

The New Distance Learning Instructor

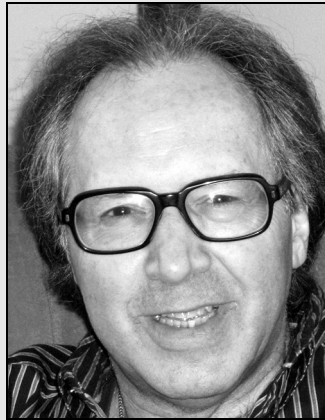
A Miniguide for Those Never Previously Teaching Online

Errol Craig Sull

As distance learning continues to grow, ads continually appear seeking instructors to teach online. Many have experience teaching online, yet some also apply who have a solid education and great experience in a

specific field—but have never taught online. This latter group of potential online instructors should not be dismissed merely because they have no online teaching experience. Indeed, every online instructor had a first-time experience teaching through a computer. Yet to be sure this never-taught-online instructor grows into a strong school asset there are several guidelines that should be followed

These suggestions will help this new-to-distance-learning person become a valuable teacher.



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GET TO KNOW TRAINING (IF APPLICABLE)

Most schools have training sessions for new online instructors, lasting from several days to a few weeks. If this fits your school there are two important items to do: (1) Become as familiar as possible with what is covered in the class. First, you want to know if anything has not been covered you think ought to be learned by the new instructor. Second, it has often happened that what is taught in a training session has one or more items not in sync with what

the instructor should know. (2) Take notes on the most important items; these can be used as a reminder checklist for the new instructor.

ASK THESE INSTRUCTORS FOR ONLINE AREAS OF WEAKNESS AND STRENGTH

Although the new online instructor has been thoroughly interviewed, once hired and introduced to his or her first course it is important to get a good sense of where the person feels strong about the subject and teaching the students, as well as areas where the individual might feel a bit weaker. Once this information is known possible additional suggestions, information, and insights might help this new instructor get off to a good start. Add to this a discussion of the major differences encountered between a face-to-face and an online class. The more “tools” to help teach a first online class the more successful the teacher.

HAVE A DETAILED CHECKLIST

A thorough checklist on what the person new to online teaching instructor should focus is important. First, although there was much in a training session (again, if it existed) what is especially important to the supervisor should be front and center with this new teacher. Second, the same checklist held by this instructor’s supervisor is simply a good reminder of what areas to have special care taken. (Note: No doubt a supervisor will have such a general list, but it should also be personalized based on the person’s strengths, weaknesses, and course specifics.)

BE SURE THERE IS A VETERAN “SHADOW” IN THE FIRST TWO COURSES

This is important for someone who has previously taught online, but is especially

important when an instructor is teaching his or her first course. The veteran online instructor can give motivation, counseling, suggestions, and correct any incorrect movements in the course. No doubt this new educator has stellar qualifications in subject knowledge, education, and enthusiasm for teaching, but once in “the real world” of an online course “unexpecteds” will come up, and having this shadow person in the course can help turn the instructor into a strong asset. Also, a once-weekly phone or Zoom conversations with the vet are important; this adds an element of personalization to getting the new teacher adjusted.

HAVE A PHONE CALL EVERY 2 WEEKS

The supervisor should start a regular 2-week chat with the new instructor, going over what was seen in the course thus far, discussing any input from the shadow instructor, and hearing what the freshman educator has to say: questions, gaffes, overall impressions thus far. This discussion is crucial for motivation, to be sure why the person was hired matches what the individual is going, and to give any teaching corrections. (Note: the first word in this list of three is “motivation”: it is crucial the conversation always begin with a positive. This person knows he/she is under a microscope, and knowing there is some good feedback—immediately—can simply make the person feel more relaxed and excited about teaching.)

OFFER A MINIEVALUATION AT THE END OF FIRST COURSE

Evaluations are always important, for it gives valuable input on one’s positives, as well as areas that could be improved or strengthened. Such an evaluation should be mandatory for a person new to online teaching. Having been “in the trenches” of reality for one course there may be some

items that showed differently than in an initial interview or resume; it can offer great motivation for the person to become even better than what was shown in the first course; and it offers an opportunity for candid dialogue between the new educator and supervisor once the evaluation is read. (Note: Ask the person to keep each evaluation received so overall progress can be seen, as well as areas that might still need improvement.)

BE SURE TO HAVE A "WE ARE SO GLAD YOU ARE HERE!" PERSONALITY

This may seem rather obvious, yet too often educators new to a school complain about the lack of warmth, the missing feeling of being welcomed into the school. This individual was hired based on a resume and interview; the hiring indicates an individual is considered a good fit for the school with the looks of a long-term teaching asset. Being friendly, embracing, and excited this person is now a member of the teaching staff is a nice little motivator to keep the educator enthused to do the best possible job. Added to this would be encouragement to contribute to or join one or more school activities.

HAVE THE NEW INSTRUCTOR KEEP A LIST OF QUESTIONS, PROBLEMS, ET CETERA DURING THE FIRST CLASS

Make it a point to have the new instructor keep an ongoing list of pluses and minuses, challenges and triumphs, and questions and concerns as the first class rolls along. Encourage this; sometimes, the new educator may be hesitant to bring up such items, thinking it might make him or her seem less than capable. This certainly is not true, and going over the list at the end of the first course can easily translate into a

much better prepared new online instructor for the second course taught.

INCLUDE A SESSION ON LANGUAGE AND "POLITICAL CORRECTNESS"

There are obvious words and phrases one should never use, and in the world of distance learning it is especially important every educator have a solid grasp of this, as what happens in an online course is primarily written, with occasional recorded audio. This means what was mentioned by the instructor can be seen and heard again and again and again; it will not go away. Be sure this is emphasized to the new teacher, including any language not accepted specifically at the school. It is better to have this conversation rather than have the new educator guess—and make an error that can be hurtful to this person, to students, and to the school.

MAKE AVAILABLE IMPORTANT CONTACTS

If a training session is required a contact list of "must have" contacts might be made available. Yet beyond these schoolwide contacts there will be departmental contacts the new educator should have, and the bright and shining new online educator should keep these nearby when teaching in case one is immediately needed. There are many instances when a student reached out to the instructor for contact information to help with a tech issue or financial aid problem, and the online teacher did not have this information. The more contacts available the more complete the new educator will feel when help is needed—by a student or by the educator.

ENCOURAGE THE PERSONALIZATION OF THE NEW ONLINE EDUCATOR'S COURSE—AS MUCH AS IS ALLOWED

Each person coming to teach has ideas of how a course should be handled; this

might include wanting to make phone calls to students, introducing creative approaches to teaching a subject, or some examples of the new educator's professional experience that the person believes will help students learn. It is important for this new online teacher to know what can or cannot be used, especially because this will be the first course taught. It is perhaps better for at least the first course this indi-

vidual "stick to the script," that is, offer great knowledge of the subject, a motivating and exciting personality, and the steps to the teach the course outlined by the school.

Remember! Ah, the newborn—entering a strange world, but with nutrition, guidance, and patience will grow into a strong member of society.