Dealing with Problem Students and Faculty

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Abstract

One of the most difficult issues facing distance-learning administrators is that of how to respond to students who either disrupt the learning environment in some way or who make it difficult for their classmates to focus on the learning at hand. Following closely behind this issue is a related one: dealing with faculty members who are either inconsiderate to their students or are unsupportive of their student's learning needs.

The administration's reserves of tact are called upon when telling students or faculty members that their problems stem from interpersonal disconnection: "it's not the machine; it's you." This essay offers some appropriate policies to enact before problems arise, some of the signs that can indicate student and faculty problems in the online classroom, and some administrative responses that address both the institution's right to offer quality online learning and the individual's right to self-expression.

Defining the Problem

First, a word or two may be necessary in order to help to define what we mean when we talk about problem students and problem faculty. The students who are having difficulty in setting up their accounts in their online courses—you know the ones I'm talking about, because you've talked to them five times already today—these folks aren't problem students. As a matter of fact, these folks are the bread and butter of our programs: ordinary people who, for whatever family-, work-, or disability-related reasons, are taking our courses via distance-education means. Even if we have to hold their hands until they get the hang of being online students, we should do so smilingly.

When Giordano Bruno was tutoring pupils, he lamented that he had to explain the same basic concepts over and over again, until he was faced with the King Henry III as a student, who reminded Bruno that without the patience of Bruno's own teachers, Bruno wouldn't be in the position to lament his own students' lack of skills. Speaking of which, we all know at least one faculty member who is a bit disorganized, needs to hear the same training sessions three or four times before the basics sink in, and who is often a little puzzled about what was just said five minutes ago. Again, such folks are not problem faculty.

It is perhaps disingenuous to begin by defining problem students and faculty by what they are not, but distance-learning administrators sometimes confuse those folks who are merely

annoying, absent-minded, or unskilled with those whose situations require a stronger response than patient forbearance. I have been an administrator for many years, and have only recently (within the past three years) been tasked with the development and administration of an online education program at my college. One of the lessons I learned the hard way is that I already knew how to deal very effectively with problem students and problem faculty—I'd already been doing it for many years with regard to our face-to-face classes, but I was afraid of putting my electronic foot in my mouth because of what I perceived as the barriers to effective communication in the online medium. I couldn't think of how I would "meet" with the aggrieved parties, nor how I could possibly apply my mediation skills effectively: how does one actively listen in an email exchange? How can I inflect my words with irony, friendliness, and such?

What I found was that I was defeating myself by focusing on the medium and not on the problem. I've discovered, through researching other folks' experiences with similar problems and through the school of hard knocks, some fairly simple strategies for modifying the methods I already practiced to good effect face-to-face. First, however, I need to introduce a few examples of problem students and problem faculty, so we can all recognize some of the signs of when things have gotten out of control. We'll look at some of these more pressing, dire circumstances first, along with some suggestions about how to deal with them effectively. Then, we'll look at some things we can do before difficulties arise in order to help to prevent them from happening in the first place. Now, for the examples.

The Litany of Woes

Most distance-education administrators work with staff and faculty members who are pleasant (or at least cordial), dedicated to the task at hand, and courteously helpful with regard to such issues as playing the devil's advocate in order to anticipate concerns, voicing questions in order to get help and clarification, and suggesting ways to improve the process by which we put together our distance-education courses. Distance-education is a field in which good interpersonal skills are not only beneficial, but necessary. Poor communicators impede the flow of ideas and tend to sour the work or class environment. We find ourselves in conflict with our faculty and our students on an almost daily basis, but most of the time, our problems are relatively minor, and the parties to disputes usually accept our solutions as the final word. Because some administrators are unfamiliar with distance-education technologies and pedagogy, they do not feel as confident as they might in being able to adjudicate fairly in distance-education matters. However,

> you do not have to prove who is in charge; everybody knows who is in charge. And, the more you try to <u>prove</u> it, the more people start to wonder.
>
> (Whitaker, <u>Dealing with Difficult Teachers</u> 27)

With that in mind, think back on your own experience as an administrator. Aside from the conflicts that we all have about needing more money, a larger work space, and a larger and better-trained staff, what kinds of interactions with others send you home from work in a snit? It's likely to be those faculty with whom you've tried and tried to communicate only to be left confused and steaming, even after trying to talk to them in different ways. When was the last time you had to tell a faculty member that the problems he or she was having with students in a distance-education class might stem not from the students' arrogance, immaturity, or lack of a clue (pick the one you've heard most recently), but from the faculty member's way of handling students?

