

Ask Errol!

Errol Craig Sull

The year rolls on, and as we begin to see pockets of normalcy from the lockdown of COVID distance learning continues at a steady pace. This translates into ongoing challenges, unknowns, and wrinkles in teaching online, and thus a stream of emails to me asking for assistance, which I am happy to supply when I can. Although this edition's questions can certainly resonate with instructors who teach in face-to-face courses such questions cannot be left unanswered, as each presents a conun-

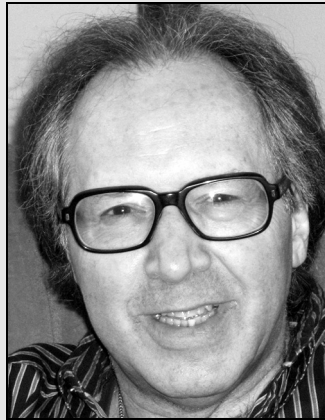
drum that vexes more than one distance learning instructor. The more information we have the smoother our online courses can proceed. (By the way: Please have your queries to me—erroldistancelearning@gmail.com—by June 15 for our next issue.)

This edition's email bag ...

VOLUNTEERING FOR EXTRA SCHOOL ACTIVITIES

Errol, my problem is one of enthusiasm, or perhaps I should write overenthusiasm! My school offers a wide variety of what I'll call extracurricular activities, events such as student essay contests (call for faculty judges), special literary and holiday events (call for faculty submissions or participation), requests for faculty mentors, and faculty participation in various special projects. For nearly each of these I want to volunteer, for two reasons: I have a genuine interest in the items and I think it looks good to show my additional involvement in the school. Do you have any suggestions for how much I should undertake?

We primarily apply to a school to teach, but as you indicate, other opportunities within the school come along, and the pull to volunteer can be out of a genuine interest in the event, believing doing so is extra "insurance" to help keep your job/get class assignments, or both. There is one word



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that should be a guide: moderation. What you don't want to do is give the impression you are "raising your hand" so often that you are more interested in being seen as one wants to be noticed by your "bosses" than a faculty member who genuinely wants to contribute to the school out of sincere interests. Doing the former cannot only damage you in the short run but also possibly put you in a position not to be called on for future volunteer activities. Choose your interests wisely and measured, and then pour 100% of yourself into each one. The school will benefit, and you'll come across as a faculty member who is a genuine over-the-top asset to the school.

GIVING FEEDBACK AN ASSIGNMENT RUBRIC

First, Errol, I need thank you for such great insight over the years. Your columns have offered valuable information and suggestions that have benefited my colleagues and me at our online school. With that said, however, I do have another reason for writing: I need your help! Our school, like most schools, I presume, uses rubrics in giving students feedback on their assignments. I teach two courses in environmental science, and the rubrics are quite obvious in how points for an assignment are broken down. We've had no guidance from our department chair on how to use these, other than to be sure the students knows in which sections full points or less-than-full points were given, along with a brief explanation in each section where the student did not receive full credit. I've talked with colleagues about this, and consulted several online articles about using rubrics, but I wanted to know what you would suggest. Once again, thanks!

I appreciate the positive feedback on my columns; that's always nice to hear! My efforts have only one goal: to enhance the teaching efforts of distance educators. So

let me offer some insight on your rubric quandary. Always look at a rubric as if you were a student: what would you want to see? Yes, the points breakdown is certainly important, as well as the sectional explanations you mention. But think of a rubric as a sports commentating team: there is a play-by-play person and the color commentator. The rubric's breakdown of points is the play-by-play: just a by-the-numbers (with brief explanations) of the points earned. Yet just as the color commentator makes the game come alive, gives the game personality, so should you in a rubric. Here are some examples of what you could add: a brief intro paragraph that sums up the student's efforts (and always contains at least one positive point); a few sentences reminding the student how the assignment connects to the world of work; a section that offers school resources to assist the student, including links in the library and textbook reminders; some Socratic-style questions to have the student think deeper about his or her efforts in the assignments. One, some, or all of these will make your rubric one for which students will be thankful, as it has gone from almost only numbers to feedback that is meaningful, sincere, targeted, and personal.

BALANCE OF INFORMATION TO SHARE WITH A GUEST INSTRUCTOR

I am faced with an upcoming situation I never anticipated, Errol, and I have found no meaningful input on how to handle it. Perhaps you might have some suggestions for me. In a few months I need have an operation that will keep me out of my classroom for about 2 weeks; the school has a plan for situations like this: calling for someone to volunteer to take over the class (the faculty member will be paid). Once a guest instructor has been selected, however, it is up to the regular instructor, in this case me, to inform the guest instructor of what to cover in the

class, announcements the regular instructor might want posted, et cetera. My quandary is beyond the "regular suspects" of class contents to cover and announcements to post what other information should I offer that will keep my class in balance for my return?

Your question is one I have received often, and the solution is in the fulcrum you create for the guest instructor. As you mention, the "guts" of the course must be presented to the students so they, and thus the course, can keep pace with where you left off and where you'll pick up on your return. Do keep in mind, however, the guest instructor will not have your personality, and thus the dynamics will probably differ from when you are in the course. That will be of no concern, as the guest instructor would not have been selected if the person were not qualified and the individual's personality will be in your course for a short time. But do this: (1) Give the

students a heads-up on what to expect, including assignments you need them to do; (2) Let the guest instructor know of any students he/she should especially watch, such as those in need of extra help and class members that can be depended upon; (3) Inform the guest instructor of any additional outreach and/or resources the students have come to expect from you; (4) Close your note to the guest instructor very upbeat, thanking the person for taking over your class while you are away. Doing all of this will give you peace of mind while you recover (and I certainly hope all goes well!).

Remember: Sea turtles look all the better because of "cleaning" fish that pick algae off their shells; weightlifters use spotters to assure barbells don't fall on them; Boy Scouts often help the elderly cross streets so they won't fall—having help is, indeed, a wonderful thing.

applied situations. Research is now needed on how to overcome problems often related to lack of understanding, or the inertia of tradition. Undoubtedly, instructional design must now be recognized as the critical element in need of a renewed level of study.

Certainly, distance education the field, and distance educators the people, have dynamic challenges generally and rich opportunities personally. Innovation born from necessity, once again.

It is interesting to wonder what politicians, our elected leaders, think of the changes to education in the last year and a half. But that is a mystery best left to talk show hosts.

The changed educational environment of the last 18 months has forced children, teachers, leaders, and scholars to evolve—the time lived through was terrible to be sure, but those times are potentially the beginning of a new understanding of education.

And finally, change is difficult, but as the wonderful poem by White encourages us:

If thou of fortune be bereft
And in thy store there be but left
Two loaves
Sell one, and with the dole
Buy hyacinths to feed thy soul.

—James Terry White
(Not by Bread Alone, 1907)