

# The Hot Topics for 2012— and How to Keep Them Cool!

Errol Craig Sull

As I write this it is the beginning of 2012, and thus many new possibilities and opportunities exist for all of us—and this extends to the distance learning classroom. In the coming year we are going to meet obstacles in our classroom we had not anticipated, new procedures and software introduced by our schools, opportunities to improve our teaching we had not

considered, and complexities of our lives not yet known but that can impact our online teaching efforts. This column is written to help you over, around, and through all of these ... a guide to the most pressing topics in distance education for the coming year—and how you can best embrace, tame, and own them on your terms:

## STUDENT ENGAGEMENT REMAINS THE MOST IMPORTANT FOCUS OF DISTANCE LEARNING

I am going into my 18th year of teaching online, and in those many years I have seen more articles, experienced more discussions, and responded to more e-mails on student engagement in the online classroom than any other topic in distance learning. And it is a no-brainer as to why: if the students are not engaged they are not going to learn, they will lose interest in the course, there is a good chance they might be a negative stat in student retention, and your school might lose the need for some distance learning instructors—not good for folks who make their living doing this! So ... put your best effort yet into student retention: one of my earlier columns for *Distance Learning*, in the fall of 2009, offers many suggestions on how to best keep your students engaged. But



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beyond that info I know you have your own approaches, and your school has no doubt offered ideas—use many, for once you have your students engaged on a regular basis you have conquered the number one concern in distance learning.

### **IT IS CRUCIAL DISTANCE EDUCATORS HAVE A CONSTANT PRESENCE IN THE CLASSROOM**

Since you do not have a physical presence in the classroom—that is, a face-to-face classroom—where students will often pay attention to your teaching simply because you are there, you must be sure students know you are interested in the course, care about their efforts, and are around when you are needed. Without question, the biggest complaint of students is of faculty who are slow in responding to their questions/e-mails and who do not seem to be very involved in the class. Remember that your computer is like an umbilical cord that links you with the students; to keep that lifeblood of excitement, motivation, and engagement at a high level you must consistently “feed” that cord with your presence. Do this and your class will be a vibrant place the students want to be—and your stock as an instructor will steadily rise.

### **BEING ORGANIZED AND HAVING A GOOD SENSE OF TIME MANAGEMENT WILL KEEP YOUR STRESS DOWN AND CLASSES GOING SMOOTHLY**

While a new year often brings many resolutions—including being better organized and a better manager of time—many of these resolutions fall by the wayside after a month or so. But staying organized and improving your use of time will greatly keep you on top of your distance learning teaching in a manner that is not by the seat of your pants, last minute, back against the wall, and any other such cliché that comes

to mind. Teaching online should be fun, yet when we allow our organization and time management skills to spiral out of control, the fun is gone—and such a scattered approach also often leads to assignments returned to students late or not at all, deadlines missed, e-mails neglected that need responses, and an overall poor teaching performance. You do not want, you do not need, any of this ... so do what you need to do for an organized and time-mastered approach to your distance teaching.

### **GIVE YOUR STUDENTS, YOUR SUPERVISOR, YOUR SUPPORT STAFF, AND YOUR SCHOOL WHAT THEY NEED AND WHEN THEY NEED IT**

On the surface, this seems simple—but there is so much involved. When you start listing all that you need give your students, all that your supervisor requires, and all requirements your school requires, you will have quite the list. Added to this will be intangibles that really cannot be quantified, such as your presence in the classroom, motivating students, linking the course to employment, increasing your engagement with students—the list goes on. But the idea of a list is a good one, no matter if teaching one course for one school, multiple courses for one school, or courses for more than one school: it becomes your guide to doing all things right in your online classroom. And remember that feeling we have all experienced in forgetting one or two items that should have been done: “Oh, no!!” We will never again have to have that.

### **GO OVER ALL EVALUATIONS FROM THE PAST YEAR, AS WELL AS ANY OTHER SUGGESTIONS FROM STUDENTS AND STAFF—AND LOOK AT THEM SERIOUSLY**

If there is one area more than any other that distance instructors ignore, it is their

evaluations from past classes: sometimes they are read, and when so they are looked at, then forgotten; and many online instructors do not read their evals, believing as long as they have a new contract for the coming session all is right with them and their schools. (Only when an ominous e-mail from a supervisor comes down that reads, "I want to talk with you about your evaluation" do we suddenly take notice—but you never want an after-the-fact read like this!) Look over all evals, and make an ongoing list of positives listed—and pay especial attention to any negatives—from both supervisors and students. Items can be pointed out to make us better, to remind of an area we overlooked, to introduce new approaches we had not considered—all of this can only result in one effect: we as better distance instructors.

