

# Ask Errol!

**Errol Craig Sull**

**I**t's hard to believe 2023 is winding down! But starting up, looking at its midst, or coming to an end the challenges encountered and information needed from distance learning instructors remain the same: a constant flow. Certainly, I'm here to help but this also shows the health of online learning, for as it grows, as it expands it presents new barriers, hiccups, and bumps. We learn from these, resulting in the strongest body yet of those who teach online. And with 2024 on the horizon I look forward to receiving

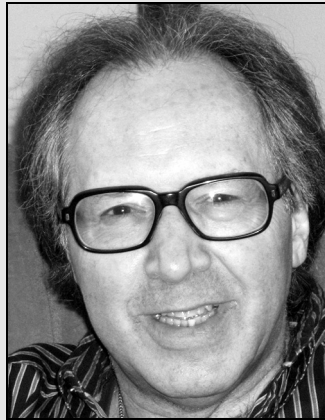
more of your requests—and assisting as best I can. (Please have your queries to me—[erroldistancelearning@gmail.com](mailto:erroldistancelearning@gmail.com)—by December 15 for our next issue.)

Use these to put a few more lightbulbs in your role as distance learning educator.

## **TEACHERS WHO INSIST ON BEING CALLED BY A TITLE**

*I've read your columns over the years, and many have resulted in upticks within my teaching; thanks so much. Never did I think I'd be writing you, but a situation has been presented where I thought you might have some insight. The supervisor of our economics program has been with us about 6 years, and during that time he insisted we call him by his first name. Recently, he was promoted to an assistant dean position, and any time we call him by his first name he now corrects us, telling us we must call him by his title, Dr. XXX, as it is keeping with the position he now occupies. I'm torn on this: on one side I can see his point, yet he also helped to establish a good rapport with our department by using his first name. Any thoughts?*

Your quandary is not an uncommon one, and the reason for the switch in how a person is addressed in a school has a few possibilities. First, of course, is what you were told: it is in line with the position and (perhaps) what other assistant deans are



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called. By using a first name he may think others might see a diminishment of authority. Too, there is possibly the ego thing, that abounds throughout education, i.e., once one has received a doctorate or been given a new title being addressed by that suffix becomes somewhat of a power trip. A third possibility is he was simply told by his supervisor or another in the upper echelon that he must now be addressed by title. In the end it really makes no difference which cause is correct: he is your boss, and if you don't address him by what he prefers you might be in danger of losing your job. Going into education one would think politics and egos don't exist, but they are in vast supply. And by the way: thanks so much for the good word; I do appreciate it!

### **THE BEST USE OF ATTENDING A CONFERENCE**

*Well, I'm about to attend my first professional conference next year, and being new to distance learning (I've only been teaching about 6 months) I'm really looking forward to it. Teaching online I don't have the same interaction I used to have when I taught face-to-face at a local college, so I haven't met many folks yet. I was wondering if you could give me any tips on how to best make use of my time at a professional conference. Thank you very much!*

Congrats on your new career! Online education is hugely rewarding, and while I don't know your field I have a feeling the enthusiasm shown in your email carries nicely in your teaching. As for conferences, they offer so many possibilities that can help with one's distance learning career. First, there are the individual sessions: look over all that are offered, and pick not only those that are specific to your field but one or two others that seem to offer new ideas in online teaching. There are also the keynote addresses: take a pad with you for notes—you can never tell when a gem will

be uttered that can prove helpful, and you might want to get the email address of the presenter. But without question the biggest plus to attending a conference is the networking: interacting with others will bring about new or enhanced ideas and information, new teaching possibilities, and resources you did not know existed (and this includes a thorough visit to the vendors' booths). Of course, you might find your conference interesting and worthwhile enough where you might want to present, so be sure to gather that info as well. Taking full advantage of what a conference offers is a great asset in improving your teaching chops.

### **GETTING STUDENTS TO OPEN ABOUT CHALLENGES IMPACTING SCHOOLWORK**

*My question walks the tightrope of the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and personal space, but I know there is wiggle room where I can get the information I need, that is, there are students in my class who are absent, who suddenly stop showing, or tell me they have "a problem." I have a strong sense of online learning and helping my students to better themselves through not only my course of introduction to criminal justice but also to help prepare them for their professional careers. With this information I might be able to work with them on a solution and get them back on track in the course. I certainly don't want to get into trouble, and I definitely don't want my students to feel uncomfortable, so can you offer me any tips that will help?*

You are right: this is a tricky situation. Too many online educators have stepped on FERPA's toes or moved into students' personal spaces where they should not have gone. I don't know what efforts you have thus far made—if any—but my experience in this area is broad, and I'll share my approaches: (1) In emails or phone con-

versations ask general questions or make general statements, such as, "I'm here to help you so we can work around any problem you might have" ... "Can you share with me the challenge you are currently experiencing?" ... "There are almost always approaches you and I can take so any problem you are having won't impact your course efforts." (2) If a student has indicated he/she does have a problem, but does not share it, respond by sharing one you had, and how you overcame it; I have found this quite successful in getting students to open up to me. (3) If possible, call the student: phone calls are much more personal than emails, and what students

are hesitant to discuss in print often are much easier to relay in that call when the student hears your voice. Two final items: (1) Be totally familiar with not only FERPA but also any policies your school might have regarding the situation you described; (2) Always let the student's advisor know—that person may have more information to share that can help you better understand and work with the student (this also covers your efforts).

*Remember:* A cake recipe can promise a beautiful, towering, and tasteful dessert—but it needs the help of a baker to make it come to fruition at its best.

but selections must be made considering limited resources.

How is this relevant to distance education? Distance educators build courses. Often written content is chosen, and as courses improve, more realistic information is added—videos, audios, or simulations.

It is also important to know that resources that make instruction realistic are abundantly available. A recent essay about ways to make courses more realistic estimated that 10,000 applications are available. Apps simulate real events (remember *Oregon Trail*), or convey ideas by visualizing them.

A goal is to make instruction at a distance “more realistic” by choosing or creating instruction that is less abstract so ideas are easier to understand. Ten thousand instructional applications are available—choosing which ones is the issue.

Once again, the importance of the instructional designer is apparent—designers help decide which apps are

needed in a course to make it realistic. Simple, abstract applications are easiest to select, but often are not the best.

Dale’s cone becomes relevant at this point in course design. The middle levels of the cone often are the most appropriate balance between effectiveness and efficiency—real and abstract.

Courses should be designed and developed using the appropriate media—not too realistic or too abstract. A “rule of thumb” for media selection goes like this—be as realistic as possible, but only as realistic as necessary.

*And finally ...* Solzhenitsyn wrote that writing transmits *condensed experience*. And, Homer wrote “lead me from the *unreal* to the *real*.”

Dale created the cone of experience to help us decide between real and abstract.

## REFERENCE

Dale, E. (1946). *Audio-visual methods in teaching*. Dryden Press.