

Want to Be Respected as a Distance Learning Instructor?

Don't Whine, Be a Baby, Complain, or Be a Snob!

Errol Craig Sull

Sure, you have the knowledge in X or Y subject to teach up a storm. And your commitment to teaching is something you've proven over the years. You also follow your school's policies and

procedures as if your life depended on it. Do these and you'll be a boffo, can't-afford-to-let-this-person-out-of-our-teaching-stable, "The teaching-sun-rises-and-sets-on-me!" instructor, right? Actually, not only wrong but so wrong it hurts. Nah, to be that really good you have to add a few more ingredients to the mix so many distance learning instructors overlook: stop complaining and whining, don't be a baby, and never whine.

You are probably saying, "Hey, I don't do that; in fact, I don't do any of that!" So you say ... and if it's true that's not just good, it's great. But just to make sure your online teaching colleagues become the best they can be in computer classrooms I offer this column—sometimes, reminders are needed:

NEVER COMPLAIN TO OTHERS ABOUT YOUR TEACHING LOAD

I hear this often: "Man, you wouldn't believe it: three schools and six courses!" ... "Hey, I wanted this to augment my day job; I didn't realize there was so much work involved!" ... "Ah, the good ol' days



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in the face-to-face classroom: two classes, and only M-W-F!" Say this to yourself, if you'd like, but never to others: you signed on for this teaching gig, remember? And if you have been hired at more than one school (simultaneously) and/or are being given full loads of courses each session this only speaks to you as an instructor who is really good. Do the job you wanted to do, and remember: there are thousands of others out there who would trade places with you in a nanosecond.

DISTANCE LEARNING INSTRUCTION CAN CRIMP VACATIONS AND FREE TIME—SUCK IT UP

Yup—it's you and the computer, nearly all the time; it's rare when you can tell your students, "Hey, don't count on being around for the next week 'cause I'm going camping in Maine!" or, "I'm going to be busy the next few days, so assignments will be late" —you get the picture. Unless it's an emergency or day here or there your students depend on you to be available; you—YOU—are the lifeforce that keeps that connection between students and you energetic, motivated, engaging. Be gone too long and students start disappearing from class and complaints against you are lodged. Not good, not good at all. So, when you leave for wherever, for whatever, be sure you find where Internet connections are available (there are a host of such sites online). You can be on a beach in Hawaii or having dinner at Noma in Denmark or chilling out at a KOA campground in Iowa or running the Ironman in Lake Placid or nearly anywhere: your students will think you are living in their computers, and that's the way it ought to be.

DON'T LOOK DOWN ON ANY SUGGESTION OFFERED TO IMPROVE YOUR TEACHING

There are online teaching snobs who won't accept advice unless it is 100% certified only applicable to distance learning, not one iota

for face-to-face classes. That's bunk; teaching is teaching, and while there are teaching situations unique to the online environment and the face-to-face environment many suggestions, approaches, tips, and info can be applicable to both. So? Think about it: many of us got our teaching feet wet in face-to-face classes (especially if you go back far enough before there was the Internet)—how much of what you honed in those classrooms do you now use teaching distance learning courses? Accept all advice, then decide if you can use it as is, if it needs to be tweaked, or it just won't work in your class.

STUDENTS AND SUPERVISORS WILL GIVE YOU POOR EVALS AT TIMES—DON'T CRY ABOUT IT

You might think you're the perfect online instructor—and maybe you are—but that won't prevent students from giving you poor evals now and then. Sometimes, students take out their own poor efforts on "the teacher," blaming you and using the end-of-course evaluation to vent their frustrations. But don't blow up, get angry, or—worst—write an angry e-mail to your supervisor. Bad evals from students come with the territory—just do your best in the class, and if you have one or more students giving you problems in class reach out to them ... and save your and their e-mails "just in case." As for supervisors, take a close look at the ding(s) you were given; you might have overlooked something. And if you do believe it was unjustified ask—in a nice way—for more clarification. The more you embrace, the better you'll be seen as one who wants to improve.

SOME ONLINE SCHOOLS JUST WON'T WANT YOU—A FACT OF TEACHING LIFE

Many, many distance learning instructors cast their teaching nets on the vast ocean of schools offering online courses with the intent of teaching for a zillion different

schools. And with all these schools needing so many online instructors and you with such great credentials there's no way you could be turned down. Way. You will be turned down—often—for any number of reasons—including your major course load on your transcripts not matching your subject interest for the school; a school's long-term needs when you only are looking at the now; better qualified candidates (yeah, they do sometimes exist!); and the quality of your writing and/or the wording in your initial contact. Accept this, but don't let it discourage you from pursuing other online teaching gigs. You'll learn from the feedback, hone your application process, have a more targeted search. Also, do your homework: research each school to which you are applying, including finding the names of folks in specific positions—such as department heads—who might have more direct influence in the hiring process than an HR assistant who fields hundreds of applications each day.