### **STAY CURRENT ON TECHNOLOGY THAT CAN HELP YOU DELIVER YOUR COURSE INFORMATION AND IMPROVE STUDENT INTERACTION**

The distance instructor remains the linchpin to keep a class alive, to teach students, and to make the online learning experience a positive one for students. Yet it is technology that allows the field of distance learning to exist, and thus we must pay ongoing homage to its importance by staying on top of new software releases, social media options, and hardware updates that can improve all areas of our online classroom. Often, this begins with the course delivery platform used by the schools, as well as software the schools incorporate for live chats, course material presentation, and faculty meetings—it is important you know all facets of these so you can incorporate the tech facets of your course and school to their fullest. But do not stop here: there are many free downloads of software that can help with your teaching...be sure your computer (in whatever form it takes) is at its best ... and look for updates of software you constantly use (and the school

does not supply). Do all this, and your teaching efforts will be more fun, efficient, and productive.

### **BE SURE FEEDBACK ON STUDENT ASSIGNMENTS IS DETAILED AND STAYS POSITIVE**

One of the beautiful benefits of online teaching is we can offer our students so much more feedback than if we had to write comments by hand on each student's assignment (not to mention no problems with students discerning our comments!). And when students receive feedback that is detailed—and by detailed I mean it always contains three parts: pointing out when something is incorrect, telling the student why it is incorrect, and offering advice on how to get it right—they have, in essence, individualized minitextbooks that truly help them learn. These comments can be made easier to do if you develop a "bank" of comments from which you can choose for each student assignment; you have the option of copying and pasting these as is or altering each one for a more personal touch. And do not forget to point out positives in student assignments and always leave an overall summation comment that ends on a positive note: our comments should, in the end, encourage a student, never depress or discourage a student.

### **ALWAYS HAVE THE ONLINE CLASS FUNCTION WITH REALITY-BASED EDUCATION IN MIND**

As we know, our students take our courses so they can improve their knowledge for use in the "real world" of work. However, students often look at the course subject and material with limited or no thought to how it can be implemented beyond the bits and bytes of the distance learning classroom. Yet when we remind students of how this can be incorporated (e.g., the use of examples, videos of folks in the field

talking about the importance of the subject, and posting of articles relating the subject's importance on the job), we have taken that critical step into reality-based education (i.e., showing the practical, everyday importance of what they are learning). There is a nice bonus to this: it helps students stay engaged, gets students to discuss more about their own lives, and motivates them to give more effort into assignments.

### **ONGOING MOTIVATION IN ALL AREAS OF THE COURSE IS IMPERATIVE**

It is common for students to have problems keeping themselves motivated in the distance learning classroom: poor grades, personal problems getting in the way of their efforts, an increased workload on the job eating into their school time, family responsibilities, anxiety about the distance learning environment, and other situations can take shark chops out of students' motivation in the course. Thus, we must be constant cheerleaders for our students, from assignments to general e-mail/announcement postings to live chats to responses to student postings to us. And when need be (and allowed by your school), phone calls to students can be one of the best forms of motivation. Put these all together and you can keep students enthused about their efforts and lift up students who have run into problems.

### **YOUR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IS IMPORTANT FOR YOU, YOUR STUDENTS, YOUR SCHOOL**

We have been hired to teach by our schools partially because of our expertise in one or more subjects. Too, we have been deemed as having "the right stuff" to deliver the

course material, to be a good presence in the classroom—in two words, to teach. Yet we must never sit on what we first brought to the school, but rather always look to improve our subject knowledge, abilities as teachers, adeptness in the online classroom, knowledge of our school. So—take advantage of any professional development webinars or chats your school offers, seek out new info on your areas of specialty, and constantly reads what is new in teaching strategies and approaches, with a focus on the online classroom. This will keep you a strong asset to your school—and your students can always be sure of getting the best from you.

### **CONTINUALLY POST NEW RESOURCES IN YOUR COURSE TO ENHANCE STUDENT LEARNING**

Our schools provide us with lectures and/or texts and/or audiovisual resources in the initial classroom setup. Much thought has gone into these, and the students gain much from what they offer. Yet there is so much more available we can bring to students relating directly or indirectly to our subject: articles, videos, interviews, cartoons, quotes, newspaper and magazine stories, documentaries, an almost endless list that offer so many plusses—underscoring and spotlighting of course material, a transition to the outside world, enhanced student engagement, and increased student excitement about being in your class. Certainly, do not overdose your students with this—too much and they will turn away from it; using it wisely, however, can take your distance learning classroom to exciting and interesting heights.

*Remember:* Superman has amazing powers, Batman has Robin, and King Kong has size; however, the distance educator has the greatest aid of all—knowledge.