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Special Report

11 Strategies for Managing Your Online Courses

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IDEAS FOR EFFECTIVE ONLINE INSTRUCTION

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11 Strategies for Managing Your Online Courses

Much has been written about the challenges of teaching an online course. While not discounting the unique (and sometimes frustrating) aspects of the online learning environment, it could be said that, despite the numerous differences, many of the same course management strategies that are essential to success in a traditional classroom also apply in the online classroom. These strategies include the importance of a strong syllabus, clear directions, well-organized materials, and timely feedback.

Of course, the big challenge for online instructors is that the very nature of online education amplifies the importance of properly addressing these management issues, while throwing a few more additional obstacles into the mix. Choosing the right communication tools and protocols, addressing technology problems, managing student expectations, and building community are just some of issues that can stretch online instructors to the breaking point.

11 Strategies for Managing Your Online Courses was created to help online instructors tackle many of the course management issues that can erode the efficiency and effectiveness of an online course. It features 11 articles pulled from the pages of *Online Classroom*, including:

- Syllabus Template Development for Online Course Success
- The Online Instructor's Challenge: Helping 'Newbies'
- Virtual Sections: A Creative Strategy for Managing Large Online Classes
- Internal or External Email for Online Courses?
- Trial by Fire: Online Teaching Tips That Work
- The Challenge of Teaching Across Generations

It's important to keep in mind that you're not the only one who may be a little anxious about going online. Students often have anxiety when taking their first online course. It's up to you to help them feel more confident and secure, all the while keeping your workload at a manageable level. The course management tips in this report will help.

Rob Kelly
Editor
Online Classroom

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Syllabus Template Development for Online Course Success

By Ken Hess, James Falkofske, and Carol Bormann Young

Investing time up front specifically detailing all aspects of the online course will reduce the need for follow-up and will provide students with a greater sense of security and a more accurate set of expectations about the course. Student anxiety can be reduced when clear expectations are detailed at the start of the course.

There are three basic principles that will help reduce the amount of classroom management time required in online courses:

1. Provide a thorough syllabus and course schedule so that students have clear expectations.
2. Provide online discussion areas specifically designated for students to post questions about the content and assignments.
3. Provide rubrics, samples of assignments, and specific assignment instructions so that students are aware of the specific formats, requirements, and expectations for submitted work.

Developing your online course syllabus

We recommend that your online syllabus specifically include the following elements:

- Thorough explanations of policies and procedures
- Detailed expectations and formats for assignments
- Clear instructions for communicating with the instructor on private matters versus questions of interest to all students in the class
- List of assignments and locations of relevant rubrics or examples
- Course schedule (or location of that document)
- Specific technology expectations and basic troubleshooting
- Resources and services that the institution provides to online students

Structures

It is important that the syllabus clearly indicate the structures and materials that will be used within the course. This information should include the textbook, the location of important documents and guides, and an explanation of

how the online section will be different from a face-to-face section. In explaining the pedagogy and design of the course, students will have a clearer understanding of how the activities and resources are used during their learning process. The students should also be offered a self-assessment tool that evaluates their preparedness for taking an online course.

Communicating with the instructor

An online syllabus should clearly explain how students should contact the instructor for various types of questions. Students should send email only in situations where the questions or concerns are of a private nature. All other questions about content, assignments, or processes should be posted to the appropriate course discussion board so that all students have the benefit of the instructor's answer.

Policies and procedures

The syllabus serves as the policies and procedures manual for the class. It is best to err on the side of overexplaining versus underexplaining your expectations. Do not be afraid to duplicate information in several areas as they apply to your policy sections. Also, where possible, provide hyperlinks to the institution's Web pages that give further support to the policies you have stated (e.g., plagiarism, student conduct, withdrawal deadlines, etc.) (Vail, 2006).

Failure to provide details regarding course operations and practices will likely cause confusion for students and develop into a stressful environment for students and faculty alike. Since students can choose to work on assignments at any time, they need instructions that are clearer and more detailed than those for a traditional face-to-face class. Any confusion regarding assignments, formats, or processes might lead to work being done incorrectly or not at all. The quality of submitted work might also suffer as a result of unclear directions or lack of samples.

Comprehensive instructions for assignments and detailed information about instructor availability will help avoid questions and problems students might otherwise face.

When designing a syllabus for an online course, communication within a department or curriculum unit is useful in establishing departmental expectations, policies, and procedures. The common language that results can be designed as template text (Jugdev, 2006), which can be copied and pasted into course syllabi. This template text reduces development time for future syllabi and provides consistency when informing students of rights and responsibilities. Template text, where appropriate, should contain links to

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official Web pages that contain conduct and policy statements.

Assignment expectations

In a face-to-face classroom, the details of assignments and reasons for policies are often explained orally. In an online environment, this information should be written directly into the appropriate syllabus sections. Any elaborations that would be spoken in a F2F course need to be written into the syllabus of an online course. Try to anticipate questions that students might have, and answer those questions preemptively. Having clear structures within the course site for students to ask questions and receive hints will benefit all students and reduce your email traffic.

Failure to provide details regarding course operations and practices will likely cause confusion for students and develop into a stressful environment for students and faculty alike.

Technology requirements

An online syllabus must address the specific technology requirements, expectations, and processes that students should follow. Included in this list would be the instructor's expectations for student knowledge of software, access to computer hardware and software, access to Internet connections, and specific skills that students should have.

Instructors should create a page that contains sample files for the various media and documents that are used in the course. This page would also contain links to the browser plug-ins needed, allowing students to "pretest" their computers to verify compatibility with the course content.

The instructor should also prepare a list of alternative assignments or delivery methods to combat online "snow days" when the course management system might be offline or certain tools unavailable at assignment deadlines. For example, instructing students to directly email assignments if the course homework dropbox is unavailable would be beneficial to specifically state in a syllabus.

Resources

Campus services and resources offered to online students should be listed in the syllabus. Examples of these services might include contact information for online tutoring, information technology help desk Web links, library and writing resources, and locations of any on-site computer laboratories that online students can utilize.

It is helpful to publish the syllabus before the class begins so that students are better able to understand technical and other expectations before registering for the course (Rossett, 2005). Some online class schedules have the ability to add notes or hyperlinks to syllabi, and this feature should be utilized where available.

Key sections

The following list details sections that we recommend for inclusion in an online syllabus.

I. Structures: This section contains course description and methods.

- a. Where to find information and assignments in the course
- b. Explaining the pedagogy (how online is different from face to face, and the purpose/objectives of each assessment)
- c. Course objectives and competencies
- d. Course-specific instructional materials and associated costs (texts, software, workbooks, etc.)

II. Communication: This section contains expectations for student interaction with the faculty and the course site.

- a. Preferred methods (questions about course or assignment instructions are posted to discussions; personal and private topics sent through campus email account with appropriate subject line)
- b. Response times (from instructor to student)
- c. Structure (subject headers/from which accounts for message formatting)
- d. Frequency (updates and logins expected per week)
- e. Campus location for FAQs regarding online courses, textbooks, and resources
- f. Detail level expected when asking questions

III. Policies: This section details specific course policies, procedures, and expectations.

- a. Expectations of students regarding prerequisites and technical/research skills
- b. Netiquette
- c. Late assignments
- d. Extra-credit assignments

- e. Attendance
- f. Online snow days (what steps to follow if a specific tool within the IMS is unavailable)
- g. Plagiarism and copyright policies
- h. Disability statement
- i. Preparation and study time; any required online times (synchronous chat or Web conferencing)
- j. Special administrative deadlines (drop/add/withdrawal/refund)
- k. Incompletes
- l. What happens in Las Vegas... (confidentiality of online discussions and peer-reviewed assignments)
- m. Student permission forms for use of projects as future examples (ability for instructor to share or use samples/examples placed into the course by students, with or without names)

IV. Assignments/evaluation: This section details expectations for assignments and activities in which students are earning points, and describes the methods by which grades are determined.

