

OBSERVATIONS THAT GUIDE PRACTICE— BASED ON RESEARCH Miscues, Oversights, Errors, and Blunders of the Distance Learning Instructor: What Not to Do and How to Correct Them

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Perfect distance learning instructors do not exist—and never will. It is called being human, and all instructors have occasional missteps in our teaching. What is crucial: we learn from these so they are not repeated. Not doing so can result in not being assigned more classes to teach or dismissal from a school. To be sure these two uglies never happen to you I've taken my gazillion years of online teaching experience and offer these suggestions to keep your teaching errors at zero, or at least a minimum.

- **Missing required discussion postings.** Depending on the school, an instructor may be required to make X number of postings on Y number of days—and to Z number of students. One or more of these requirements can be easy to overlook, but research

has shown there are two simple ways to be sure all discussion posting requirements are met: (1) Use an audible or visual reminder, such as on a smartphone or a reminder software; (2) Keep a checklist next to the computer of all requirements for discussion postings, broken down by days; check each off when complete.

- **Not following all general requirements.** There will be many requirements a distance learning instructor must meet in a course beyond deadlines and numbers of this or that. As these come out make a checklist; again, don't bury it in a computer file, but rather keep it on the desk: this will be a constant reminder so you follow all course, student, and school requirements.
- **Missing deadlines.** Being open 24/7, an online course will have required deadlines

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(posting of grades, responding to student queries, etc.) that must be met. Studies have verified that missing one or more—especially on a regular basis—can negatively impact one’s employment. This is where an audible or visual date reminder would make sure deadlines are not missed.

- **Responding late to student queries.** Nearly every school has a “need do” as to the time frame in which to answer student queries (usually 24-48 hours). If you miss any immediately apologize to the student. Should a supervisor be informed? If miss one or two queries are missed, no, as long as any are immediately rectified with the student, and can share such a response with a supervisor if asked. Instructors are human, and the occasional misstep will happen.
- **Forgetting to attend a “must attend” meeting or webinar.** Most school meetings and webinars are recorded, so it’s important to view these. It is crucial for an apology to one’s supervisor—“the best offense if a good defense”—and share the reason why it was missed. A tip: after viewing the recording let the supervisor know of one point taken away; this is a good way to prove it was viewed.
- **Giving a student response that is negative, insulting, or hurtful.** When writing to a student or students always look over the text before sending it; inadvertently, something may be included that in a read over would be eliminated. Studies indicate when speaking to a student it is important to always hold emotion in check; words must be weighed carefully before speaking. Yet instructors know that no matter how careful one might be a student may react negatively to something written or said. Let the student know it was not done with malice and it was appreciated the student pointed it out.

- **Offering minimal feedback on and resources for assignments.** Students grow through the input and overall assistance we give them; when that is lacking the students have an unenjoyable experience in the class. Be sure to give feedback and offer resources that are helpful, to the point, and comprehensive. A rule of thumb for feedback is always begin with a positive comment, including thanking the student for the assignment; next, offer one or two plus items from the student’s work—this lets the student know his or her efforts did have successes; then, delve into areas that need improvement, explaining why each item was incorrect and how to get it correct; and end with an overall motivational message.
- **Not following up on supervisor evaluations.** Supervisors give evaluations to help their instructors grow. It is always a plus to let the supervisor know the suggestions are now in use—and they have proved helpful.
- **Overlooking reticent or “ghost” students.** There are students in every class who hang back, offering little in the way of engagement or assignments. Additionally, there may be “ghost” students: students on a roster but they never participate in any fashion. Two “to dos”: (1) Make every effort to contact these students, and on a regular basis; (2) Let the students’ advisors know, and ask for their help.
- **Having a paucity of class Announcements and emails.** Constant instructor presence in a class is a must; beyond regular discussion postings be sure to post at least two class announcements each week and also send at least one class email each week.

Remember, to err is, indeed, human—but to learn from our error so it’s not repeated is a great joy of being human!