

Creativity

Use It Effectively to Enhance Your Online Teaching

Errol Craig Sull and Catherine M. Skora

Sometimes, you get lucky. For some time, I have wanted to write a column on the use of creativity in teaching online courses. Not only have I used it very effectively within my distance learning courses, but I've talked with numerous online instructors who found its proper implementation to be invaluable.

And so I happened to mention this to a friend, Cathy Skora, a master's student in the prestigious International Center for Studies of Creativity program at State University College at Buffalo, and I was quickly given the missing pieces I needed to make such a column happen. The information she shared with me allowed for a



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true melding of academic research and experiential teaching, and I saw the use of creativity in my courses become more productive. Thus what follows is just downright cool—and extremely practical—when it comes to the use of creativity in distance learning pedagogy.

Most folks, of course, tend to use the term *creativity* in a general, “Hey-I’m-the-creative-type” context, understanding, perhaps, that being creative means going from working within what is to pushing beyond to something not yet defined. In this spirit—when done effectively—students become more engaged, are more interested in learning, have fun, and more concretely embrace the subject matter. But once the theory and practice of creativity is understood—wow! These outcomes can be brought to an even higher level.

After several hours of conversation with Cathy (hence the joint credit for this column) on all things creative, I’ve taken her knowledge, suggestions, and insights on creativity and combined them with a few thoughts, musings, and adventures of my own with using creativity in teaching online to bring you several approaches to sprinkling creativity throughout your courses. Use them—you won’t be sorry.

UNDERSTAND WHY THE USE OF CREATIVITY IS IMPORTANT

When a distance learning course is “given” to an instructor nearly all of that course—if not all—is pretty much set in stone: due dates, assignments to be completed, lectures, readings, and so on. These were not put together helter-skelter, of course; sage educational minds thought about how all of these can work best for a great student learning experience. Yet, these courses are also very much like a soup without spices: fine for nutrition, but adding some spark to it can make the soup more exiting. So, too, with adding creativity to a course: effectively added in choice spots within a course the students become more engaged,

a stronger student-instructor rapport is created, the course has greater whiffs of fun, and the students have a stronger lock on the subject taught.

ALWAYS LOOK TO COMBINE CLASSROOM ELEMENTS FOR NEW CONNECTIONS

There is a tendency to view the classroom in a linear fashion—that is, each component of our course is often used as a stand-alone unit, only involving other parts of the course when built into that segment (e.g., a discussion topic might focus on an upcoming assignment). Yet we must look around and see where unusual or unlikely connections in the course might result in another learning experience for the students. An example? Take that same discussion I just mentioned, then ask the students to connect the topic of the discussion to ... an animal *or* a city *or* a color *or*? By bringing in this thread of creativity the students think about the subject from another view, have a bit of fun, and the subject is once more embraced by the students.

INVITE YOUR STUDENTS TO OPEN THEIR CREATIVITY SPIGOTS

Why should you have all the creativity fun? Turn the tables and ask your students, as an example, to give you their most creative yet practical uses of the subject being studied (or a portion of that subject). Have the students pick a historical figure, and then use their new knowledge of their subject to improve upon something that historical figure attempted. Have the students discuss a topic of the course subject as if it were a recipe, then have each student pick one word that best defines his or her relationship with the subject—and explain why. Any of these, or others, uses creativity to make a subject fun—and much easier to “digest”!

INTRODUCE AUDIO AND VISUALS AS NEW CREATIVE DIMENSIONS TO YOUR CLASS

Technology has opened many new possibilities in creativity use within an online course, and when we introduce these to students, excitement about the course and subject, student engagement, and long-term knowledge of the subject increase. Delivering feedback and other course-related messages through audio and streaming video, use of video to underscore or highlight a component of the course subject, and introducing real world applications of what the students are being taught through visual means (video, pix, cartoons, etc.) all add to the learning experience. And don't hesitate to invite students to share the same: all benefit!

BRAINSTORM LIKE CRAZY: IT WILL BE PRODUCTIVE!

We must let ourselves "get crazy" with ideas sometimes. The result will be new approaches, activities, insights, and connections for our online courses we had not previously considered. Brainstorming (a divergent idea-gathering method introduced by advertising executive Alex Osborn in 1953) has four rules: seek wild ideas, defer judgment, strive for quantity, and build on other ideas—so, go for it! Take any one broad subject, and frame it into a question or starter statement, like, "How might I make a topic area more interesting in my online class?" Jot down ALL ideas that pop up on your mind screen in response to this question. When finished, look over your list, and start converging your ideas by putting them in like categories known as clustering. Bada bing ... a fresh approach!

LET YOUR WORD CHOICE BEND, SWAY, AND SHAKE AT TIMES

We each get comfortable with our vocabulary, as we should—it is an extension of us,

and our students come to know us by how we write, as well as what we write. Yet this groove of the same old dependable writing style can also add a flat spot in your course. Think of this reliable type of writing as a long, long stretch of road with no scenery, no landmarks: it delivers you to a destination, but that's all it does. Yet, adding some scenery, perhaps a snack shop, and maybe some birds overhead make that trip more interesting, more memorable. The same holds true for your use of vocabulary and the structure of your sentences: don't be afraid to let it get a bit crazy, a bit off kilter, a bit loose, a bit funky at times. By being "language creative" you draw the students into your words, they pay closer attention to your message, and reading you is just a fun thing to do!

