

DL
21,4

Ask Errol

134



Errol Craig Sull



And the years go on and one . . . and so do the intricacies, “unexpecteds,” and challenges of distance learning. The more we know about this excellent and highly useful method of teaching the better class motivation, engagement, and enjoyment. Together, these translate into the ultimate goal for any online educator: a successful class experience for the student. Over the many years I have written this column a diverse set of queries have come my way, and with each of my responses I have hoped to enhance distance learning instructors’ efforts just a bit more. This column’s edition is no exception.

Here are three important items that will add to your classroom involvement . . .

1. Responding to artificial intelligence

Errol, I know that I am like many, many online instructors when it comes to artificial intelligence (AI): somewhat lost, a bit confused and with a ton of questions. My biggest worry, of course, is students using it to cheat. I teach two intro courses to Economics, and have come across several student essays that were too good to be true. When confronted, nearly all admit using ChatGPT to write or help write their essays. I do post a note about not using it, and our school has a disclaimer included in our syllabi. Any assistance you can give me in making my times in class with AI less worrisome would be quite helpful.

AI has become the big elephant in the room for online educators. Some students will look for any shortcut that equates to them doing less work but getting better grades, and AI certainly fits that description. There are several approaches to help – but never entirely clean up AI for writing essays, doing research, creating formulae, etc. First, the note you post is fine; not knowing what is in it be sure to include the importance of doing one’s own work, and that while AI can be helpful for suggestions its purpose is not to write or create outright for the student. Also, let the students know you do have AI detection software that can immediately tell if a student has used AI. (A note on this: while there are several AI detection software programs available, none are 100% accurate. In fact, I found it quite interesting to know that a few paragraphs I wrote for one of my columns were labeled as 90%–100% AI-generated . . . in three different AI detection checkers!) This can give students pause in using AI to do a student’s work.



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Also: I do run some students' work through one or two AI detection checkers when their work is – to quote you – “too good to be true.” The result is usually, yes, it was AI generated. So I have a stock email I send to the students giving the results, and asking how they can explain this. When they acknowledge its use I give them the opportunity to rewrite. But do not let this detract from your teaching: AI-generated text will slip by and, ultimately, the student loses, not you.

2. Recognizing holidays in class

First, many thanks for your tips and sometimes tricks over the year in helping me teach online. I really thought I knew how to handle all situations, but I never realized how many situations there were! You have made these easier to address. As for the primary reason I am writing, with a wider and varied demographic of students in courses I am wondering if I should expand my recognition of holidays beyond July 4th, Memorial Day, MLK Day, Flag Day, President's Day, Indigenous Peoples Day, New Year's, and what I call the Holiday Season (in December). These are quite a few, and to add more – Would it not seem like my course is a holiday course?

Thank you for the kind words. I also consider what I write with its possible impact on those who read it, and I want all to be positive tidbits to improve online teaching strategies and approaches. Comments like yours tell me I'm going in the right direction. As for your question, it can be easy to get carried away with recognition of holidays – what you offer is quite comprehensive. There are two approaches I take that help me with such a wide arrays of national and worldwide celebrations. First, I send an email to my students indicating days I'll be recognizing but asking them if there are other days I should include. Several are less than serious (such as National Zucchini Day), but I will have some religious observances, and on those days I will post a message recognizing the day. Also, for a bit of fun I post national U.S. days that many folks can identify with, such as National Chocolate Day and National Teacher Recognition Day. These two links will help you: [Holidays worldwide \(timeanddate.com\)](http://Holidays.worldwide(timeanddate.com)) . . . [Observances in USA in 2024 | There is a Day for That!](http://Observances.in.USA.in.2024|There.is.a.Day.for.That!) With such a wide variety from which to choose each online educator's decisions on these will be different – explore these two links; you will find them useful.

3. National and world news: how to address

Errol, it seems impossible not to bring into class national and worldwide events. Certainly, as much as possible, I want to restrict my class to the subject I teach, Criminal Justice, but I find that more and more students are using these external events as items in the discussion threads and to include in essays they submit. Up front, I do let them know to stay away from controversial and often heated topics such as abortion, stem cell research, politics and others. Most of the time this works, but I wonder when or if there is a time for me to bring in these outside events. Thanks so much for any input you can give me.

You are right about the controversial topics you mention – they can make for some heated and over-the-top comments in writings and sometimes confrontations in discussions. Yet there are times when an event is so over-the-top, so in-your-face, or of such importance that it cannot and should not be ignored; doing so by the online instructor can lead students to believe that educator is indifferent to the world outside of school. Examples of these items would be devastating weather events, an economic item of great significance, recognition of a nationally or internationally known figure, etc. Of course, there is one more item that can nicely add to a class: when something of great or even medium magnitude occurs that is related to the subject taught it can add to the importance and reach of the course. Keep a list of these as well: they could easily prove useful for future classes you teach.

REMEMBER: Tutors, aides, docents, helpers and assistants are crucial for improvement, betterment and achievement – the more we seek these out, the better we can be.

Errol Craig Sull