- a. Clear instructions
- b. Learning objectives
- c. Samples and examples, and/or grading rubrics
- d. Due dates and file formats (MS Word or .RTF, APA citation style, etc.)
- e. Instructor grading and feedback timeline
- f. Minimum competencies for passing of class
- g. Expectations for group work, peer review
- h. Online discussions expectations, including the following:
 - i. Length, quality, number of posts
 - ii. Interactions meant to build on previous posts
 - iii. Timeliness of posts to ensure a “conversation”
- i. Grading scale and standards of work quality

V. Technology requirements:

- a. Internet connectivity
- b. Hardware
- c. Software
- d. Browser plug-ins
- e. Verification of IMS (methods to verify that the student’s computer successfully functions with all tools needed within the IMS)
- f. Textbook publisher sites (and method to access or register)
- g. File management and backups
- h. Antivirus software

VI. Resources: This section documents campus and library

resources that may be used in the course.

- a. Campus computer services and labs
- b. Information technology helpdesk
- c. Library resources
- d. Tutoring resources
- e. Writing labs
- f. Online course support

This structure should address most situations for teaching an online course; instructors may feel the need to add additional sections to address specific needs of their course or to meet their departmental or college requirements. It is not advisable to leave out any of these sections; however, this information might be better organized in different documents that are linked to the main course syllabus.

As a means of assessing student understanding of the syllabus, we recommend that students take an online quiz addressing syllabus content.

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Virtual Sections: A Creative Strategy for Managing Large Online Classes

By Lisa Panagopoulos, MS CE

When there are more than 25 students who regularly participate in an online course, the discussion boards and chat rooms can become overwhelming for students and difficult to manage for the instructor. Weekly chat rooms become crowded, which makes it difficult for everyone in the chat room to keep up. Weekly discussion boards become populated with so many postings that students and faculty feel inundated with the amount of information to read through and/or reply to. While the discussion and chat tools are critical to successful online courses, creative strategies need to be identified to help manage large online classes.

As a way to avoid having my students possibly feel overwhelmed and inundated in my course, I came up with a simple solution to managing the challenge of such a large course—I created virtual sections.

In a recent semester I found myself with 40 students in my Introduction to Information Systems Course. As a way to avoid having my students possibly feel overwhelmed and inundated in my course, I came up with a simple solution to managing the challenge of such a large course—I created virtual sections. The “virtual section” is a way to achieve all the benefits of a smaller class within a large class.

To create my virtual sections I used a feature available in most course management tools that allows the instructor to split the class into multiple groups. Rather than splitting

the class with the intent of having the students work in “teams,” which is often the rationale for grouping students, I split the class with the intent of grouping students into multiple sections for the purposes of chat and discussion only.

Here’s how I set up my virtual section. With my class size of 40, I split the class into two separate groups. Students with last names ending in A–K were placed into Group 1, and those with last names ending in L–Z were placed in Group 2. For each week of the course, I set up a separate set of discussion boards for Group 1 and another set for Group 2. The groups also had their own set of weekly chat rooms as well. Approximately 20 students were placed into each group, which is what created the two “virtual sections” within my single course.

When splitting online classes into groups for the purpose of more manageable interaction, only the chat and discussion components are affected. This is good news for the instructor. E-mail, lecture notes, assignments, assessments, and all other course components are visible to the entire class. No additional modifications were made in order to keep track of the “groups” for any other component of my online course.

Incorporating virtual sections into my online course came with some minor added responsibilities that needed to be addressed. Once the course had started, it was important that I was aware of any students who were added late to the course. These students needed to be quickly placed into one of the groups, so that they would have access to a discussion board and chat room. Also, by splitting my class into two groups, I was responsible for conducting two chats per week, rather than just one.

With that said, I feel that the commitment I have invested into creating the virtual sections has been well worth it. I have noticed that when students were a part of a smaller class, the overall quality of the interaction within the course improved immensely. The result has been more meaningful interaction that is more manageable for all involved.

Lisa Panagopoulos is an instructor at the University of Massachusetts Lowell in the IT department. She teaches computer-related courses both online and on campus. She also teaches the “Introduction to Online Teaching Strategies” course to instructors as part of the UMass Lowell Online Teaching Institute. @

Use Participation Policies to Improve Interaction

By Rob Kelly

One instructor's study of student participation in online discussions in two of his asynchronous online courses over a five-year period has yielded some interesting results that have influenced how he conducts his courses.

John Thompson, associate professor in the computer information systems department at Buffalo State College, employed the user-statistics feature within the Blackboard course management system in the courses he taught online through the University of San Diego. The courses were six-week asynchronous graduate-level education courses mandated by the State of California for teacher certification. In each course, discussion was a significant component that counted for 41 percent of each student's final grade.

Not surprisingly, the incentive to participate in the online discussions encouraged participation, but simply mandating participation and making it a substantial part of the course grade does not guarantee the quality of participation that adds to the learning experience.

For example, the University of San Diego requires that each student post seven acceptable messages—those that advance the discussion in some way—each week. The majority of students met this minimum requirement each week, but Thompson found that approximately half of the postings occurred in the last two days of the week, which often made the discussions less productive than they might have been otherwise had students participated throughout the week. “Left on their own, students will have a disproportionate number of postings in the last couple of days in the week. You really need to take a look at that. If that's OK with you, that's fine, but what I find, if left on their own, students have far too many postings done to satisfy a requirement,” Thompson says.

To encourage students to post earlier, Thompson requires a minimum of seven postings from each student during the first four days of each week. Thompson deducts points for failure to meet this requirement.

In addition, each week had seven to nine discussions, and Thompson found that most students tended to post messages to the first two discussions and neglected the others. To counteract this tendency, Thompson required

students to post at least one message to each discussion.

Thompson also looked at the time of day that students accessed their online courses. “Before I started the study, I would assume, based on informal conversations, that a lot of this work or maybe even the bulk of it would occur during the workday when students had access to computers, going online during breaks or before or after school when they had better connections. What I found out was that the two most common times were between eight and nine and between nine and ten at night.”

This finding was somewhat surprising to Thompson. However, because his courses were asynchronous, this did not have any effect on the way he conducted these courses. If he decided to include a synchronous component, this information would give him an indication as to when students might be available.

On the Road Again: Keep Your Computer Happy!

By Errol Craig Sull

Well, it's that time again: summertime, and thus more online instructors are on the road than at any other time of the year. Of course, in addition to the “usual suspects” of clothes, money, cameras, etc., that will tag along, that indispensable umbilical cord to the classroom will also be coming: the laptop. For the class and its students can't be left alone for too long; it and they need you, and thus your summer journeys hither and yon must include that portal of connection to both.

