

Reality-Based Education

Teaching Your Course Beyond the Course

Errol Craig Sull

We teach our courses because we have expertise and an interest in our subject, know how the use of our subject relates to our professional lives beyond teaching, and are cognizant of the subject's general global importance. All of this, of course, makes it somewhat easy to give our students mis-
sives on how best to incorporate this subject matter into their lives. Yet it is one

thing to offer course material and have students use it as they choose, quite another for us to put in more time and effort so our courses are vibrant examples of real-world knowledge that students need or will need in their daily lives beyond the course.

This reality-based approach to teaching is what can make our courses so much more important than mere vessels holding grades and degree requirements for students. Rather, it upgrades all components of the course into solid peeks at and examples how the course contents is important in their lives beyond school; by doing this your teaching efforts have a far greater reach than X weeks—and can help students become stronger and more adept in their professional and personal lives.

The bottom line: infusing a reality-based teaching approach in your courses is boffo—here's how to do it:

YOUR COURSE IS A MEANS TO AN END—NOT AN END

When we begin our course we usually don't know if students understand the importance of the course beyond a grade they will receive, beyond a requirement they need for a degree. Yet as the course winds through Week 1 and into Week 2 we begin to know the students who embrace our subject for the benefit it offers after



Errol Craig Sull,
Online Instructor,
P.O. Box 956, Buffalo, NY 14207.
Telephone: (716) 871-1900.
E-mail: erroldistancelearning@gmail.com

that final grade and degree requirement—and we also get a strong sense of those students who see our course as but a notch on their academic belts. What is crucial for us who teach online is to never view our course as but simply that: a course; if we do, those students who seek it out for its help in their professional lives will not get that sense of the information's importance, crucial in keeping our teaching alive beyond the course. And for those students who see the course as but something to show on their transcripts they will leave with no understanding of the subject matter as being important in their lives and the lives of others. Always remind students how the course and its subject can permeate their lives.

ALWAYS TEACH WITH A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE IN MIND

There is so much required of us when we teach online—school admin responsibilities, course postings and individual student replies, assignment editing and grading, course readings, and so on—that it can sometimes become easy to simply teach what is required, day to day, with students fending for themselves to discover the where and how of the course's relation to the real world in which they currently and will continue to exist. We can never let this happen, for it defeats the most important elements of any course taught: to enhance students' cognitive abilities and rote knowledge in helping them effect positive changes in our society. The more we remind our students of the global importance of our course—personally and professionally—the more the students benefit from what they are taught.

POPULATE YOUR COURSE WITH REAL-WORLD SNIPPETS THAT TIE TO YOUR SUBJECT

We begin our courses with textbooks and/or assigned readings for the students; the

school may include other resources that relate to the subject of the course; and we might offer related info of our own choosing that focuses on the course subject. Yet if this subject-related material goes no further than these initial postings the class can become very stagnant, as nothing new has been added to generate student interest in the subject. Too, by injecting real world material—videos, articles, essays, audio—that relate to the subject you are continually demonstrating to the class how the subject is very much alive and in need throughout the world. Last, by doing this the course becomes an ongoing portal to the lives of your students, to be used now or later ... beyond the course.

USE YOUR STUDENTS' BACKGROUNDS TO MAKE YOUR COURSE MORE MEANINGFUL

Most online courses begin by having the students introduce themselves to the class; each student who participates not only shares school-related info but more importantly—for your efforts in teaching with a reality-based approach—details of their professional and personal lives. Also, if an online course features discussions students often use this bully pulpit to expand on their professional lives as the topic discussed warrants. Both of these offer the online educator invaluable info, for they tell you what a student needs to make the course more valuable, more pertinent to him or her. Based on this you can post more specific info for the whole class or send "Hey, XXXX—I came across this and thought you might find it interesting" individual postings. By doing this you are tailoring the course to your students' needs, which not only demonstrates the subject matter's importance far beyond the course but also makes for a more exciting, enticing course.

HINT: Set up a file with each student's name, then jot down the particular focus of your subject you believe the student

might especially need. As you come across material relating to a student's needs and/or when you have a few minutes to search out new material that would be pertinent to a student's subject interest post the URL and/or location of file for this info under the student's name. During the course you can then send these, one or two at a time, to each student. It shows you really care as an instructor; it strengthens student-faculty rapport, and it gives added weight and richness to what the students are learning in your course.

