

What to Never, Ever Do in Online Teaching!

By Errol Craig Sull

We have been taught that when giving others advice, it is best to do so in a positive manner rather than implore folks “not” to do this or “don’t do that.” It is far better to advise others to “do” this or to “take a positive approach.” But sometimes there are approaches, strategies, or other “things” in teaching online that are so heinous, so evil, so plain wrong, that for their seriousness to be driven home, only a “Don’t do it!” approach is warranted. This is the focus of this month’s column.

Online teaching, of course, is relatively new. I have been teaching online for 14 years and am considered somewhat of a pioneer in the field—yet 14 years is a blink of an eye. What this means is that I and thousands of others who teach online are still trying to figure out how to really get it just right—how to take all that experience from teaching in a traditional school and all the inexperience from teaching online, and use both to become online instructors who are boffo and to teach online classes that elicit huzzahs! What follows are items that should never see a hint of daylight in any of your courses.

Never copy and paste old coursework without proofreading it. Copying previous information, emails, syllabi, and other postings from previous classes can save much time. However, each time you do, it’s important that you take the time to proofread for old dates, no longer applicable assignments and textbooks, and other dated information that can immediately tell a class that you are not involved or interested in them, that you are not a careful or concerned instructor—never a good way to start off a course.

Never share personal information beyond the superficial and what the course calls for.

Depending on the school, you might be asked to share a bit of your life—but the operative word here is “bit.” The course is not a pulpit for you to expound on your interpersonal relationships, your latest attempts to get published, a vacation in the Canadian Rockies, your recent dinner party, or the like. This is not why students are taking your course. Use personal information only when necessary for a course, and then make it only of a superficial nature. Sure, you want students to know you’re human, and that’s fine—but your autobiography is something they don’t need.

Never have inappropriate relationships with students. Whether during a course or after a course has ended, your relationship with a student should always be professional. During the course, there are obviously numerous reasons to be in contact with your students, but only as they relate to the course or its subject matter. Once the course has ended, there are legitimate, professional reasons to stay in contact with a student: because that student has an incomplete, is challenging a grade, has a question related to the course, or seeks your professional guidance, for example. Anything less than a professional relationship with a student may be very innocent, but too often the perception is anything but. And if the school gets wind of this post-course, nonprofessional relationship and is uncomfortable with it, don’t think for a moment that your teaching job won’t be in jeopardy.

Never use your postings as a substitute for your frustration as a writer, philosopher, or advice columnist. When you post to the

class or even to individual students, stick to the point you need to make. Do not ramble or wax poetic about this or that because it appears that this is the only forum where you can share your ideas, thoughts, and musings related to items not associated with class. If you need to let the world know about your frustrations, triumphs, disappointments, and concerns, set up a blog.

Never be less than a role model that students can emulate. You tell students they must give substantive postings in a discussion thread X days a week, that their assignments must be in on time, or that you’d like them to respond to your email within 48 hours. Whatever requirements you make of your students, you must be the role model that shows students you not only talk the talk, but also walk the walk. Thus, you should be very visible in the course, respond to all email within 48 hours, be sure your discussion postings are substantive and in great supply, and follow through on all promises you make to your class. Not doing so diminishes your credibility and makes for a rough relationship between you and your students.

Never use foul, sexual, or sexist language. There are online instructors who think it’s cool to curse and who don’t really think about the public nature of their sexual or sexist postings—but then it’s too late. Unless you are discussing Huck Finn’s “All right, then, I’ll go to Hell” comment or the like, there is no reason for you to curse. As for sexual comments or innuendos, if they live in your mind, keep them there. They should never find a spot in your course. And sexist comments—as well as racist or

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similar comments—are offensive, insensitive, and boorish.

Never show favoritism. It's easy to settle in on a student or two who really put forth extra effort, are witty, and ask insightful questions; likewise, we can be quick to write off students who seem not to care a whit about the course, don't follow directions, and never seem to "get it right." But if you let this enter into your grading, comments to the class or individuals, or enforcement of class rules, your objectivity and integrity have just been trashed—and the class will quickly know it. Always be neutral and base your grading and other student decisions on the guidelines you established for the class at the beginning of the course.

Never criticize a student in front of other students. We don't like it when anyone criticizes us in front of others—do you think students are any different? It is very unprofessional, unethical, and simply unkind to criticize any student to any degree in front of that student's peers—no matter if it's in a discussion posting, a class

email, or a live chat. Sure, it takes more time to send an individual email or call that student, but it is also the right thing to do—and that student will be more receptive to your comments and certainly appreciate that you kept it private.


Never be a braggart. The course isn't about you—it's about the students. Most schools require that an instructor introduce himself or herself, and this sometimes includes posting a biography—but no more. If students want to know more about you—and they will—all they need do is explore the Internet for more facts and foibles about you. Yes, something in your professional life may be perfect to underscore a point a student has made or one that you want to make about an item in class; that's fine. But don't go on about how wonderful you are.

Never solicit positive evaluations. Students will give you evaluations based on what they believe you deserve (yes, there will be the occasional "revenge evaluation"—it goes with the territory). But asking students to rate you highly tells them that you don't care about them or about the course, but

rather your paycheck, so that those who issue it can think highly of you and rehire you because of glowing evaluations.

REMEMBER: "Never" means not at all, no possibility, is not an option, would not consider, no way, ain't gonna happen, does not equate, ixnay, and not in this lifetime. Period.

Please let me hear from you, including sending along suggestions and information for future columns. You can always reach me at errol-craigsull@aol.com. And I'd be very interested in hearing about other "Never, Evers" you think I should add to my list—I'll run them in a future column.

*Errol Craig Sull has been teaching online courses for more than 14 years, and has a national reputation in the subject, both writing and conducting workshops about it. He is currently putting the finishing touches on his next book, *The Student's Complete Guide to Online Learning*. *

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