How many calls have you taken from faculty members who complain that there's one student in their classes who refuses to listen to gentle suggestions about appropriate behavior? Or about the student who suddenly "shows up" halfway through the term, insisting that the professor should have called her to let her know the semester had started?

These situations are grim, but likely reflect that bothersome one percent of students and faculty with whom you and your colleagues work on a daily basis. Both kinds of complaints can be traced back to a breakdown of communication, and this essay explores ways in which to avoid such situations prescriptively, and ways in which to help to defuse such situations once they have occurred. The conclusions made here are supported by survey research, individual interviews, institutional policy, and solicited testimonials from many institutions across the United States, and are not meant to reflect a particular institution's policy or work environment.

Silence isn't Golden

Alyssa (all examples in this essay are fictional) turned in brilliant work for all of her professors, but she very rarely said anything in class. Even when called on to answer or to respond to class discussion, Alyssa was terse, direct, and offered nothing further than what her professors had asked her to relate. Alyssa took one of Jim Brown's online business courses, but dropped out after only two weeks. Jim's not sure what happened, since he'd had Alyssa in a face-to-face class before, and was very surprised to receive so much email from Alyssa in his online class. He had assumed that Alyssa had finally found a good way to learn, so he was very puzzled when she dropped the course.

The easiest problem to ignore in our face-to-face classrooms is also one of the most damaging to students' educations: silence. In a classroom, it is easy, and sometimes desirable, to allow students who do not actively participate in the classroom discussion to skate by without saying a word, especially if one's silent students turn in good work. However, this is a disservice not only to those folks who keep their own counsel in our classes, but to those students who might otherwise be challenged to examine their own methods and beliefs by the opinions of the quiet students. In distance-education classes, the silent students are those who often are the first to drop out of the course, because so much of the interaction in interactive-television and online courses is based on email, class discussion boards, and real-time virtual chat sessions. Students who are quiet in the classroom often open up when they aren't in the classroom—most silent students have fairly well-entrenched networks of support: their roommates, friends, and classmates often band together outside of class time in order to discuss class materials. In distance education, however, these support networks are often missing.

Many of our distance-education students are taking distance classes because they cannot take classes during the times we offer them; family, work, and medical considerations often play a large part in deciding who our distance-ed students will be. Students who are silent in face-to-face classes often go to an extreme in a distance-education course: they clam up all together or they finally uncork. Students in distance-education classes, especially online students, sometimes assume that the professor will contact them if there's anything wrong, and so they go along reading lectures and doing work, without ever contacting their classmates. Contrarily, Alyssa is an uncorker: Professor Brown couldn't figure out why Alyssa suddenly sent a barrage of questions and messages to him, but both those who go into deep cover and those who send messages seemingly every few minutes have been lured into doing so by a common misconception about distance-education classes: it's just me and the professor.

It is easy to understand why students can come to this misunderstanding. Alyssa was taking her

online class from home, in her living room, on the family computer. Without any classmates to see, Alyssa assumed that she should simply soldier on, and ask the professor any questions she had. This on-on-one mindset works well for independent study, but Professor Brown had twenty-four other students in his class. Imagine what would happen if all of Professor Brown's students began to think of their online business class as a direct link to the instructor! Jim Brown would be drowning in email from only a few of his students, while the rest of them would assume that all was well because Jim hadn't taken the first step in contacting them. One group drops out because Jim isn't able to keep up with their needs, and the other group drops out because Jim was too uncommunicative for their needs.

This situation makes for really weird course evaluations. If you find yourself in a situation similar to Jim's, how can you bring your class back in shape quickly?

Silence <u>is</u> Golden

Calvin was a bright sophomore who was taking Nancy Bigelow's Faulkner senior seminar on the interactive-television system. Calvin was fond of a good discussion, and often came up with excellent and subtle points about the novels the class was reading, but he had a tendency to monopolize the class, hitting the "speak" button on the microphone at his remote site almost constantly, cutting off classmates or denying them the opportunity to be heard in the first place. Professor Bigelow had set up an online discussion board for the class, and Calvin was indefatigable there, too, responding sometimes three or four times to everyone's postings.