In this column, I offer you the latest tips to keep your hassles with online teaching to a minimum while you enjoy a well-deserved break or two during these warm months:

- **Bring a laptop first aid kit.** On the road you may not have access to a computer store, so it's best to bring both your “this I need” and “this I might need” items with you, including a can of air, screen wipes, Ethernet and flashdrive cords, a small flashlight, contact information in case of a computer problem, and an extra flashdrive.

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- **Travel with a cigarette lighter plug-in.** Several airlines now provide outlets on board so laptops need not run down their batteries. These are the same size and shape as the old cigarette plug-in lighters, so you'll need to bring an adapter to use them—but they will help save your laptop's battery life (for when you really do need it) and give you a tad brighter screen.
- **Bring along copies of important PC files.** Do a thorough check of files on your PC to determine which ones you might need on the road; copy them onto a flashdrive. And don't worry about bringing along those "It's very unlikely I'll need these" files—you probably will find you need at least one, and it's much better to have it with you than to bemoan that you could have used it but it's back home. (By the way: always back up your data in case you and your laptop become "separated!")
- **Know the ins and outs of airport (and other) wi-fi hot spots.** The following four websites are comprehensive and include worldwide airports and just about every other worldwide public location you can think of:
 - o U.S. airports (free and for-a-fee wi-fi):
www.travelpost.com/airport-wireless-internet.aspx
 - o U.S. airports (free wi-fi):
www.wififreespot.com/airport.html
 - o Worldwide (bars, marinas, shops, etc.):
www.ezgoal.com/hotspots
 - o Worldwide airports: (free and for-a-fee wi-fi):
<http://usatoday.jiwire.com/hotspots-hot-spot-airport-directory-browse-by-country.htm>
- **Be aware of hotel's Internet access policies.** Most middle-to-upper-scale hotels have Internet access in the rooms, but some have it available only in their lobbies or other public spots; and there are many hotels and motels that don't have any Internet connection. Check this out before leaving on your trip, including any fees involved.
- **Remember that laptops do not like liquid, sand, humidity, or heat.** While laptops can go anywhere, don't get careless and forget about their aversion to liquid, sand, high humidity, and heat. Be careful of drinks being passed over your laptop and sitting too close to a pool with your laptop; also, don't bring it to the beach: with sand, water, high humidity (possibly), and heat in ample supply, your laptop is a disaster waiting to happen.
- **Be up front with any late student correspondence resulting from your travels.** Nearly all online schools require that faculty respond to student correspondence—of any kind—within 72 hours max. If you expect to have difficulty in meeting this deadline because of an out-of-town trip, let your students know so they can plan accordingly—and will not think you've lost interest.
- **Additional air travel tips can prove very helpful.** Look into exit rows on planes if you have a large laptop screen (these laptops will often not fit in the space available in other seating, except First Class); many airlines allow you to purchase these, if available, online for a small fee. Don't forget your power cord when you go through airport security (and keep your eye on your laptop!). Finally, there is no need to worry about exposing your laptop to the airport security X-rays: these are very low level and will not harm your laptop or its contents.
- **Protect your laptop from thieves.** When not using your computer, keep it locked in its case (this prevents someone from taking your accessories and/or laptop). Label both your laptop and case in the event it is stolen or misplaced. Never let anyone use your laptop unless you are absolutely sure the person can be trusted. If you need to leave the laptop in your hotel room, keep it as unobtrusive (and out of sight) as possible; be sure your windows and doors are locked.
- **Carry proper documents.** If you are leaving the country with your laptop, be sure to bring along proof of purchase, as well as register it with U.S. Customs before you depart. Duty is levied each time you re-enter the United States with electronic equipment that was not manufactured here, unless you can prove that you owned the equipment before you left the States. To do this fill out a Certificate Of Registration For Personal Effects Taken Abroad (CF4457) for each foreign-manufactured product you are taking that has a serial number. You can find a printable PDF version of this form at the U.S. Customs & Border Protection website (www.cbp.gov/), and be sure to include the item's serial number in the Description of Articles box.
- **Keep a low profile.** When using your laptop in a public area, try to find as much privacy as possible: you do not want someone having easy access to private information you may have on the screen (especially bank account numbers and passwords) or to offer easy pickings for someone out to steal a laptop. And if using a PC in an Internet café or the like, shield the screen

from others as much as possible (and never leave any files on any computer but your own).

- **Universal adapter and surge protector.** If traveling abroad, it's imperative that you have a universal adapter so you can use your power cord with another country's electrical system (nearly always different from ours). Also, bring along a surge protector to shield you from any "hiccups" in another country's electrical system.

REMEMBER: Treat your laptop on travels as if your favorite pet and it will remain loyal, dependable, and healthy—for a long time.

Errol Craig Sull has been teaching online courses for more than 12 years and has a national reputation in the subject, both writing and conducting workshops on it. Presently teaching online courses, he is putting the finishing touches on his fourth book—a collection of his online teaching activities titled Pebbles: A Most Unusual Approach to Very Effective Writing. @

Making Visible the Invisible

By Denise Tolan

How do great teaching moments happen? For me, great ideas usually come from watching bad television. One night, I found a show on the Discovery Health channel called I Lost It. The basic premise of the show is that you hear the motivational tales of people who lost weight. In the episode I watched, a woman told the story of her move to a small town in Colorado when she was 16 years old. The town had a population of 1,500 and the woman and her family were the only African-Americans in the community. On top of that, this young woman, at 16, was six feet one inch tall. Her discomfort at being "different," she recalled, was soothed by food. When she graduated from high school, she enrolled in online courses because she wanted "to disappear and be like everyone else." She quit her online classes after a few weeks because she felt "disconnected." Hmmm, I thought.

It just so happened that while I was thinking about this idea of "disappearing" into an online course, I also began teaching one. Each semester I use an icebreaker during

which students have to tell the class something about their past, their present, and their future. Over the years I have become accustomed to seeing the lists of three things appear on the discussion board, so I was surprised when checking the board one evening to see a short post from a student in the class: "Are there any (insert racial designation) in here?"

I read it.

I froze.

I wondered if the term had been offensive to anyone.

I wondered if anyone had read it yet.

I deleted the post and I wrote the student, asking why she had posted the comment. The next morning she wrote back: "Oh, I was just wondering if there was anyone else like me out there." She wanted to "see" who was in the class. She wanted a cultural connection. She wanted to make visible the invisible.

Online teaching is in a double bind as to how to balance the freedom of relative anonymity with potential isolation or the loss of diversity. Much has been written about the online classroom being a level playing field, but I wonder if a level playing field necessitates the stripping away of gender, age, and racial and ethnic identities. How do we honor diversity when we can't see it? Should we even try?

I thought about my own online classrooms. The semester after the war in Iraq began, the discussion board was lit up with students heatedly discussing (and I mean discussing) both sides of the issue. In spite of my vigilance in maintaining a safe environment for students to openly discuss hot-button issues, some students did make hostile remarks about Iraq and the people of that country. Toward the end of the semester, one of the students revealed that she was an Iraqi woman who had married an American man 11 years prior and had moved to Texas. In the following days I got a lot of email from students who said things like, "If I had only known we had a person from Iraq in class, I would have...." Would have what, I wondered? Been more thoughtful, sensitive, restrained, considerate?

I thought of all the students I had taught in previous online classes who hailed from Finland and Uruguay and Uganda, and how they sometimes had names like Bob and Shay and Ben—names that enabled the cloak of invisibility to remain in place. What if I had asked those students if they would share their diverse lives with the class? I would never pass up teaching opportunities like that in the face-to-face classroom, so why should it be any different in an online class?