YOU DON'T KNOW IT ALL—AND NEVER WILL

The best online instructors—and the ones I most respect—are those who are always seeking out additional sources (human and non-human) to improve their teaching effectiveness. These distance learning folks are confident in their own abilities and subject mastery, but know the perfect, all-knowing online instructor is right up there with The Abominable Snowman and The Loch Ness Monster. The more you search out journals, books, newspapers, websites, professional associations (and their conferences), and materials offered by your school the more complete a distance learning teacher you will be. And when you have the opportunity take advice given by others and seek out advice given by others: each of us has different distance learning experiences, and the more we share these with one another the stronger our efforts in the classroom. Your students will get a

really, really great learning experience in your online class—and, yeah, your school will come to love you as well.

KEEP YOUR UGLY EMOTIONS IN CHECK—THEY CAN DERAIL YOUR TEACHING CAREER

Each of us has vented: anger, frustration, disappointment, concern, anxiety, all brought about by any number of reasons in the online classroom. Whether from your course structure, students, supervisor(s), and/or school policies the bed of roses you thought would be the backdrop for each of your courses will sometimes also present weeds and thorns. Okay—so it goes. But certainly never let these negative reactions go beyond your own mind (and if you really, really, really do need share your thoughts with someone do so with a significant other, another family member, or close friend—someone who can trusted to take your uglies to their grave before sharing them with others). When these spill over into the tone or wording of class postings and e-mails you can land in deep doo-doo—and once you share a scar it's not soon forgotten.

BE PROUD OF TEACHING ONLINE—DON'T APOLOGIZE FOR OR HIDE IT

If I had a dollar for each time I hear this ...well, you know the phrase. There are many distance learning instructors who just don't feel the pride for doing what they do; it's as if it's not good enough, that it's something to hide from the rest of the world. Look, there are any number of reasons why people choose to teach online, but the fact remains we are TEACHING, passing along information and expertise and insights on a subject area to others so they can do better throughout their lives, academically, professionally, personally; so they can be a lynchpin for positive societal, financial, professional growth in our country. How great is all that? Über great! It

makes no difference that you are not world renowned, don't have awards for your teaching, can't buy a Jag from your teaching salary, are not a household name across America—what you are doing is enhancing, improving, and motivating others' lives, not just now but far, far beyond your course. If that is not something of which to be proud I don't know what is.

YOU'LL HAVE TIMES WHEN IT SEEMS LIKE YOU'RE WORKING IN A FACTORY LINE—SO WHAT?

The same old-same old can set in with any profession, and distance learning is not immune. Day after day, week after week, month after month of grading and returning assignments, responding to student postings in discussions, sending out class e-mails and course announcements, reading and following up on supervisors' and support staff directives ... the list goes on, and can be wearing. But this is built into the structure of online teaching; it's simply a portion of any courses offered via the Internet, so you not only must accept and do all of this but do so as if each time it's the first time—and thus your eagerness, excitement, and enthusiasm can't waver. But behind the scenes there are tricks you can use to keep this up: take breaks, incorporate more resources into your classes, apply your creativity to perk up student interest and engagement, stay organized. And remember: all of these "gotta-make-the-doughnuts" tasks are focused on one thing: helping students to learn in an optimal way, and that makes any online teaching drudgery always worth the while.

SITTING ON YOUR DERRIERE ALL DAY AIN'T HEALTHY—WATCH YOUR EATING AND EXERCISE

Folks who teach online often wax poetically about how great it is to be sitting in the confines of their home (or wherever they chose to use the Internet) while teaching. Saving on gas, no driving or parking problems. Rain or snow is always on the outside, choice of clothing makes no diff, food and drink—with loud metal rock blaring—can always be around as the course is taught: all major benefits of online teaching, to be sure. But that's also much sitting, with a real tendency to want a snack when doing a course, with TV and nap breaks off and on—and this can become too easy to accept. Over the long haul this is just not good for your mind or body, so you need to get out: exercise and eat healthy. I've run into too many distance learning instructors who are the victims of what I call "The Distance Learning Instructor's Lazy Body and Mind Syndrome." And you are not the only one who can be hurt by this—your family and friends, sure, but also your students: you can become lazy, lethargic, lugubrious in your efforts in the class. But exercise on a regular basis, with overall healthy eating, and wow: you'll be a force with which to be reckoned.

Remember: Popeye had only cans of spinach to save the day and The Incredible Hulk had to be slapped in the face before his muscles took over—yet the distance learning instructor has so much more available to make it heroically through the slings and arrows of an online classroom.