TAKE YOUR STUDENTS ON A TRIP BEYOND THE COURSE

Too often, students confine their course studies to the course: assignments due, readings to be completed, discussions to be posted, and so on. For many, the course becomes separate from their own lives—it is an online "school" they are attending for a degree, a certificate, or self-improvement. However, introducing "reality-based education"—education that brings the online course into the students' world outside of class, both now and later—is a creative way to bring the course to life, to have students think about how they will apply what they now learn to their everyday lives. And all sorts of prompts can be offered: "How can you use this course material in your present job?" "Can you give an example of how XXX will help you advance in your career?" "What past employment mistake did you make that could have been minimized or eliminated by what we are learning?" This list just goes on! The more students see and feel the course come to life in their own lives the more the course material will stay with them—and be used far after the course has ended.

EMBRACE YOUR MISTAKES FOR CREATIVE BONUSES

We all make mistakes in our teaching—it not only “goes with the territory,” but they help make us better online teachers: from what we did wrong we learn what to do right. Yet these same mistakes can also present fertile breeding grounds for creative ideas that will work well in our distance education courses. By looking at what we erred on we can take that same “oops” and see how it can be honed, twisted, and bent for use in the class—even letting the class know you are aware of an error you made can open wonderful “teachable moments” where students will offer ideas and insights that otherwise would have stayed hidden. Also, look at your goof from another approach: is it possible it is a goof when looked at straight on but really is a great thing when viewed differently? Some traits of creativity are the ability to be fluid and flexible and, yes ... to not be afraid to take risks! Don’t be afraid to make mistakes—and learn from them. The more we understand and use our online teaching errors the more we can introduce creativity that was simply handed to us—by us!

LOOK OUTSIDE YOUR COURSES FOR CREATIVE OPPORTUNITIES

Relying on our own experience, the students’ input, and various connections we make in our online course’s components will offer many creative opportunities to seize upon. But why stop there? Our everyday lives are teeming with creative ideas: folks’ interactions with one another; book and DVD titles in a store or a library; TV and radio shows, movies, and plays; vacations and business trips; casual conversations with friends, colleagues, and relatives; books, articles, and essays read. All of these and more will present you with creative opportunities to connect, combine, and synthesize information into new

approaches that you can integrate into your online classroom. This fresh approach will be interesting for your students, and by practicing your creativity skills they will continue to grow!

BREAK YOUR TEACHING MOLD

Sometimes, entering into our distance education courses with a different personality, strategy, approach, emotion (always positive, of course), detail, alternative, and so on can add some creative juice to the course. First, the students are not expecting this from you, so they will take notice; second, no matter how you broke your mold the “why” is crucial—you are doing so to get students more involved in the course and to more firmly embrace what is being taught; third, you are shaking yourself up a bit, thus re-energizing your teaching mojo (it can get stale if you are the same old, same old person all the while in your course!); and, fourth, you are reminding yourself that some creativity added to the course can make the class more enjoyable for the students *and* you!

INTRODUCE PUZZLES, PROBLEMS, AND THE UNKNOWN

Crossword puzzles and problem-solving puzzles, word games, real-life business difficulties, and other like “brain teasers” are creative ways to get students thinking about the course subject from a far-less-than-vertical approach; this only heightens their interest in and awareness of the subject. You can also make up a situation, then ask the students for their best solution or approach based on the item being taught; too, invite the students to submit websites they find helpful or interesting relating to the course. Again, these creative approaches to learning add some fun to the course and have students look at the course material from varied angles, a sure way to reinforce their absorption of the subject.

ESTABLISH A CREATIVITY BANK AND WATCH YOUR DIVIDENDS GROW

As you become more attuned to the effective use of creativity techniques in the classroom you will find your course offers you much that can be used for future courses. Of course, one of the benefits of an online course over a face-to-face course is that all your creative efforts can be seen—and continually seen; thus, you can reap these for placement into what I call a *creativity bank*. Here is a plethora of creative ideas, approaches, activities, postings, suggestions, student feedback, and so on, that have appeared in my courses, all categorized by course and level of student. While new dashes of creativity for my courses keep coming my way—and will yours, as well—also making use of my previous bursts of creativity has allowed me to save time, have more creative variety at the ready, and help keep me energized by mixing and matching my creative course inserts based on what my online course

needs at the time. Keep your own creativity bank—you will find it quite helpful.

Now, I usually don't end my columns with a summation paragraph, but this time I must. One important item I learned from Cathy is that our potential for creativity is at the ready and has no boundaries, and thus I know each person reading this column can offer additional suggestions on the use of creativity in the online classroom, so I invite you to send them to me: eroldistancelearning@gmail.com. I'd like to offer a follow-up column on creativity that is, well, creative in that all suggestions come from others. It certainly would not only add to our effectively teaching online but also continue that creative collaboration among colleagues that I began with Cathy!

Remember: If it were not for the effective use of creativity Einstein would be Mr. Einstein, Jaws would have eaten all of New England, Harry Potter would have lost the Quidditch match, and Indiana Jones would be dead.

"OF COURSE, ONE OF THE BENEFITS OF AN ONLINE COURSE OVER A FACE-TO-FACE COURSE IS THAT ALL YOUR CREATIVE EFFORTS CAN BE SEEN—AND CONTINUALLY SEEN."

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