Of course, that is my emotional response to issues of diversity. But even in a practical sense, honoring diversity in an online classroom is critical. Each semester, I know

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there might be some form of cultural distance in my classroom, so I try to find a way to bridge those gaps. I believe some students are at a loss in the online classroom because of issues with language. Some don't comprehend written sarcasm while some fear the permanence of language and the power of the written word. My own mother, for whom English is not the native language, takes time to read every word of a document because, to her, the written word means power. But while there are studies on how to work with issues of cultural distance in regard to tangible academics, it is the essence of culture that is often ignored or overlooked in an online course.

So how can you incorporate cultural issues into the online classroom? The discussion board is the place to begin. Students can "reveal" themselves in a personal way on the board. Ask a question every week on the discussion board that extends the ideas from a major assignment and lends itself to exposing and honoring differences. For example, if you are asking your students, as I do, to come up with an argument of definition, ask them to also tell you how a person from another race, gender, age, or other ability might define the same issue. In another exercise, my students go to the Pulitzer.org website and pick an image from the photographic or editorial cartoon winners, and I ask them to tell us what visual argument the author has made. In another paragraph, they have to consider what a person "other" than themselves might say in response to that argument. It is astonishing how colorful those black-and-white text blocks can become when students are aware that who we are makes a difference in how we teach and learn.

Is posting a picture of each student enough to identify culture in your online class? For mine, probably not. I can see the differences in skin color and age and sex, but I won't see what it is that makes you who you are unless I have the opportunity to hear you and learn from you. I begin the semester with the *Where I'm From* poem. (It's easy to find—just Google it.) The poem is student-friendly and allows them to talk about their families, their neighborhoods, the foods they grew up with, and the languages they heard. I might have them do a culture collage—either a PowerPoint or a Word document or any program whereby they can introduce items and images that represent who they are. I also honor these cultural ideas by giving them a grade. Students see through empty gestures pretty well.

Okay—don't we have enough to do? Students have reading issues, learning issues, writing issues, issue issues—why should we care about culture in an online class? Isn't this the one place I can stop thinking about who sits before me? I can only answer these questions for myself: I want my students to be better global citizens. I

want a rich cultural environment in all of my classrooms. I want to learn and to grow and I want the joy of sharing new things with my students.

I recognize the irony inherent in sitting on the couch watching a television show about losing weight. I know I have to get up and move if I want to be on that show one day! But I also see irony in online teachers complaining about the lack of engagement in their classes and then rolling out the same class, semester after semester. Where is the point in not utilizing the diverse backgrounds of all students? Who knows—in the process, students might even see themselves in one another and connect in a meaningful way. After all, for some of us, the cultural education within the classroom is the one that has the most impact once students leave us. I hope so anyway. That is why I teach.

Denise Tolan is an English professor at Northwest Vista Community College in Texas. @

Internal or External Email for Online Courses?

By David Reavis, CCP, PhD, and Charles Mohundro, JD, PhD

Choosing the right tool for email in Web-based classes can streamline the communication process for both students and instructors. Choosing the wrong email tool can frustrate everyone involved by requiring more time and effort than necessary for communication. To make the best choice, instructors need to understand the differences between internal and external email systems, and find the mix of features that best supports the course objectives and work habits of the students and instructor.

A Web-based course is normally supported by a course management system (CMS). CMS features usually include internal course email. Examples of CMSs include Blackboard™, Angel™, and E-College™. These and other CMSs provide an email tool that is restricted to class members, and the email system is not generally available to outside communication. Alternatively, the instructor may choose to use an external email system, such as an institutional server (Microsoft Exchange™ or other system) or a client server (Outlook™ or Eudora™, for example).

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Internal email

One of the benefits of internal email is that messages in the system are easily traceable. This means that the sender, recipient, and class ID are easily identified. With internal mail, the instructor does not have to decipher questions such as who sent the message (because it came from jcool@hotmail.com), what class the message was about, or who the original receiver was. The internal system provides this context because only students in the Web-based class involved have access to the mail system, and the mail system enforces traceability. Another benefit is that internal systems are not flooded with spam (unwanted commercial or malicious messages). The internal system is not directly connected to the Internet and cannot receive this type of email. The internal mail system is also inherently more reliable than external mail. Messages are not lost when there are connectivity problems because the system is self-contained, and students have no grounds for claiming not to have received messages from the instructor.

Internal systems also suffer from some drawbacks. The first is that when an instructor adopts internal email for a course, he is committed to checking email in multiple places. He must check his regular email and course email. When an instructor teaches multiple sections or classes, this could mean several different email accounts. This could create some workflow inefficiencies, depending on how the individual uses email. If the instructor does not use email as a normal part of his or her daily activities, this may not present a problem. The majority of instructors who use external email for numerous types of communication might find that checking email in multiple locations is problematic. Another drawback is that internal email tools are not as robust as those of external systems. Creating folders, using previews, and applying themes to email are only weakly supported in many internal systems. Some internal systems impose attachment restrictions, fail to offer HTML support, or do not offer robust spell-checking features. In addition to these drawbacks for the instructor, the student also might find it inconvenient to check email in multiple locations.

External email

If the instructor chooses to use an external email system, he or she gets the benefit of receiving all email in one location. When using an email client supported by the institution, all the normal archiving and retention operating procedures are applied. This means that the instructor can usually choose how long and where to keep email received

from a given class or student. With the internal system, archiving rules are usually different and course content can be more difficult to access after the semester is over. External email clients also offer features such as stationary, advanced search capabilities, and auto-reply options that are not available in many CMS products.

One of the typical problems with using external mail systems is that students might not clearly indicate their identity or class membership when sending messages. It is not uncommon for a student to send a question such as, “Could you check my answer to question five on the quiz? Thanks, Joe.” If the instructor was teaching one online class with one person named Joe, and there was only one quiz in the class, then this question would be easy to answer. Complexities arise when there are multiple students with similar names in an online class, multiple classes for an instructor, or multiple assignments to which the question might apply. This problem could be resolved by replying to the student asking for clarification (which would involve yet another round of emailing), researching student roles and assignments to try to figure out which Joe missed which quiz question five, or creating a class policy that requires students to follow some procedure when emailing the instructor. Such policies could include putting the class name in the subject line of the message and requiring students to provide their full name on all correspondence.

Making a choice

The choice of internal or external email often hinges on the workflow habits of the instructor. If the instructor uses external email infrequently or not at all, then internal systems might be the best choice. If the instructor uses external email as his “to-do” list, then using internal email could cause extra work and confusion about what communication has actually taken place for a given class. Other key factors that can determine which method to use are how email is used in the course and what students should expect when using email communication. It can help students if the instructor defines in the syllabus how email should be used in the course. Setting limits can keep email from becoming a bother to both students and instructors. There are valid arguments in favor of using email as a tool to create a sense of participation in the course and a connection with the instructor that enhances the learning process. These objectives can also be accomplished through other tools such as discussion boards, office hours, or chat sessions. Examples of how email might be used include clarifying assignments, asking content-related

questions, and notifying the class of any changes in the class schedule. Students might also appreciate knowing how email will be used in an online course. If the instructor plans to send out certain information via email only, then students should know this from the beginning, so they can react (and read the messages) accordingly. If email will be used in the course to facilitate student-to-student communication, internal email may work best because email addresses are built in to the system. Ultimately, the choice of internal or external email for an online course should be based on workflow considerations and how email is used in the course.