We have all taught the eager student who seems never to do anything but work on our course materials, and although it sounds like a blessing, especially after the legions of half-hearted folks we've had in our classes over the years, it can be a relative administrative nightmare, mostly because it is very difficult for instructors to be equitable in giving help to all of their students in this sort of situation without appearing to (or actually) ignoring much of the output from one student. This can lead to animosity between the student, who suspects the professor of not fulfilling his or her end of the educational contract, and the instructor, who suspects that the behavior of the overeager student is a mask for an attention-getting strategy (or, worse, that the student's behavior indicates severe psychological problems).

Aside from the misperception of having a one-to-one relationship with the professor described above, which fits online-course models well, we might profitably look at a few other causes that produce the attention-greedy behavior Calvin exhibits.

For example, in distance-ed classes, there is often a perception on the part of the instructor that his or her students are a community, when in most cases this is not naturally true. Because we look at our face-to-face classes and see groups of friends sitting in the back of the classroom chatting and passing notes, we assume that there are also groups of friends in our distance-education classes who study together and who ask each other for help. However, it's more likely that distance-education classes are made up of students who do not know anyone else in the class. Most distance-education students have responsibilities outside the classroom, like work and family, which preclude their being part of a ready-made social group. One possible result of this condition is that students sometimes feel that they need to compete against the others in the class in order to get a good grade and to show the instructor that they are serious about their learning.

One strategy that we can counsel our instructors to take is preventive: "Faculty should encourage students to introduce themselves to their classmates and ask each other questions about their

background and professional experiences" (van Rooij). Knowing who among their classmates are like themselves allows students to create informal groups. I always ask my instructors to use the "pizza and beer" approach to group dynamics. I ask them simply to ask their students if they've ever studied with friends before, and where they went to do that studying. Most folks would meet after school at a local fast-food restaurant or a pub, and when instructors ask their over-eager students if the students could help out their peers, these students are usually very amenable to the idea, especially if it's couched in terms of a good way for the problem student to review the material more thoroughly.

A deeper reason for over-participation is that some students do not place value on the collaborative model of learning; rather, the stereotype of the college professor who has a "dead-man's curve" grade book persists in the minds of many adult students who have been away from school for a long time, and many of them think in terms of beating a class curve. Since very few instructors use grade curves to foster competition among students, especially in undergraduate work, this disconnection creates inappropriate student behavior. Some students have never worked collaboratively on any school project at any level, and it is wise to advise our students and our instructors to place specific value on the means by which collaborative projects are accomplished:

> It is important for students to understand that good thinking and logic will be appreciated in the collaborative assessment, even when the answers are "wrong"; that their learning processes can be productive even when they have not yet mastered a task; that mistakes can reveal progress along the way to mastery. (Ripich 346)

This approach can be counter-intuitive to many instructors, let alone students. It is always a good administrative strategy to explain the reasoning behind the value of collaboration in terms of measurable outcomes. I often ask my instructors, "what do you want your students to know by the end of the class? What do you want them to be able to do by the end of the class?" After we draw up this knowledge base and these key skills, I then ask, "how can the students show you that they know this material and that they know how to do these things?" The answers I receive are sometime very focused on passing objective tests, to which my reply is always "are there other ways for students to show you these skills? If a student walked into this room right now and you wanted to see if he or she could do all these things, what would you ask him or her to do?" The answers are almost always hands-on, open-book projects that test the application of skills and knowledge, and not the simple existence of skills and knowledge.

Especially with regard to students whose inclination is to do more work than anybody else in the class, having a way of harnessing that energy in a collaborative and positive manner is a great benefit for an instructor. A less envious situation occurs when students share too much of their personal lives in class.

Too Much Information

Jerry Okobeli taught a popular World Religions course online, and he had begun to notice that three of his students were using behavior very inappropriate to the classroom: Fred Santos often posted messages that were laced with mild profanities like "hell" and "damn" and occasionally ventured out into more inventive swearing. Most of Fred's messages contained some cussing, but they were almost always on topic and responses to the ideas under discussion. The second student giving Jerry difficulty was Amanda Seleck, whose messages sometimes contained overtly racists remarks, which only intensified when Jerry emailed Amanda privately, telling her that she

was offending him personally as a black man, and asking her to stop. Jerry's third problem student wasn't so much a problem for Jerry personally, but he was a little concerned, nonetheless. Missy Stephens never missed a chance to mention in her class postings some personal detail about her sex life or the state of her relationship. Messages that began "My boyfriend and I are going through something like what Siddhartha did" always made Jerry reluctant to read on.

