

# Ask Errol!

**Errol Craig Sull**

**A**nd I present another edition of distance learning-related questions (with suggestions for each) from readers! Be sure to send yours to me at [erroldistancelearning@gmail.com](mailto:erroldistancelearning@gmail.com) by January 1 so I can include them in our next issue.

This column's selections ...

*Group discussions and group projects are a standard part of my online course, yet I find in each of my courses I cannot get everyone*



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*enthusiastically involved in groups. I've certainly been motivating in my tone, and I've even posted outcomes and comments from group discussions and projects in previous courses (deleting names, of course), yet these efforts seem to have little effect. Any suggestions?*

This is a question I'm often asked, and it's because of the asynchronous nature of our teaching: the online course is often looked at as a come-when-you-want learning environment by students, and this easily spills over into group discussions and assignments. Too, many students simply don't know when or how to start in these group settings, so often an approach or two is needed that simply pulls students in. Here are a few: (1) In a group discussion you make the first posting, and have it be of a somewhat material-light nature so students will feel at ease in responding; this way, no one feels ill at ease about making the first move as it's already been done. For group projects the same method can apply, e.g., you can begin by breaking down the project into the same number of components as there are students in the group, then asking who feels comfortable doing what. Again, you are making the first move and allowing students to get involved within their comfort zones. (2) Include audiovisual, that you post, in either the group discussion or project, and try to include some humor; ask each student to also contrib-

ute at least one that relates to the topic—it's a good way to start the students' enthusiasm for full participation. (3) Assign each student in the group a specific role, indicating he/she needs to present a discussion post or project idea on X day. Any of these three suggestions will help with your problem!

*As we who teach online know, plagiarism by students has grown, and there seems to be no end in sight. I want each of my online classes to have a strong awareness of how not to plagiarize and the consequences of plagiarizing. There are pieces I've written about this that I posted in my class, the school offers some boilerplate info on plagiarism, and the students have extensive info on how to cite. But is there anything else I can do that would be specific for an online course?*

What you list are excellent approaches; there are two more that nearly always get students' attention about the correct way to cite sources and plagiarism's perils: (1) Too often, students see plagiarism as something that lurks only in the college course, and thus its ramifications are contained within the course and only to the guilty student—and usually that student gets another chance to make good. Yet take plagiarism outside the course—to the "real" world of everyday business—and another story emerges: jobs lost, corporate images damaged, families embarrassed, reputations ruined. Get this across to your students by posting articles that feature these consequences—they are readily available on the Web. And this is even more effective if you can match these stories to the subject you are teaching and/or the students' professional backgrounds and major. (2) The web offers many good links to the hows and whys of proper citation and what happens if one plagiarizes; two of the best to use for the latter are quite funny and effective:

- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gC2ew6qLa8U> and
- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7j5z7MNP4SU>.

When a negative can be shown to lurk in a student's world, and when you can use clever animation to deliver a message, you will begin getting more of your students' attention on the subject.

*Okay—my question is more of a concern, and it's been brought on by my school's enthusiastic push for instructor-student communication. This is great, and I'm all for it, but I'm also a bit bothered by the whole email thing. Students write me on a constant basis, and nearly all of it is related to the course, but sometimes there is email where it seems the student is merely bored and just wants to drop me a note to say hello, to tell me what he or she did during the day, etc. Any suggestions on how best to handle student email?*

This concern is a huge one with any school that offers online courses—let me offer three strong suggestions: (1) Post an announcement in the course on Day One that outlines the nature of e-mails students can send you; do this in a positive, upbeat way, of course, but stress the importance of receiving e-mails only relating to the course; (2) By posting this, when a student does stray from your guidelines you can respond to the student with a response such as, "Evonne, thanks for your e-mail, but did you forget about my class announcement on Day One regarding e-mail content? Please do look it over—thanks!" (And you can make this a template response that is always at your ready!) (3) Keep copies of all student e-mails you receive in a course and all of your replies (as well as e-mails you initiate) to these e-mails—it offers proof (if ever needed) that you have been professional in each e-mail you sent a student. Using (1) and (2) in each of your classes

will markedly cut down on “just because” student e-mails!

*I'm excited about incorporating media, such as videos and audio, into my classes online; I know they help engage students and also reinforce what I'm teaching. But there is so much available relating to my subject—nursing—that it becomes difficult to decide what's best to use, what is too much to use, et cetera. From reading your columns it seems you are a big proponent of incorporating various types of media in online classes, so can you offer any guidance on this?*

Your question is one that is asked by many—and will be asked by many more, as audiovisual opportunities for course resources is growing at a very fast rate. It can be like walking into a toy store and getting so carried away by what's available that one can forget about the purpose of using audiovisual in a distance learning course: to highlight or reinforce the info being taught, to increase student course engagement, and to get students more revved up about the course. These approaches will help you stay on track: (1) Break down your class into an outline form, then add one or two audiovisual resources for each or most class components; this will give you a balanced approach. (2) It is tempting to search out A-V resources that are funny, as we know students are drawn to these; yet too many can water down the importance of your course. It's best to offer more of the serious nature and some that are humorous; this way you stress the overall importance of your subject while still letting students know there is a light side to learning; (3) Keep an ongoing library of all A-V sources in a file on your computer; update these on a regular basis: you want to feed your classes timely, to-the-point, and varied audio-visual resources; (4) Begin each week of your course with an .mp3 (or the like) overview of the course—it's a great way to

use audio on a regular basis to personalize your thoughts on various parts of the course. (Online instructors are also making use of texting, tweets, Facebook, and videos for this purpose.) Each of these suggestions will help keep A-V use in line with the core outcomes of your course.

I'm teaching at four online schools, and I'm pretty well organized in keeping everything straight. My time management skills seem to be working okay, as well. Yet what bugs me is the constant—and I mean constant—barrage of e-mails from my schools, these sent out to all faculty, to all teaching in my department, or to me. This can get overwhelming, and while it may seem like a minor problem compared to some of the larger issues one encounters in online teaching I would appreciate it if you could address this item.

This may seem like a no-big-deal question, but it can prove a bit frustrating and time-consuming—especially for those who teach at more than one online school, such as you. Do this: (1) Get to know—from the e-mail address—which e-mails rate top priority from your school so you can read these first; (2) Read the subject line: you might find the e-mail pertains to a course you will never teach, a situation that does not affect you (e.g., parking problems on a campus that also offers face-to-face courses), etc.; these can be skipped over with no worry of missing info you might need; (3) Read those e-mails—thoroughly—that in some way may or do impact you, and save those in an online file that you believe have items important for you to know; (4) Be sure to take worthwhile general suggestions and information sent out by one school and use it, when applicable, for other teaching situations (5) Delete all e-mail like this after you have saved it, read it with a determination it is not needed, or after you have decided you don't need to read it—not doing so will result in clutter and to you possibly overlooking important

school e-mails. Follow these five steps and you'll keep this e-mail onslaught in check—and let it help you, not hurt you!

**Remember:** No matter how minor, insignificant, or small you may think a

question or concern to be about your distance learning course it is a major, powerful, and important one for you—and that's what counts.

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