DEVELOP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS THAT INCORPORATE REALITY-BASED TEACHING

Whether you initiate the first discussion questions or they are set by the school, these can only carry the students' interest in posting so far; additional questions must be posted by the instructor to keep the postings going strong and substantive. Reality-based questions are ideal, for they offer three benefits to the class: (1) These are the types of questions that "hit closest to home" for the students, thus they are more wont to respond (and often with interesting stories about their professional lives that tie into the course subject); (2) The more postings by students in discussions the deeper a topic is explored; this results in new ideas, suggestions, and questions, which only broadens students' understanding of the core subject; (3) Your constant presence, by posting new questions, tells the students of your enthusiasm and interest in the course, always very important in maintaining student engagement and instructor-student rapport.

SET UP A BLOG TO BRING IN STUDENTS' DAILY LIVES RELATING TO THE COURSE SUBJECT

Blogs in an online classroom were once unusual to find, but now are more common—and they can offer much in the way

of texture to an online course as their structure is more open, with emphasis on content and responses. Setting up a blog that revolves around your subject can allow students to post willy-nilly thoughts on any aspect of a topic you select, with input from all others in class that can take the blog into a long-running, unbroken chain of thises and thats related to your course—but always focusing on the real-world application of your course teachings. While discussions in a course typically last a week or two at the most the blog can last for the length of the course, giving the students more freedom to stay on a subject. For more specifics on effective use of a blog, including how to set up a blog, visit these sites:

- <http://www.wikihow.com/Start-a-Blog>
- <http://www.howtostartablog.org/>
- <https://www.blogger.com/start>

REMIND STUDENTS OF THE ASSIGNMENTS' IMPORTANCE TO EVERYDAY LIFE

Students know they will be receiving assignments throughout a course, and for the most part students complete assignments as steps toward a final grade, and—typically—with each assignment completed the students put it in the past and move on to the next. With this pattern, however, students miss out on how these assignments relate to life beyond the course—and while students must receive grades, and these are important, it is crucial that each assignment be tied in to students' lives outside the course, with a special focus on their careers and jobs. To do this effectively there are some easy steps you can take: (1) With each assignment give students a bullet list of how the assignment ties in to the global marketplace; (2) Ask students for a few lines following each assignment (and build this into their grade) as to how the assignment will benefit them outside of your course;

(3) When giving your final, overall comments on an assignment always remind the students how the assignment can benefit them in their professional and personal lives—and include a suggestion as to how any assignment errors can negatively impact them beyond your class.

INCORPORATE YOUR OWN LIFE EXPERIENCES AS THEY RELATE TO THE COURSE

The National Enquirer and *People* magazine sell well because they give folks a peek into the behind-the-scenes lives of personalities—and letting the students in on parts of your life as they tie into what you are teaching will do the same thing. You are the force that makes or breaks the course—never the course itself—and thus you carry great power in what you write to the students. By giving them “Hey, believe what I say because it’s what I’ve experienced” stories you not only offer real-world examples of how the course material is pertinent to the students’ lives but also allow yourself to be seen as a real flesh-and-bones person, not merely some bits and bytes amalgam of letters that appears on a computer—this always makes for a stronger instructor-student rapport and for more in-depth discussions on course topics.

TWITTER, FACEBOOK, AND OTHER SOCIAL NETWORKING OPTIONS: BONUSES TO USE

Social networking sites are the newest “wrinkle” to take up residency in online courses; some online instructors have them as mandatory components of a course while others use them as options. Whichever, they offer additional opportunities for both the online instructor and students to offer real-world input on how the course contents can be used or is being used beyond the course. As examples: some courses have set up Facebook accounts for specific daily reporting on

how something taught in a course has been implemented beyond the course, how it has been seen to impact society (e.g., through news or magazine reports), or where some of the course info might have been helpful. Twitter is being used the same way, although in an abbreviated (i.e., 140 character) manner. Also: instructors have begun incorporating texting into their courses so students and instructor alike can post daily examples of the course material brought to life.