Professor Okobeli's situation is what my own students call "TMI": too much information. This concept refers to sharing more information than is socially acceptable, or sharing information that is offensive or embarrassing. Jerry is in an odd bind, since Fred's work is intelligent, thoughtful, and on-topic. In a face-to-face classroom, this sort of problem would likely never reach an administrator's desk: Jerry would talk to Fred after class, and ask him to refrain from using unacceptable language is the classroom. Likewise, even Professor Okobeli's difficulty with Amanda's racists remarks could be solved pretty simply in person, mostly because the physical presence of the instructor implies authority (Metcalf 38). Missy's too-personal messages are also not likely to cause much of a stir at the administrative level, either.

However, when such communication difficulties crop up in distance-education situations, direct communication is the first thing both instructors and students think of. Unfortunately, the person with whom the faculty can most easily have direct communication is their administrator: you. If faculty come to you with complaints about inappropriate language or communication from their students, there are a few steps that you can take to help keep such problems at their proper level: just small difficulties between the instructor and the students. First, an anecdote:

> Ms. B came "flaming' into my office about her student, John W. Apparently, John's belligerent attitude and disruptiveness in Ms. B's class was more than she could tolerate. Ms. B was very angry and quite critical of John, and went on and on about his terrible behavior. This offered no solution to John's behavior, and instead encouraged John to be more rebellious. . . . I asked Ms. B: "When has John behaved for you in the past?" Stopped in her tracks, Ms. B was puzzled and quiet. I then telephoned John: "When have you behaved for Ms. B and what has she done in the past that helped you behave?" Both teacher and student were quiet and became very serious as they began to tell me times when the "behavior" was better. The teacher and student both became less defensive immediately and began to talk about what could be done differently by both of them. I was amazed at how they arrived at the solution. I then asked them both: "What can you do this afternoon, John, so that the 'behavior' that brought you here is not bothering you as much?" (Metcalf 83)

This example illustrates again the collaborative model of learning, although the participants this time are the instructor and the student with whom she has issue. To return to Jerry Okobeli's case, let's examine the responses I might give Jerry in order to better help defuse the situations himself.

I'd start by saying to Jerry that his difficulties sounded like the kinds of things he's dealt with in his face-to-face classroom many times. Then, I'd ask Jerry how he'd handled similar situations in the past. For Fred, the vulgar student, I might suggest that Jerry email him privately and remind him about using an academic tone, couching his message in concern about Fred's marketability when he looks for a job: usually, adult students are receptive to advice about professionalism, especially since many of them are looking to enter the workforce or earn a promotion after their studies.

Amanda's racist remarks require a different sort of advice to Jerry. Since Jerry has already asked Amanda via email to stop her inappropriate communication, the next step is to create physical proximity to reinforce Jerry's position of authority. I asked Jerry to ask Amanda into his office for a chat, or, barring that, to speak to her on the telephone. I asked Jerry to stress the effect of Amanda's words on himself and on her classmates, if Jerry could point to complaints from others in the class. I also asked Jerry to be careful not to accuse Amanda of anything by saying something like "how would you like it if I called you a _____," instead focusing on the concern he and Amanda's peers felt for her: "some of your classmates are concerned about the language you're using in some of your online postings; is everything all right?" By couching his complaint in terms of concern for the student and a wish for the student to improve, Jerry can now ask the student about ways in which she can improve (and most of the time, students know exactly how they can improve).

Missy's situation calls for a similar administrative response to that of Frank. Because of the misperception of having a one-on-one relationship to one's instructor, as has been noted above, some students feel that they are responding to a friend instead of to a professional teacher. This can be so especially in classes where most of the students are adults, and where the instructor encourages a relaxed and collegial atmosphere, which is helpful in creating community. Jerry was loath to approach Missy about her confessional writing because Jerry told me that he felt awkward sending a blunt email that could be misconstrued, and he felt equally awkward discussing Missy's sex life in person or on the telephone. I suggested that Jerry start out by contacting Missy by email, but to handle the inappropriate behavior as a step toward appropriate behavior. Jerry sent Missy an email message in which he said that the parts of Missy's work that were direct and to the point were excellent, but the parts that referred to her romantic life were off the mark, and not worth including, since the subject was off-topic and brought down Missy's grades. He encouraged her to continue to strengthen the parts of her writing that were appropriate, and cited some of Missy's better passages as a model.