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Trial by Fire: Online Teaching Tips That Work

By Lori Norin and Tim Wall

A few years ago, our university started accelerating its distance learning program. Along with courses that televised lectures to area high schools, we began a fledgling online course program that used WebCT classroom teaching software. Some professors designed courses that worked well, while others found that 100 percent Web delivery didn't work well for them. Early in the program, our speech department experimented with a departmental online course, but it didn't work as well as we had hoped.

Initially, when our speech department was asked by our dean to put our basic course online, we resisted. In fact, our course was the last required general education course to go online. We finally agreed to a Web-enhanced course. It was a disaster: the professor was trying to master WebCT; the students were trying to learn WebCT. One student even commented, "I signed up for speech class, not WebCT." More time was spent learning the software than learning the content. The number of times students had to

come to campus was modified over and over. Student feedback was mostly negative. Students complained about the irregular number of times they had to come to campus and the organizational methods used (they wanted nothing more than a list of assignments), and they could never seem to master the location of necessary functions, like mail and discussion boards. Students were frustrated. Faculty were frustrated. At the same time, administration wanted more Web courses. At one point the department recommended dropping the Web-delivered speech course entirely.

As a last resort, we attempted to restructure the course by creating a hybrid—presently half online and half on campus. Students were now required to meet on campus with the professor once a week. The results were amazing. Student feedback was much more positive. One student even commented, "I was really upset at first that I had to come to class once a week, but now I really see the benefit. I think it helped me to get to have that contact with the classmates and the confidence to know I had that face-to-face opportunity with the professor if I needed it."

In addition to more positive student feedback, student retention improved as did student assessment scores. Student retention improved 8 percent the first semester we switched to the hybrid course, while posttest scores jumped an average 20.5 percent. There was also a clear decrease in student and professor frustration. As one student said, "This was an excellent learning experience. When I needed any help or information, it was always readily available, and there were many sources for learning."

Having found a delivery method that seemed to work well, we began to look seriously at strategies, tips, and techniques for using WebCT that would simplify and enhance the teaching experience. We frequently discovered we were "overworking" the course management system. Just because we could place a message, document, or link in three or four places didn't necessarily mean we should. There were so many tools at our disposal that we were tempted to use them all. Frankly, that just confused everyone—professors and students. Our next step, then, was to look for ways to make the presentation less busy, falling back on a lesson that all teachers learned a long time ago: sometimes less is more. At the same time, however, we didn't want to simplify so much that we excluded useful techniques. Eventually, by trial and error, we learned the balance between too much and not enough.

We also discovered that working in the electronic venue required that we constantly be several steps ahead of our

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students, who often are extremely computer savvy and quite likely to discover ways to plagiarize. Without engaging in cynicism, we adapted the Reagan philosophy of “trust but verify” by using readily available software such as student tracking and TurnItIn. In the process we also learned how to use feedback mechanisms to enhance teaching. For instance, we discovered that a threaded electronic discussion on a subject like plagiarism puts students on record as knowing what it is. After that, the standard excuses for plagiarism pretty much went away. Similarly, a quick personal email is a handy way to find out what a student knows or needs to know about a subject. The professor can ask the student to summarize a concept in a return email. Then the professor, at a glance, can see the gaps in knowledge and advise the student accordingly. These are only a couple of effective ways in which judicious use of software enhances teaching without getting in the way. The trick, we found, was to use the software without becoming slaves to it.

Along the line, we’ve discovered some techniques that work. If you’re new to the online course experience, especially if you’re considering a hybrid course, here are some tips you might find helpful.

Acceptance forms

Professors commonly pass out course outlines and discuss class policies, and then ask students to sign a contract or agreement that they will honor those policies. Here’s an opportunity to use the hybrid situation both to save paper and to simplify record keeping. Instead of handing out a syllabus on the first day, tell your class that it’s online and where to find it. In addition, ask the students to submit an acceptance form electronically. That acceptance form then can be placed in each student’s electronic mailbox. Since the acceptance form is the first correspondence of the semester, the form will go automatically to the top of each student’s email list for easy retrieval. Neither paper nor filing is involved.

Hiding elements

A website can be confusing if it publishes too much information in a single screen or if it presents too much information in a short period. We’ve found that if we put too many items on a screen, students tend to surf through them instead of working on the lesson at hand. Sometimes we want students to read ahead, but sometimes we want them to concentrate on a single lesson. That’s where hiding elements comes in. If you’ve designed all the lessons for a semester and then put them on a Web page, hide the ones

that aren’t active. That way the students can’t “smorgasbord” through the course. Hiding menu elements (on the left of the screen) also can be valuable. For instance, we’ve found that if the students can see the “Discussion” tool in the menu, they tend to open that tool to see what’s in there. Since each discussion targets a particular concept, try placing a discussion link in that learning module, with perhaps a backup link in the calendar. Now you can hide the discussion tool in the menu; students don’t need it. Otherwise, students may open the menu tool and start surfing, resulting in questions about upcoming discussions. A reverse of that situation is the practice of hiding something that’s been there for several days. If an active assignment was due a couple of days ago, hide it and wait for the questions about where it went: nagging by hiding.

Organizational methods

There are a variety of content organizational methods that can be used; however, the week-by-week method allows you to use your calendar and your learning modules together. You can limit each learning module to a single week’s work and install links in your calendar. We found that students in the basic speech course responded especially well to this organizational method, most likely due to the built-in time management components. Students were able to approach their public speaking preparation using a clearly delineated, step-by-step method. Also, this practice tends to keep students where you want them to be in the course.

Tracking tools

In a classroom, how many times have you heard this: “I simply don’t get it.” As a teacher, you wonder why, and you ask the student to clarify. In a hybrid course, you can use the tracking tool. We post our lecture notes on the course site, and we track student reading. You can tell at a glance what a student has read and how much time was spent. Let’s say you discover that a student has spent very little time going over your materials (lectures, handouts, etc.). As a teacher who’s been around a while, you suspect a similar lack of effort in reading the text. Instead of sending a tedious email that paraphrases what you’ve already published, you can send a short email that asks the student to clarify.

Here’s an example:

“Please tell me which points are baffling to you.”

If at that point the student isn’t specific, here’s a typical follow-up:

“Please review the lecture notes and text and then send

me an email that outlines your understanding of the major concepts that this assignment covers.”

By that time, the student usually gets the drift.

Discussion tool

Although you’ve already engaged the class in a discussion, you can reinforce that discussion on the bulletin board. After the class discussion, you can require the students to post their thoughts on the bulletin board. Then you can jump into the forum and ask the students to respond to other postings. This practice engages the students who aren’t very active in class but who may have valuable input. As a bonus, sometimes the quiet students start participating more in class discussions.

Humor and frequent communication

While we don’t want to be in the stand-up comic business, we can make it clear to students that we’re not a robotic part of the machine with a square screen. Often a friendly or encouraging email that uses nonthreatening phraseology can make a student feel more a part of the class. An appropriate humorous comment allows the student to view the professor’s lighter side, allowing for the interpersonal component that is difficult to transcend over the Web. Also, consider that people check their computers sporadically 24 hours a day. Don’t miss the opportunity that this around-the-clock access allows. If you have a thought on the way home after a lecture, send it to the class. If you want to remind them to read a chapter, send an email or publish a text block they can’t miss.