SOLICIT IDEAS AND INPUT FROM STUDENTS TO INVIGORATE YOUR COURSE’S REALITY

No course should ever be one sided, that is, all material, suggestions, and so on, come from the online instructor and the school; this results in a narrow approach to education and a very wrong view that students can offer little while instructors and the school know better. Constantly asking for student suggestions to improve the reality-based approach of your course will result in many items that can improve the reality impact of your course—but that you had not considered. For we cannot be our students; they know their everyday lives so much better than we, and they can offer resources (including websites), on-the-job examples of the need for or use of your course content, and input on how the course can better effect the real-world lives of your future students.

CREATE A “BANK” OF REALITY FODDER FOR FUTURE COURSES

Ideally, each time you teach the same course it should be a richer, deeper, and more effective version of the previous one you taught. To accomplish this it is important you create a folder—a bank, as it were—of the anything and everything that added to your course you had not initially planned on. This includes all items—such as information, websites, student sug-

gestions, audio/visual clips, articles and essays, suggested readings—that can take your course from a two-dimensional depth to one of three-dimensional depth. When this happens your course has taken on a life that impacts students throughout their

lives—the real world impact we always want from our teaching.

REMEMBER: Pictures of dogs and campfires and cars and sunrises are nice—but petting a dog, building a campfire, driving a car, and viewing a sunrise allow us to truly understand them.

REALITY-BASED TEACHING—THE BIG 11!

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2. TEACH WITH A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE IN MIND
3. POPULATE YOUR COURSE WITH REAL-WORLD SNIPPETS
4. USE STUDENTS' BACKGROUND TO MAKE YOUR COURSE MEANINGFUL
5. DEVELOP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS THAT INCORPORATE REALITY-BASED TEACHING
6. SET UP A BLOG TO BRING IN STUDENTS' DAILY LIVES RELATING TO THE COURSE SUBJECT
7. REMIND STUDENTS OF THE ASSIGNMENTS' IMPORTANCE TO EVERYDAY LIFE
8. INCORPORATE YOUR OWN LIFE EXPERIENCES
9. SOCIAL NETWORKING—BONUSES TO USE
10. SOLICIT IDEAS AND INPUT FROM STUDENTS
11. CREATE A BANK OF REALITY FODDER FOR FUTURE COURSES

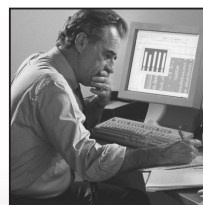
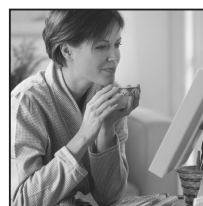
When It's Your Life...

**You TRAIN
You DELIVER
You DEVELOP**

Well, we have something in common.

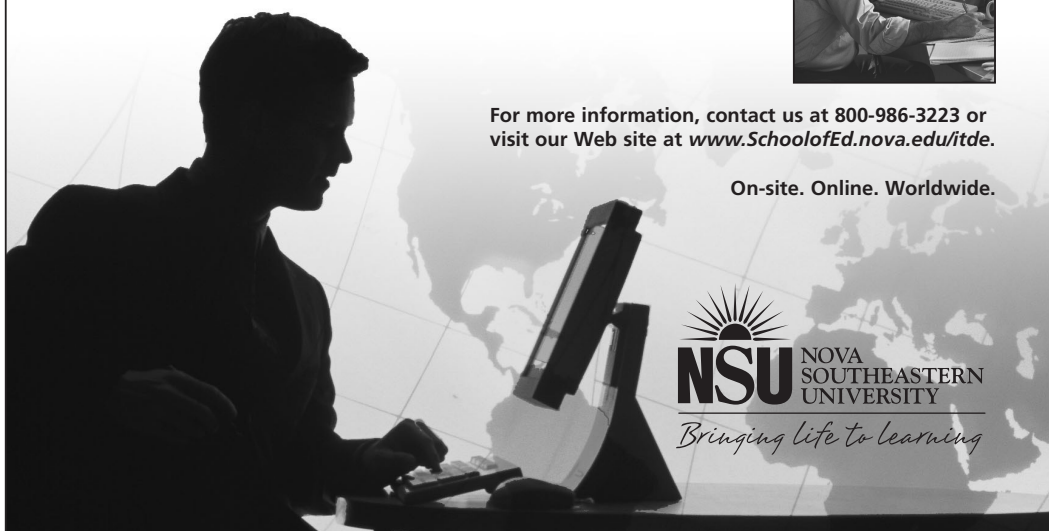
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