If we assume that students and instructors want to do what is right, they will have little choice but to follow our assumption, themselves. Notice that I never talked to Jerry's students at all. Whether Frank was being vulgar or not was not my concern; I wanted Jerry to communicate his reaction in a way that presented his perceptions as valid, that offered his students concern and help, and that assumed that his students were going to do what Jerry expected of them from then onwards. It's very difficult to have such confidence in our distance-education students, however, when they're not there.

The Lazarus Syndrome

Nancy Bigelow noticed that Thomas Dolan was listed on her interactive-television class roster, but since she had never seen him in class, she assumed he must have withdrawn early on in the semester. She was quite puzzled, therefore, when she received an email message from Thomas in the fourth week of the class asking her whether she had looked over his first and second class essays. "Didn't you get them? I sent them to you weeks ago." Even after Nancy emailed Thomas back and explained that she had never seen him in class and had never received any work from him, Thomas continued to insist that he had been keeping up with the readings and doing the course work all along. Thomas threatened to go to Professor Bigelow's chair, and to the dean if necessary.

Augh! To the dean, yet! The threat of going over the head of an instructor is usually the first rallying cry of the student who wants to get by on bluster alone. This is not to say that there aren't disputes that can benefit from the involvement of third parties, but that there are students

who equate the ability to complain with the ability to raise one's grade. Often, administrators effect compromise far more lenient than what a student deserves simply because the student promises to stop complaining at higher and higher levels:

> Having been raised on gold stars for effort and smiley faces for self-esteem, they've learned that they can get by without hard work and real talent if they can talk the professor into giving them a break. This attitude is beyond cynicism. There's a weird innocence to the assumption that one expects (even deserves) a better grade simply by begging for it. (Wiesenfeld 16)

Distance-education classes offer the possibility of new variations on the "but I slipped it under your door" line of student reasoning. The usual complaint is that a student turned in work that somehow never reached the instructor on time or never reached the instructor at all. Most administrators reach concord between instructors and students by outlining a plan by which the student is allowed to turn in missing or late work, to be docked less severely than otherwise would have been the case, and to promise (usually in writing) to turn in all remaining work on time. Some faculty members and administrators are not very familiar with the electronic tools they use in order to receive work from students: FTP, email attachments, and tools like the "digital drop-box" are often used by instructors with little understanding of how these tools work. When students say that they've been turning in work all along, it's tempting to think that the instructor perhaps really didn't get the work because of his or her inexperience with the medium.

Fortunately, the skills we administrators use to weed out the wheedlers in our traditional classrooms come in handy in the digital environment, as well. Ask to see the evidence from both the faculty member and the student. Faculty members should be able to provide attendance logs, copies of email messages they've sent to the student, and videotape/online chat logs to show non-participation. Likewise, ask the student to provide evidence of having been in class and having turned in work. I also like to ask the student to explain why he or she hasn't been in contact with his or her professor. If the answer is "I have too many things in my schedule," then my advice is usually that the student withdraw from the class and take it again when there is more time in the student's life to be able to do well.

What can we advise our faculty to do with students who suddenly show up midway through the term? If your institution does not have a college-initiated withdrawal policy, encourage it to adopt one, so that students who have not turned in work or shown up for class by the third or fourth week of the term are sent a warning letter from the institution itself. What happened to all of the collaborative learning and concern for student progress I was talking about a few paragraphs ago? It's still here, but Nancy Bigelow's situation with her student Thomas calls for action to be taken long after the problem has gotten out of hand. In the long term, I'd advise Nancy to adopt a set of rules for her distance-education classroom, one of which might be to check one's grade or progress at regular intervals, and to take responsibility for one's learning:

> learning is facilitated when students are responsible for their learning, the subject matter is relevant and meaningful, and self-evaluation is the principal method of assessing progress or success. (van Rooij)

Each of these key areas is vital to making students in distance-ed classes feel that they are on track and that their work is toward a clearly defined goal. If students themselves must make sure that their instructors receive work, if students themselves are held accountable for their words, actions, and contributions to the class, and if students themselves are given the opportunity to have their say among their peers, most of the "problem students" we have discussed turn around

at least somewhat. There is no blanket panacea for all sorts of problems, but I hope to have shown that administrators can effectively deal with difficult students by bringing their already sharp skills from the face-to-face arena into the distance-education world with a few modifications.