Text blocks

WebCT features the ability to publish headers and footers. You certainly can use this feature to design a page with standard banners like the name of the course. In addition, you can use the text block feature to publish urgent messages. If you have one message one day and replace it with a new message another day, be sure to change the color of the text block. Otherwise, students may assume it’s the same message and skim by it.

Tips for the online learner

Adding a direct link on the home page that provides “tips for new online learners” can eliminate initial confusion and provide students with a clear understanding of what the online learning environment is all about. These links might include such topics as Web etiquette, where to go for help, thinking ideas through before responding, online learning is not for everyone, creating a private and positive working

environment to study, and other helpful weblinks, etc.

What now?

This is a mere handful of tips, and it is by no means a complete list. As classroom professors, we try new tricks regularly. Some we keep; some we lose. Don’t be shy about using the same approach when you’re teaching your hybrid Web class. If you’re relatively new to the Web-teaching environment, take our list as typical techniques you can try. If they don’t work for your students, discard them or modify them to fit your situation. WebCT has a lot of tools: use them your way, and don’t feel you must use all of them. Do what you do in class: put yourself in the students’ place and see whether your presentation works; stay loose and listen to the feedback.

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The Challenge of Teaching Across Generations

By Rob Kelly

Instructors need to take steps to make the online classroom a comfortable and supportive learning environment regardless of students’ online learning experience or learning style preferences—a particularly important consideration when teaching students from multiple generations.

Deborah Silverman, assistant professor of human nutrition and dietetics at Eastern Michigan University, teaches online and hybrid courses and has observed several generational differences among her students, some of which are due to the level of familiarity with the technology as well as their previous learning experiences. Among these differences:

- older students tend to resist technology more than younger students,
- older students are more likely to ask the instructor

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technical questions rather than relying on the helpdesk,

- younger students are more likely to include URLs in threaded discussions, and
- younger students tend to prefer video

For many young students, the idea of taking an online course is nothing new. They are often comfortable with the technology as well as the student-centered learning environment. For older students, the technology and the pedagogy are obstacles. Many older students are used to a traditional, lecture-based learning environment and reluctantly enroll in online courses only when there are no other viable options.

“There are some students who should never be in the online environment. It’s sad because it’s often because of how they have been taught face to face. They’re spoon-fed learners who are not [inclined] to become self-directed learners. That disturbs me because I’m in a profession where we’re training practitioners who are going to have to take courses to maintain their credentials once they graduate.

Most of the courses in our profession are being offered in an online format, and if they aren’t happy using technology, they’re going to have a difficult time finding ways to be able to earn the number of continuing education hours they need,” Silverman says.

Whenever Silverman has a new group of learners, she has them do a learning styles assessment. “When I’ve got a mixed age group, I put in several different options. They have the option to read the textbook or view a video of the content. They can do the textbook reading and have some supplementary video clips that help to reinforce the learning,” Silverman says.

When assigning group work to multigenerational group of learners, Silverman makes it a point to group students with similar learning styles and experiences so that they are initially comfortable. As the course progresses, Silverman lets students choose their own groups.

There are many benefits to getting students from different generations to interact with each other regarding the course content. However, different cultural references and language usage can be obstacles. Silverman, a member of the baby boom generation, feels that it is important for her to keep up-to-date on the ways that her younger students interact and to be able to provide cultural references that they can relate to. However, she reminds her younger students to use standard language in the course rather than the shorthand that is so common among people

who grew up using informal text messaging.

“I think there’s going to be some challenges for faculty to understand the differences across generations, and we have the responsibility to find ways to adapt our delivery and engage our students or we’re always going to have this core of students who are not going to be happy,” Silverman says. @

10 Ways to Get Reluctant and Downright Scared Students Enthusiastic About Taking Online Courses

By Errol Craig Sull

Forrest Gump might as well have been talking about the profiles of online students when describing a box of chocolate: “You never know what you’re going to get.” Indeed, in addition to the geographic, age, and other mixtures, there is also a wide range of enthusiasms when it comes to taking an online course for the first time: from a level of total comfort and ease in using computers to major fear and anxiety. Many teaching online don’t expect the latter; there is a widely held belief that anyone taking an online course not only is tech savvy but also has no problem in not being in a brick-and-mortar classroom (where face-to-face interaction with the instructor is taken for granted).

As just about anyone who has taught online has discovered, this is a major misconception.

Many students are returning to the classroom after years away—and to an online course, to boot. There are also the students who know little—and sometimes nothing—about using a computer, freely admitting their high stress level at now having to do a course online. And there are students who strongly maintain that the only way to learn is with an instructor they can see, hear, and talk with right in front of

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them. All of this translates into additional work on the instructor's part—something necessary and noble, to be sure, but also something that can be minimized with a few teaching strategies:

1. That welcoming email is so important. If your first email is too harsh or impersonal it can really bother those students already concerned about taking an online course. Instead, welcome them with enthusiasm and interest—and always let the students know you are available and eager to help anytime. This approach will go a long way in making those anxious students feel less anxious.

2. Address possible student concerns before they're brought up. I have what I call my Mini-Guide to Taking X Course Online, and one of the sections addresses some of the pre-course problems I know I'll encounter from students (mentioned above). Just out of curiosity, I kept track of the number of students who would raise these concerns before I included the section and after—I had a nearly 25 percent drop in hearing from students once I added this section. It's not going to address every concern, but it does help—and every little bit allows for more focus on the course itself.

3. Anticipate student computer fears, et al.—and be ready for them. What I'm about to suggest serves two purposes: being able to immediately respond to most pre-course student concerns emails and saving you time. I type out a series of responses to questions regarding lack of computer knowledge, not being face-to-face with the instructor, etc.; I have these saved in one file called Student Pre-Course Concerns. When I receive an email from a student addressing one of these, I simply copy and paste my template response in my return email, tweaking it, of course, for that specific student. If you do this, have a friendly, I'm-really-interested-in-your-problem tone—you want the students to feel you are not just giving a perfunctory response.

4. Never make yourself out to be a computer god. This is one of the worst things you can do, for it gives already nervous students just that much more to be nervous about. No one is born computer-wise—in fact, it really helps to let the student know you once felt the same way he/she does now (or at least were also once a computer neophyte). Your computer prowess will come through in your helping students better understand how to navigate through your school's computer environment.

5. Write students often—and not as R2D2. Depending on the online platform used (WebCT, eCollege, Blackboard, etc.) you will have opportunities to write students through chat rooms, discussion threads, team projects, overall class announcements, and general email. Do this often: students—especially those who initially were hesitant about taking the online course—need to feel that you are an involved, caring instructor, not one who simply pops in once-in-awhile.

6. Don't hesitate to talk with students still having problems. Sometimes, no matter how often you write (to the class and individual students) there is still a need for one closer step: the sound of your voice. This can be very reassuring, very motivating—often beyond what you can say in writing. And remind your students of your willingness to speak with them throughout the course: if it's a one time thing at the beginning of the class students can either forget it's an option or—worse—think you really didn't mean it.

7. Never accept computer awkwardness as an excuse for late assignments. Do this and you immediately offer any student a convenient out for handing in late work. In the Mini-Guide I mentioned earlier I remind students of one of my favorite quotes, from Clint Eastwood's movie Heartbreak Bridge: "You improvise. You adapt. You overcome." Translation: if your computer is not working or you don't have access to one for a few days, visit the library or use a friend's; if you are still learning how to become friends with a computer, spend a couple of hours just getting to know it; etc. I remind students that in taking any course they have a responsibility to get the work in on time (barring unexpected illness, catastrophe, etc.).

