid footing.

HOW TO STRUCTURE PHONE CALLS TO STUDENTS

Errol, I have been teaching online at our school for 12 years; it is a part-time job for me, as I have a full-time position working as a zoologist at our local zoo. But online has been fun for me, and I enjoy sharing my professional experiences with my students. Our school recently instituted a new policy in an effort to better connect with students: where previously the school would not allow us to call our students it has reversed policy; as long as the admissions department has prior approval from a student we can call that student. The policy goes into effect in a few months, and I'm a bit nervous about it. Can you offer some suggestions on what to cover and what should be left alone? Thanks so much!

I have been calling my students for years, and when you can connect with them it's a great way to create a stronger

instructor-student bond and to further clarify or explain a concept or assignment in the course. Some tips: (1) From your first words be enthusiastic and motivating; be sure to ask the student how he or she is doing personally; let the student know you are calling because you care about your students, and want to be sure the student stays on top of all assignments; and be sure to be a listener, not merely a talker. (2) Ask the student how the course is going, what problems or concerns the student has in the course, and how you can be of help; (3) Go over assignments the student may be missing and/or assignments where the student had a less-than-stellar grade, explaining why all assignments are important and spending some time explaining to the student why he or she did not do such a great job on an assignment. Also, remind the student of upcoming assignments. (4) Somewhere in the conversation remind the student the course is not just for X weeks and a grade, but rather it also will be extremely useful in other courses and/or in the professional world. Finally: find out a good day and time to call the student so you can have repeat chats; at the end of the call ask the student if there is anything additional he or she would like to discuss; and during the call take notes on the content so you can have these as reminders for in the course and future calls. These steps and suggestions I just shared are what I do—and the results have been extremely positive!

REMEMBER! The idea of going it alone is okay, but why settle for okay: when cakes have frosting they are more presentable; Cesar salad needs be topped off with an anchovy to be complete; hot dogs require mustard for a final touch; and a banana split is always more exciting with a topping of whipped cream.

- dents, so in order to equalize naming, have local students create name tents.
2. Proper student names should be used, nicknames that can be problematic (e.g., first and last names).
 3. Difficult names to pronounce or remember could be hard to use, so instructors should negotiate with students.
 4. First name use is friendly, but for adult students first names might be too "personal."

What about the instructor? What should students call you? It is widely reported by students that they really wonder what to call their teacher, trainer, instructor, or professor.

The best answer is to tell them what to call you. Do not be modest. Tell them! After all, Ishmael told us what to call him. For example:

- Mr.;
- Ms. (use of Mrs. or Miss—may be okay but check with the person first);
- Dr.; or
- professor.

Establishing name protocols is a good idea. The first day or class, or in the course syllabus establish the rules for names.

1. *Student Classroom Name.* What local and distance students should use as their videoconference name and the name on their classroom name tent.
2. *Video Enabled.* The distant learner should be required to have their video camera on during the entire class? Instructors can see the local students, so distant students should be seen also.
3. *Dial-In Students.* Is dialing in with a cell phone acceptable? If so, when? If not, what should they do if they are "on the road"?
4. *Instructor's Name.* What name should students use when referring to you.

And finally, as Shakespeare wrote, "to which we call a rose, by any other name would smell as sweet."