Let us turn from the difficult student, then, toward our problem faculty members. In 2000, I conducted a survey of U.S. and Canadian distance-education administrators to determine their typical responses to difficult students and instructors. Nearly eighty percent of respondents reported that their problems with distance-ed students were minor, and that they knew very well how to handle such situations effectively. However, seventy-seven percent of respondents cited faculty problems such as lack of communication with students, outmoded pedagogical approaches, and personality conflicts among students, faculty, and administration as the primary problem in their distance-education programs. I was surprised at the data the survey generated, and, while I am cautious about extrapolating from a very small sample (n = 476 responses out of 1,120 surveys sent), the results of the survey suggest that distance-education administrators are most frustrated by what they assume to be a general faculty attitude that distance courses equal less (or no) work than do classroom courses.

One of the things that Todd Whitaker emphasizes in his approach to working with difficult students is that "if we can remove or change difficult teachers, then most of our problems with difficult students will disappear, as well" (telephone interview). Whitaker comes to the problem of distance-learning difficulties from the perspective of having been a high-school principal for many years. Now, as a faculty member in the education department at Indiana State University, Whitaker has turned his attention in his book Dealing with Difficult Teachers to codifying the ways in which administrators can deal with immediate problems, and, more importantly, prevent problems from occurring. Whitaker's methods speak well toward appropriate administrative responses to troubling faculty behaviors, as we will see. Here are some representative samples of typical difficult instructors (with, of course, fictional names throughout).

No Responses to Students Outside of Classroom Time

Jonas Sulek teaches an interactive-television course in Introductory Spanish. He asks his students to read aloud passages from the text during class in order to test their proficiency with the spoken language. However, many of his students have reported to his chair that he is seldom in his office, even during his posted office hours. Further, many folks in the administration have been hearing that Sulek hasn't been returning student telephone calls or email messages.

Non-responsiveness on the part of instructors is nothing new. We all have among our faculty those folks who seem never to keep their office hours, never to return student telephone class and email messages, and never to do one minute more work than is required of them by their contracts. Unfortunately, there is sometimes a perception among faculty who have not yet taught using distance-education methods that teaching using non-traditional media is much easier than teaching in the classroom. After a few early adopters of distance education report how they've been able to teach really exciting and interactive courses to bright, motivated students--in their pajamas from home, yet--the picture of distance-ed classes begins to sound like a lazy person's paradise. "Do you mean that students just pop a tape in their VCR, and then I grade the exams?" "So, students just teach themselves and help each other, and all I have to do is guide them along?" This is pretty inviting, to say the least. Such comments suggest that online and videotape courses allow instructors to do much less work that their current contracts require, since they need not ever "show up" for class, and need do nothing more than post their lecture notes and let the clockwork of the class wind down of its own accord.

What the early adopters also say, but which some faculty members conveniently do not hear, is that developing a distance-education course takes motivation, dedication to a rigid schedule of deadlines, and work: lots and lots of work. Faculty who do not respond to their distance-ed students have often found that their initial estimates of the ease of developing and teaching at a distance were, unfortunately, entirely correct, mostly because they didn't bother to put in the effort and industry that our more motivated instructors did. Often, non-responding teachers have no idea that there's anything wrong, since students in online classes "should teach themselves," and requests for help are either ignored or shunted back to the class at large.

Directing questions back to the class is a great strategy for fostering cooperative learning and student collaboration, but only if there's already a sense of community in the class:

> Establishing an open, inviting, non-threatening learning environment is the best strategy for bridging the distance between instructors and students, as well as among the students in a class. "Teacher immediacy behaviors" invite interaction, suggest approachability, and foster positive outcomes in students. . . . In distance learning, it is particularly important to provide positive, individual, prompt feedback to student work and questions. Students need an accurate means of measuring their success, or potential for success, early in a course. This can make a difference in whether the student chooses to remain in the class. Distance learning students cannot always judge their progress in a course as easily as those in a classroom environment. (Boaz 42–43)

The important phrase here is that distance-ed students "cannot always judge their progress" in their learning. Part of an immediately effective administrative response to a non-responsive faculty member is to express concern from his or her peers: if the faculty member knows that one of the "stars" of the program for whom he or she has respect is concerned about the quality of his or her class affecting the whole program, it's much more likely that the problem professor will improve, even if marginally, in order to keep the peer pressure from building up.