8. Have resource and contact information ready. There may be times when there is a tech question beyond your knowledge but one the tech department, your supervisor, or some other administrator will probably be able to answer. Have those folks' emails, positions, phone numbers, and best time to reach on one sheet that you can pull up when needed. Besides helping to resolve the problem it has the nice bonus of showing you as an instructor both prepared and interested in his/her students.

9. Always "sell" the positives of online courses that landline schools can't offer. This is a big plus in helping anxious students somewhat overcome their nervousness. Often, students are so focused on what they are concerned about in taking an online course that they forget—or may not even know—all the

terrific benefits online education offers. I enumerate these in my Mini-Guide with an approach of, “Welcome to the exciting, interesting, and bonus-filled world of online education!”

10. Keep an online folder of all “yikes!” emails. This can assist you in so many ways, including preparing additional template responses for emails, helping you become better prepared the next time you receive a concern you hadn’t thought about “this time,” and giving you reason to search out additional support resources. My list is several pages long, only new “concerns” go in, and I have them broken down by category: Computer Concerns, Not-in-Live Classroom Concerns, etc.

REMEMBER: Fear of the unknown can be easily assuaged by a flashlight of sincere concern, availability, and assistance—with a thread of friendliness thrown in for good measure.

Errol Craig Sull has been teaching online courses for more than 11 years and has a national reputation in the subject, both writing and conducting workshops on it; he teaches English Composition online for Excelsior College (Albany, NY); and is currently at work on a book of his online teaching activities titled Pebbles: A Most Unusual Approach to Very Effective Writing. @

Playing Catch-up: How to Come Out From Behind When an “Unexpected” Broadside Your Efforts

By Errol Craig Sull

Just recently, my hometown—Buffalo, N.Y.—was hit with a somewhat “perfect storm”: On October 12 and 13, 22 inches of wet snow fell, coming to rest on thousands of limbs and branches that were still in the midst of their autumnal leaf display. The result: nearly

400,000 folks lost power; all Internet connectivity and landline phone service were gone for many of these people; and street upon street was blocked off by downed power lines and whole trees or tree limbs. For me, this meant no use of the Internet (desktop or wireless) nor driving to another location for computer use—for five days. My online students, of course, merrily rolled along with their work, as all were in various locations where it was another ho-hum day at the Internet office. So, when my screen finally smiled back at me with its warm glow, I knew I had some serious catching up to do. But what route would be the best? What should I do first? Some of what follows has come out of this experience; some of it is from previous, not-quite-such-a-long-loss-of-Internet-connectivity experiences. I hope you never need any of it—but do save it: these suggestions can make any catching up much easier:

- Don’t Panic. Panicking is the worst possible thing you can do! What I call “the unexpecteds” in life happen to each of us, so we must simply take the unsavory situation in stride. It will pass, eventually—it always does. But if you panic about no longer being able to do your regular routine with your class(es), you might say or do things that you wish you hadn’t. Conversely, you might NOT say or do things you should have. There is nothing you can do about what happened, so work around it.
- Contact the “powers that be” about your situation. In a previous column, I suggested you keep a hard copy of important contact information for your school(s). Here is a perfect example as to why. First, it would have done you no good if it were on your computer. Second, calling someone at school and asking him or her to alert your class(es) to the situation will [a] alert the school to your difficulty so they will know you are not sloughing off and [b] give your students a heads-up so they will know your absence is something that is simply beyond your control.
- Personally communicate the problem to your students, if possible. Although having someone from your school(s) initially contact your students is crucial, you also must get a message out to your students as soon as possible. This may necessitate going to a library or a hotel, if yours is down. If the unexpected event is a health issue, you can send them an email from home. The students create a personal relationship with you, and thus it is extremely important that they hear from you—your guidance, your plan for the class, and your thoughts on the situation help the class more readily accept your situation and work with you.

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- Work out a prioritization plan. Each class is, of course, different, and thus each will mostly likely require a different prioritization plan for what to do during and after your unexpected situation. Carefully thought out, this plan can help you minimize problems, save time, and keep you from becoming unglued!
- When connectivity comes back on, immediately let your students know. Not only is it important for your students to hear from you, and to hear from you that all is about to go back to normal, but it's also crucial that you be honest with your students and let them know that it might take you a bit of time to get caught up. (And by the way, Internet connectivity may not be your problem. Health issues, being stranded somewhere, a honeymoon, and the like may be "biting" you. Regardless, always let your students know what is going on—you are their one lifeline to the entire class, and because it is online they must rely on you a great deal.)
- Respond to individual emails before going over student assignment submissions/ postings. As soon as you can actively get back to the class look for, and respond to, any student (and other class-related) emails sent while you could not teach the class(es). These are individuals with individual concerns; they tend to have a more immediate, this-really-concerns-ME need than does a class group of papers, quizzes, or other assignments that need editing or grading.
- As soon as possible, fall back into your comfort zone of teaching. Each of us has a certain comfort zone of teaching we establish for each class. It is our groove in which we always know what to do, when to do, and how to do. Being out of that zone, which can happen as the result of an unexpected situation, can hurt us by causing us to make hurried (and thus perhaps not the best) teaching-related decisions, having our teaching enthusiasm wane, allowing other "items" to take over what normally would be "teaching time," weakening the bond with our students, and others that only you can know (as they are specific to you and your course[s]).
- Be sure to thank those who went out of their way to help you. NEVER take anyone's kindness and efforts for granted! No matter what someone did to help with your class during your unexpected situation, that person made it just a tad easier for you and your class to continue. Yes, we guide and facilitate and teach our classes, but we depend on so many others in our schools so that we CAN teach. When an emergency

comes up that interrupts our teaching, we turn to them to help out, and they will and do: don't forget them.

- Begin your own "emergency situation teaching kit." Beyond the items I've listed here, there are going to be additional things to include, depending on the nature of your course(s), school(s), and students. These may include names of anyone who can fill-in for you; contact numbers for technical, hardware, and software issues; and notes from any previous unexpected situation that will give you a smoother ride the next time one of these situations comes up. As I said at the beginning of this column, let's hope you never have to use such an emergency kit, but if you do and you DON'T have one, well, you will likely regret it.

REMEMBER: "Be prepared" is the motto of the Boy Scouts ... and the online teacher.

Errol Craig Sull has been teaching online courses for more than 11 years and has a national reputation in the subject, both writing and conducting workshops on it; he is currently at work on a book of his online teaching activities titled Pebbles: A Most Unusual Approach to Very Effective Writing. ☺

The Online Instructor's Challenge: Helping 'Newbies'

By Maura A. Ammendolia, PhD

Friday, 5:23 p.m.: "I am in Ohio until Sunday at a conference and am having a huge problem with Internet access...I am losing my mind trying to keep everything straight." Friday, 8:25 p.m.: "I am writing to you now in tears. I never did get computer access here in my hotel room so I am using the computer in the business center at the hotel...I have been working on posting my paper and team members' critique, but this computer will not let me send them. I am going to try calling the school's Web support. I have kept up with all the reading and would hate to drop out after I have put so much time into this class...I

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had no idea this was going to be so much work and frustration...”

