

Ask Errol

Errol Craig Sull

Below are three items that I hope will enhance your teaching efforts in the distance learning classroom.

1. USING VIDEOS IN A COURSE

I've been teaching online for more than 20 years, Errol, and during the time I've relied on the course readings, student assignments, and material I've put together. All of these have been in print, and although other faculty at my school have been using videos for a long time I've been in the "if ain't broke don't fix it" mode. Recently, my supervisor suggested that my using videos in the course would prove especially helpful to my students as

real-life reminders of the course material (I teach two introductory economics courses), as well as videos about the course material that could serve as visual reminders of course material. I know she is right, and having time off until the fall courses begin I'd like to start preparing myself for this. Any help you can give me would be appreciated.

Thank you so much for such a great dilemma! By no means are you alone in your hesitation to color outside of the lines. I have given more than a hundred seminars (this does not count webinars) to faculty around the country on beginning to use online learning, and there are many who remain hesitant about stepping into what is for them a new world. But not to worry; use these steps: (1) Start looking around the internet for videos and talks (such as TED Talks) that fit your course material and lessons you'd especially like to impress on the students. Take the time to view them (the content fits, no foul language, not too long, no commercials, etc.). Make a list of the ones you intend on using. (2) If not already familiar with the technology to present videos reach out to your I.T. team; I have found these folks to always be helpful. (3) Look over your course, and decide where you would like to use the videos and how. This includes integrating them into course discussions, assignments, etc. (4) Be aware of problems the use of videos can cause: using them as babysitting tools to ease your workload; having videos run too long; not engaging the students enough to discuss the videos; and using too many videos in a course. Of course, if you find more assistance is needed please reach out to me.



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2. UNDERSTANDING STUDENT GENDER PREFERENCES

First, Errol, I cannot thank you enough for all the valuable information you have given me over the years. As a member of USDLA I receive *Distance*

Learning, and thus your columns. The tips you have offered definitely improved my efforts teaching online. For my question, as you know the days of males in the class having simple names like Billy or Joe and females like Sally or Jane are long over. And a wonderful wave of immigrants and visitors from other countries have brought countless names that are often too difficult to discern if male or female. Added to this is the LGBTQIA community where gender identification can often go beyond a Mr. or Ms. I don't want my students to think me stupid nor do I want them to feel I'm ignoring who they are. Do you have any tips on how I can get this right and seem like I'm "with it"?

Well, I must say your first three sentences certainly had me smiling, and I thank you. It's always rewarding to know the items I've offered have been plusses for those who teach online. Regarding your two areas of concern I offer this: (1) Regarding names there probably are not reasons for you to know if one is male or female—or whatever if preferred. What I find most important when giving a live seminar or in a call is how to pronounce a student's name. In the many dozens of times I've asked students not only have I always been given the correct pronunciation but they are also grateful that I want to get it right. (2) As for gender I have an announcement I post the first day of class that I also send out as a class email indicating that everyone is welcome in my course, and I make it a point to ask students to let me know if there is a certain way they would like to be addressed. This accomplishes two things: [a] The students immediately know there is nothing to worry about in terms of gender identification in my course; [b] Students feel more welcome with less stress knowing they don't have to worry if possibly they have previously had problems with their gender identification. (3) An important tip: use this calendar throughout the course—The Complete 2023–24 Diversity Calendar, Dates and Celebration Events. It has a complete list of every religious and cultural day, and I use this to offer celebrations or simply "Hey, guess what today is?" announcements and class emails. The students really appreciate this, and it

helps make the course a more enjoyable one for students and faculty.

3. MAKING A COURSE COME ALIVE BEYOND THE COURSE

I'm new to online learning, Errol, and I find it an exciting way to teach (my 10 previous years of teaching English were in a face-to-face high school classroom). Students focus on their studies and the assignments, but I think they are overly concerned with getting a good grade in the course. This is important, of course, but I'm looking for some "magic" motivator to really get them interested in the material, in the learning, and not simply looking at a course for the grade it can give them. Your thoughts?

Welcome to the great world of distance learning! As hundreds of thousands of online educators have discovered, it's an exciting way to teach, and if done correctly students will learn more for the long haul than in the face-to-face course. This segues nicely into your question, for there is what I deem one very "magic" item that will accomplish what you seek, i.e., having students become invested in their learning: tying every aspect of the course to what I call "the real world," that is, the world of employment. Few students think about this connection going into a course, only doing what you mention: seeking that grade. Consider these: (1) At the beginning of the course post an announcement (and send it as an email) reminding students that (for example) discussion is what is needed in the world of employment, thus give posts as if they are responding to an employer; and as you teach English have the students think about how writing will be necessary in their careers, either now or later. (2) In each assignment always include a template paragraph that connects the assignment to careers; (3) Have students respond—either individually or en masse (such as in discussion threads or live seminars) about how the course will prove helpful with their major. (4) Midway in the course send each student an email with some thoughts and insights on their course progress as it relates to the student's major and/or current employment. These trips will definitely take the students beyond a mere grade.

REMEMBER: We can view birds and whales and elephants from afar, but using binoculars will bring the critters to closer life with their beautiful colors, enticing movements, and unique features—having more enjoyment and learning with just that extra bit of help.