Faculty almost always find that teaching distance-education courses requires a greater number and frequency of communication between them and their students:

> The problem, the faculty members say, is that teaching via the Internet is a demanding proposition for professors. That's mostly because of the large volume of student-teacher contacts required. "When you have 20 students e-mailing you all the time, it takes a lot of work," says Roy Boggs, an associate professor of computer-information systems and the acting head of Gulf Coast's professors' union. "Some professors find teaching distance learning courses to be an enormous amount of work much more than teaching in a classroom," Boggs said. (McKinnon 30)

Further, some faculty members feel as though they are being put upon to perform their instructor's duties at all hours of the day and night:

> Both teachers and students experience a dramatic increase in demands placed on them by all members of the class who now have 24-hour access to each other. The very nature of the on-line technology means that conversations are much more time-consuming as every message sent needs to be opened, to be read and responded to in writing by all communicators involved.

The appropriate administrative response to this situation is to reassure the faculty member that he or she is not obligated to be "on" 24 hours a day, but that the faculty member has an obligation to respond to students' concerns just as he or she has a duty to walk into a face-to-face classroom for three hours a week in order to communicate with students there. Suggest that the faculty member post the times when he or she will check messages, and ask that the class institute a policy about the time-frame with regard to responding to messages. In my own online classes, I tell my students that if they've not heard from me four days after they've sent messages, to check in again, and to try different methods (like the telephone or even the postal mail), just to be sure. In 1993, Barry Willis suggested some strategies for fostering a good classroom atmosphere; although Willis's ideas refer to the use of interactive television distance education, they are easily applicable to other classroom modes:

> Return assignments without delay. If practical, use fax or electronic mail for receiving and returning assignments. Make detailed and insightful comments on written assignments, referring to additional sources for supplementary information. (Willis 109)

Willis also talks about using all of the communication media available, not just the mode in which one is currently teaching:

> Arrange telephone office hours. . . . Encourage students to call with questions, comments, and concerns. Early in the course, student-initiated calls should be mandatory in an effort to get them comfortable with the process. Since many students work during the day, consider posting evening office hours. If this is done, however, the specific times that evening calls are permitted should be stated. . . . Meet students face to face whenever possible. Getting to know students personally will facilitate subsequent interaction and feedback. Encourage them to stop and visit, where possible. (Willis 109-110)

In contrast to the faculty member who seems not to bother, there is the instructor who bothers entirely too much about even the smallest requirements of the class.

Rigid Adherence to the Letter of the Law

Ted Stanchflow's online creative-writing seminar is always packed to the maximum head count every semester; his on-ground version of the seminar has generated immensely popular "buzz" about his skills in guiding students to become better writers. However, several of Stanchflow's students have begun to complain about Stanchflow's unwillingness to depart from the absolute letter of his syllabus. Students were assigned to turn in work using a "post-office-box" tool that was included in the online software, and when some students had difficulty getting the tool to work, they asked Ted to allow them to send their files to him as e-mail attachments, or, as a last resort, to send in their work in the postal mail. Ted's response, when his chair asked him about using these alternate means of submitting work was "this is an online class; the students should submit their work online. Period."

Most instructors engaged in "defending the ivory tower" do so for two main reasons, and in the case of Professor Stanchflow, it might be either of these. First, a faculty member who slavishly follows the protocols set up at the beginning of the term may be doing so out of ignorance: the instructor does not know that there are many acceptable ways of, say, handing in work.

Curiously, although most instructors have little problem in making exceptions for students in their face-to-face classes in order to allow student to succeed, when some faculty get online, they believe that there is only one way of doing things available to them, of which misperception we should work to dissuade them.

The second reason for an instructor's death clutch on the rules is a bit more unsettling. Aside from those über-organized folks among us whose entire lives are compartmentalized and catalogued, some of our colleagues are sticklers for the letter of the law in order to hide inexperience or fear. Think about this situation: you have an advanced degree in your subject area, and you have been teaching for many years, learning as you've gone. Suddenly, you are in an environment where you are very ignorant: you need to call your "techies" even to do the simplest things, like giving tests and sending back student work. Part of Ted Stanchflow's difficulty seems to stem from his assumption that there are no alternatives open to him or to his students, mostly because he doesn't know they exist:

