

Ask Errol!

Errol Craig Sull

Wow—the year is going by: nearly fall! Yet distance learning classes continue, and as they continue to grow—a huge growth spurt is forecast over the next few years—so will new problems, ideas, approaches, strategies, activities, complications, and obstacles relating to distance learning. And when these come my way I'll be happy to offer suggestions that might help. Do you have a distance learning question? Drop me an e-mail at ErrolDistanceLearning@gmail.com

@gmail.com—I'll be glad to help out if I can! (And to make it in the next issue of *Distance Learning* please be sure to contact me by September 30.)

Here is the latest batch of questions and concerns that I deem are probably considered by many:

I use a bank of prewritten comments to insert when grading my students' assignments, and this works well for my students, as my comments are detailed. Yet for me it becomes a same-old same old, so I'm in a quandary: it certainly saves me the time of writing individualized comments for each student, but it also begins to feel very repetitious—almost boring—for me, and perhaps for my students, resulting in their not reading all my comments. Any suggestions?

When distance learning educators realized the value of using a stash of already-written comments for their students' assignments it was a great step in streamlining the grading process, while also saving beaucoups of time. Yet, as you point out, there can set in a “ho-hum” sense—and this can put a dent in the student-instructor rapport if the students begin to feel your comments are always going to be the same. So, as Clint Eastwood's character remarked in the movie *Heartbreak Ridge*, we adapt, we improvise, we overcome—and in doing so we can make



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those cookie cutter comments seem freshly baked.

First, always let your students know—at the beginning of a course—the comments they receive from you will be very detailed, not only pointing out when something is incorrect but why it is incorrect and how to get it right. This immediately makes any of your comments a good thing. (And a hint: never repeat a comment in its entirety in an assignment; rather, the second or third, et cetera, time the same comment is inserted in your student's assignment write, "See comment #1" or whatever number marks the first time that comment appeared. This way, the student is not overwhelmed by a huge amount of text.) Second, always tweak a prewritten comment when necessary so it specifically fits the problem being pointed out—this makes your bank of comments come alive, and will be an added reason why students need read each of your comments. Last, when a student has a large number of A, B, or C problems in his or her assignment, thus necessitating the same comment many times, drop the student an e-mail about this—this helps stress the importance of your comments and lets student know you take the comments, and thus the student's improvement, seriously.

My school offers distance learning courses not through the typical online course delivery platform, such as Blackboard or eCollege, but rather using a video camera. I speak into a camera, and I am broadcast to several schools with which my college has a contract for the course; the students can see me, and I can see most of them (as the camera is stationary, and thus I can only view half of the class at a time). You have not addressed such a situation in your previous columns, but can you offer approaches for me that would keep these students more involved, rather than merely looking at a talking head each day of the class?

I've had much experience with this, so I know well the problem you describe! This

type of distance learning presents unique problems not found in the more typical online course, where all students "see" you through your writings—and can do so on a 24/7 basis. The two biggest problems to overcome in video teaching are keeping the students engaged and having the material taught not quickly disappear from the students' minds (it is an oral presentation, after all, and thus revisiting the lesson is more difficult to achieve).

Several approaches have proved successful in overcoming these challenges: (1) An enthusiastic, even quirky, approach to teaching will help keep students engaged in the class; (2) Ask many questions of the students, and be sure each comes in view of the camera, and gives his or her name; (3) When possible, use your school's course delivery system to help in presenting info of the course, including discussion, activities, and lecture material; (4) Start off each class with a preselected student giving a summary of what is to be covered in that class's lesson; (5) Explain at the start of the course—and occasionally remind the students—of the course's importance in the professional world; this can assist in making the material more important, and thus improve student focus; (6) As for seeing only half of the class be sure the camera is repositioned for each class so you can rotate what section of the class you are seeing. These suggestions combined can transfer the dull, stagnant video course into one that is vibrant and exciting!

I love this column! It offers tidbits that have helped me in my courses, and I've shared them with others in my school. So with that praise (you do deserve it!) I have a question of my own—any suggestions on how to get students more involved in the content of their assignments, in turning them in on time, and doing a better job on what they turn in? I think I've tried just about everything!

Well, thanks for the nice words! And of course you are asking questions that are the Golden Fleece all distance educators yearn to find! If an immediate answer were available how easy would be our life in online education. But while a “one size fits all approach” is still sought for your concerns there are some helpful approaches that most assuredly do improve each of the items you mention. In order to successfully implement these, however, they require more time and effort on your part—but the end result is well worth you doing this.

Let’s begin with a reminder to students—around midweek—of what you expect in the upcoming assignment, where students have previously erred, and tips on how to do a good job; send this out as a class e-mail and post it as an announcement in the class, to be sure all see it. (This can be taken to a higher level of success if you make an audio recording of this info, then post it to the class—but still send out the e-mail.) Next, develop a checklist of each major assignment requirements, then post it in the course each time an assignment is coming up; tell students to highlight each item once it is completed. This is a great way to help students turn in all assignments on time and with all requirements included (and remind students this checklist can be adapted to other portions of the course, such as Discussion). Third, be sure you post enough resources in the course so that students will have all they need to show a good effort on each assignment. Last, interject reminders—about twice per week—in a discussion thread about deadlines for upcoming assignments, with plenty of motivational and enthusiastic language included. While these items cannot guarantee 100% success for each of your concerns they certainly will diminish them!

There are so many software packages and “tools” available that it becomes almost

impossible to keep up with them: Power-Point, Prezi, and Adobe Connect are only a few, and I’m beginning to wonder if this is the future of distance learning, that is, where does the instructor fit into all of this? (PS Thanks for your columns—very helpful!)

Not to worry—the distance learning instructor is not in danger of becoming extinct; quite the opposite, in fact! But there are online educators who look at the onslaught of software tools designed for the distance learning classroom as a great way to minimize their efforts, and this should not be the case. It is the distance educator who controls these—and he or she gives direction to them, while also guiding students to their use for better learning.

It is, of course, important to stay current with all software your school adopts, but especially important is how you decide to integrate these into your teaching. As you become more familiar with each make a checklist of how you can implement them into your course for a richer learning experience. And always watch for students’ comments, suggestions, and concerns about the software—you can learn much this way, all to improve your overall course effectiveness.

Several studies have been done on which is more effective for the student: a distance learning course without an instructor, but loaded with “whistles and bells” of software; and the same combination of really good teaching software, with the distance learning instructor included. Always the course that has the instructor comes out ahead—way ahead—because the instructor offers guidance, suggestions, directions, reassurance, motivation, and personal intervention in a way the best designed software cannot do ... and I doubt will ever do. (And PS—I’m glad my columns have proven beneficial to you!)

Remember: We can only be best by striving to be better—and that takes forces far beyond what our one brain can offer.

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