

Ask Errol!

Errol Craig Sull

As more online courses are offered the questions I receive continue to grow at a fast pace—and that's great, because we can learn so much from one another. I've again selected those that will impact the most distance learning instructors. Please keep your questions coming. Meanwhile, this column's offerings ...

A new version of Word just came out, and there are new editions of other software that

I also use in my courses. Any advice as to when I should upgrade to the new edition of software?

Your question is one I receive on a pretty constant basis, for three reasons: there is more software being produced, online schools are embracing more of this technology, and software manufacturers realize that the more they develop or upgrade the more income they can make. In the end, all of this breaks down into two factors that will determine the answer to your question:

First, what does your school require? Several online schools require students to use the latest version of Word, and thus you must have it available as well. You will also find that certain free software—such as Adobe Reader and Java—are necessary to read various documents and files from your school, but these can be downloaded at no cost. Finally, online schools often provide software at no cost to instructors when that software is a required part of the course—do a thorough check to see what your school might offer.

Second, what do you really need for your online teaching? Microsoft's most recent release (for PC) is Office 2010, which includes Word 2010, and Corel debuted WordPerfect Office X5, which contains WordPerfect 5—but do you really need these latest versions? Unless a school requires the current versions the answer is probably not, as there are rather minimal



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overall differences from the previous editions, at least in the word processing software. But if you are always looking for the next edge, the next “whistle and bell” in your software then certainly go for a new edition of whatever software you use. (I have been known to buy a software upgrade for only one new feature that I believe will enhance my teaching efforts in the classroom.)

There is a word of caution: the first version of a new upgrade to software usually has kinks and bugs for which the company releases fixes, called “patches.” If you can deal with the wait it might be better to hold off for a second or third generation of the newest version so these problems can be worked out (a constant check of the manufacturers’ websites will keep you in the know).

I just started teaching online, and my school has given me so many policies to follow, as well as strict guidelines for student interaction. From reading your past columns I know you have much experience in online teaching, so do schools tend to ease up on all their rules and regulations, or should I follow them to the letter?

It’s important to understand the “why” of so many “you musts” from online schools, and there are really three “whys,” each school using one, two, or all: (1) for certification—in order to be recognized as a legitimate degree-granting institution all schools (online and face-to-face) must be accredited by one or more national accrediting bodies. Based on what these accrediting organization require from a school certain policies and procedures will be instituted that all faculty must follow. (2) Schools often have done extensive research—scholarly and experiential—to determine what approaches would best result in an optimal learning experience for students and allow for the greatest retention rate (crucial for a school’s bottom line). These results translate into set syllabi structure, course structure, and teaching

approaches to which the faculty must adhere. (3) Some online schools, sadly, set their courses, student enrollment per course, and faculty procedures to get in and out as many students as possible each year. The students seldom receive a good education, and faculty are usually unhappy. If this describes your school my best advice is—to get out.

With all this as background you must keep in mind two items: how committed are you to the school/to your teaching for the school AND will your supervisor give you any guidance over time as to where you can relax a bit? The first two-part question only you can answer—but if schools say certain items are “must” items and you enjoy teaching for the school then do what is required. As for the second question: when you do feel a requirement is really going overboard ask your supervisor just to clarify the strictness of X, Y, or Z requirement—more times than you might think a supervisor will indicate you can approach the requirement with your common sense judgment.

My goal is to be a really good distance learning instructor, and in the 5 years I’ve been teaching this way I think I’ve done a pretty good job. But can you recommend some “outside-the-box” approaches that can add to my knowledge of distance learning so my students can have even better experiences in my classes?

You don’t mention what you have already done to become a better online instructor, so my suggestions might be some you’ve already tried. Still, I want to offer a few items that often are overlooked, yet can add much to a distance learning instructor’s repertoire in the classroom:

First, be on constant lookout on the Web for real-life examples to illustrate everyday application of the subject being taught. Our classes are stagnant in that we often use textbooks, lectures, and other items that are not live. This can make a classroom experience seem limited to academia,

which is not the ultimate goal of our teaching. But when students see their subject in full living form, affecting folks on a daily basis that transitions the subject beyond the bits and bytes of our classroom to their professional lives of now and/or later—crucial for any online learning experience.

Second, when you have the option of using a live chat feature invite a guest presenter who uses your subject material in everyday work situations. This is a great example of how technology can add another important dimension to the online classroom. Here, not only will students hear important details, interesting anecdotes, and current application information from an expert in the field but they also have the opportunity to ask questions. And, if you don't have the option of a live chat, go to Plan B: do an .mp3 (audio) or video interview (such as YouTube) of the person, then post it for the class.

Third, look to distance learning newsletters and conferences from distance learning organizations (such as ours: the United States Distance Learning Association) for new ideas, info, videos, booklets, etc. on new developments in distance learning. You'll find a plethora of info—probably much more than you could ever accommodate in your class!

I teach for a few online schools, and two of them require I hold live chats each week of my courses. This really cuts into my time. Any suggestions, or am I just stuck with what the schools require?

Live chats take up an instructor's time: you must be present for the live chat at the same time each scheduled day, for X number of weeks. And it is rare when an entire class—or even a majority of the class—shows up for the live chat because it is held in real time, and students can find the selected time overlaps with a work schedule or other “must” responsibilities. (When live chats are not mandated most schools require faculty to record them so students can view them in archived versions.) Yet for

those students who attend the live chats research has shown—and my own experience bears this out—that students tremendously benefit from being able to ask instructors questions about assignments or core material in real time and instructors being able to denote a large chunk of time to expanding on a subject's component.

This background points to a tremendous value in offering live chats. And if a school for which you teach requires it remember: you wanted to teach for that school, and with that came an agreement to abide by school policies. If you cannot make the time for the live chats and/or give them your best efforts that school might not be for you. But here's a tip: take your live chats—especially those you develop in PowerPoint—and offer them to your supervisor for distribution to others in your department: this can go a long way in showing you as a dedicated online instructor who is a major team player.

“Nervous”—that's the best way to describe me throughout the year as I'm always worried as to whether I am going to be rehired for the next session with my online school or if I'm going to get the number of courses I desire. I'm tired of this stress. Are there any ways to better assure I do get rehired and get the preferred number of courses?

There is a short answer to your question—a question, by the way, which nearly every adjunct instructor (the majority of instructors who teach online) has asked of him/herself: give the school what it expects from you, nothing less. This is the best insurance you can have for rehire and to receive the number of courses you'd like.

But I said that was the short answer. This background points to a tremendous value in offering live chats and it is because there are also many other instructors who, too, will give what the school requires. So what you need do is always—and I do mean “always” —go beyond what your supervisor and school expect of you in every requirement given you for your

courses. Schools know that when students have a very positive learning experience in an online classroom those students will not only take more courses at the school but will also tell their friends. And when a school knows of an instructor who can be depended on to give really good teaching efforts, on a constant basis, resulting in great student feedback/evaluations—those are the instructors that school will first want to keep in their stable and first want to be certain receive as many courses as

can legally be offered an instructor (depending on enrollment).

Remember: How boring when a palette of colors is only varied shades of one color, yet the palette of many colors of varied shades lead to deeper, richer, more exciting paintings—such as what we learn from others combined with our own knowledge translate into a more engaging, stimulating, and invigorating online learning experience for our students.

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