Communications like these from students who are new to online education can be a real challenge for the instructor. As an online educator who is fairly new to the medium, I have found that classes typically contain students of varying degrees of technical expertise, computer experience, patience, and personal stamina. Consequently, classroom materials such as lectures, readings, and assignments should be designed with clarity and viewed from the perspective of the least-skilled user. In addition, technical support materials such as Web-based tutorials, help desks, and the services of other technical support staff must be readily available, easy to use, and practical. Finally, the instructor should develop personalized methods using e-mail, chat, teaming, and discussion

Deliberately allowing for some redundancy is also necessary when developing course materials. I always describe assignments in the syllabus as well as within the lesson body, and in a separate assignment section for each lesson.

tools to support students new to the online environment. Otherwise, overwhelmed students can easily disappear into cyberspace, becoming retention statistics.

I have discovered three general areas in which support for “newbies” is essential:

1. Clear and well-designed course materials

Login is the online student’s first course contact. It must be user friendly so that the student’s initial impression is positive. Using a welcoming and conversational tone in the introductory materials as well as making sure they are easy to read and well organized will go a long way toward making the new user feel comfortable. Delineating procedures and techniques that are essential for student success in an online course is important in the introductory section.

For example, point out that since online courses depend so heavily on the written word, thorough reading and rereading of the syllabus, lessons, and assignment directions is critical.

Deliberately allowing for some redundancy is also necessary when developing course materials. I always describe assignments in the syllabus as well as within the lesson body, and in a separate assignment section for each lesson. If the software has calendar and announcement options, entering assignment due dates both on the calendar and in announcements that pop up when a student logs on are also helpful redundancy techniques. This can help eliminate panicky e-mails about assignment questions and due dates.

2. Accessible technical support

Critical for all students, but especially for those new to the online environment, is technical support. Links to Web-based tutorials, reminders about necessary computer elements to support course software, and directions for using essential tools like e-mail, chat, discussion, and assignment drop boxes can be built into the course. Twenty-four-hour “help desk” support is also essential—since online students frequently enroll due to tight schedule considerations, they are often working on assignments at odd hours and may require assistance at any time. Since help desk assistance can sometimes be too generic to solve all issues, a member of the university technical staff enrolled in the course can assist both students and instructor with specific dilemmas that arise.

3. Personalized contact

In my opinion, this is the most critical area for supporting new online students. Accustomed to face-to-face instructor contact, students are often anxious about not having that contact in online courses. The instructor needs to establish a lifeline at the beginning of the course by sending welcome e-mails, providing telephone and e-mail contact information, introducing icebreaker activities on the discussion tool, and having early and regular chat sessions. While having a frequently asked questions (FAQ) area in the course may prevent some unnecessary e-mails, responding promptly to new students’ e-mails is the single most effective technique for encouraging and retaining them. Shy students are more likely to ask questions via e-mail, and students insecure about their skills may prefer to ask questions of the instructor via e-mail as well. As confidence increases, students tend to utilize the discussion board or chat to post questions of general interest, with in-

structor encouragement.

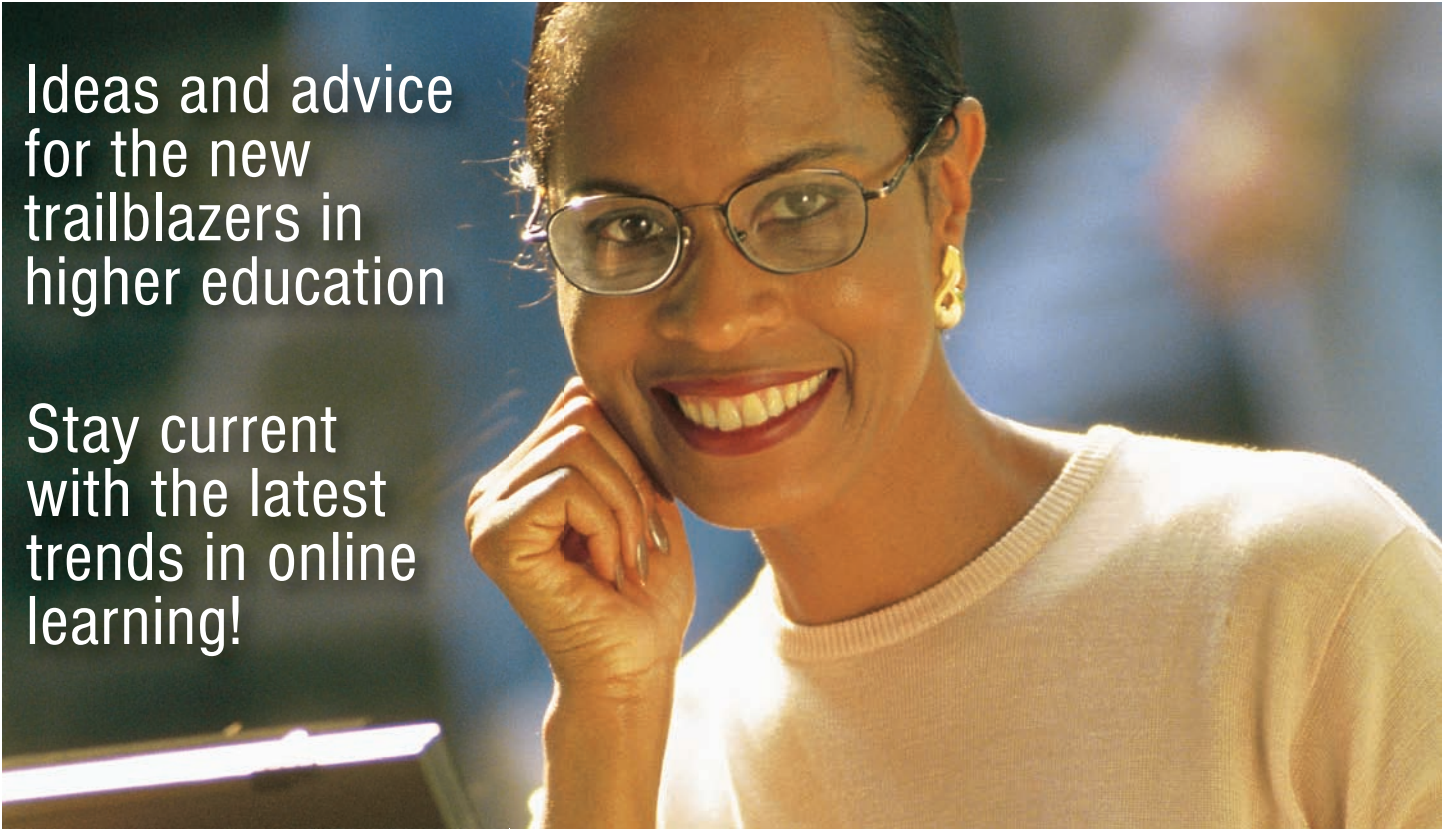
Personal contact with other students is also essential for keeping new online students afloat and engaged in the course. One of the elements in my icebreaker activity on the discussion board is a question about level of experience with online courses. After reading the initial discussion board entries, I develop student groups for team assignments, always assigning inexperienced online students to groups with one or more experienced students. The use of teams encourages students to support each other; in my experience both new and experienced users have found team activities beneficial to the online course experience.

The fate of the overwhelmed student? With the above three support elements in place, she persisted and became a solidly contributing member of her team and her class. No retention statistic here—she earned an A!

Reference

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