> Even if instructors are consulted, few would know what questions to ask or what types of support services should be available to them, unless they have had experience teaching on interactive television or the Web. . . . There are only two professions that do not require any type of training--teaching at the college level and parenting. The latter is something that many of us have experienced or will experience. The former--teaching--affects the lives of many students, potentially thousands. It is and has been assumed that a degree in a special academic discipline is an adequate license to teach. (Cyrs 20)

Although the cynicism of the citation above is apparent, the call for training is one that most faculty would welcome if it were offered to them in order to help them reach a "comfort level" with the technology that allowed them not to have to think about it, just as they can ignore the way in which they use the technology of chalk in their classrooms, and which allows them to once again become experts in their fields of study. A good response to Ted Stanchflow is to ask him how he deals with similar problems in the classroom. If his answer is to make "rule-breaking" arrangements, then suggest that he be consistent in his classroom policies across the board. If he's also rigid in the classroom, ask him to explain to his students up front about his love of structure (even suggest that he make it part of his usual "this builds discipline and character" lecture at the beginning of the term). A third sort of faculty problem is the situation in which an instructor gets behind in his or her work and begins to flounder.

"He's Going Back. . . Back. . . Waaaaay Back!"

Tovah Williams signed on to teach an "Introduction to the Internet" online course for the current term, but she attended very few of the training sessions offered by the college. Whenever she was asked last semester about her progress, she always replied that she was making headway, and that she'd be ready for the new term with time to spare. However, students are now sending confused and angry email messages to the administration, asking why there's only a syllabus posted in the online class. Under the folder marked "Unit 1," there's an assignment, but no lecture notes or other documents. In the folder for "Unit 2," there's simply nothing at all.

Any faculty member who has taught a distance-education class will confirm that the heaviest load of work for the course comes before the course ever begins: preparing lectures, assessments, multimedia, and other resources for a distance-ed class takes a long time and a large amount of foresight, mostly because, unlike traditional courses where faculty likely already have notes and resources to use over time, distance-education courses require that nearly all the resources

students will need in order to be successful in the course must be created <u>de novo</u> or transferred to a new medium. Lectures that might now exist as five or six main topics on an index card must be fleshed out into paragraphs; tests and quizzes must be re-entered into software shells; topics for discussion must be typed in. Further, in addition to the demands of transferring one's content, the technical requirements for distance education often force faculty to learn quickly in an often steep learning curve.

These two factors sometimes combine to overload an instructor, especially if he or she does not have the luxury of developing materials for the entire course before it is offered at a distance. Faculty who must teach at a distance while developing materials one unit ahead of the course often find themselves so busy that they simply cannot fulfill all of their responsibilities at once, and, since distance-education classes are usually the least rigidly scheduled part of faculty loads, they become relegated to the end of the "to do" list every week.

Just as students with already-loaded schedules sometimes sign up for distance education in the assumption that the course will be "easier" or need be given less attention than other commitments, faculty members can make similar misjudgments. While this helps to explain why some instructors find themselves behind the proverbial eight ball, how can administrators respond to such situations effectively? Canceling the class is not usually an option, nor is demanding that the faculty member produce the missing materials in a short amount of time, since this entire situation is almost always produced by a lack of time in the instructor's schedule.

One possible immediate solution is to respond as we do when an instructor has had a sudden illness or there has been a death in the family: shorten the term of the class. In the case where no substitute instructor can be called upon, such as in an online course where few possible substitutes already have sufficient training with the software, an administrator's hands are often tied, and, if the class is to continue, the instructor needs time to get caught up. A reasonable response is to remind the instructor about his or her contractual obligations, suggest that the class be given a one- or two-week "break" or an assignment that will take some time to do, and then hold the instructor to his or her obligations. The proper response in the long term is to require faculty to attend training, and to offer training and media-creation assistance during the term before a class is offered at a distance. Also, require faculty to give their students a detailed course schedule with their syllabus, one which includes dates, methods of communication, and readings far in advance of the actual dates when activities will occur: "In syllabi, explain the role of each of the instructional tools used in the class (i.e. bulletin board, chat, email, etc.)" (Charron and Reineck).

Another possible reason for Professor Williams's "missing" course components is that she may be looking at the course as a grand experiment, to see whether she can really "trust" distance-education methods, or whether courses taught at a distance are really as effective as their in-class versions. The instructor who is a "healthy skeptic" is often the least motivated to be proactive in adopting the methods of the new medium:

> Some professors say they remain unconvinced of the method's effectiveness for some students--particularly younger, less motivated ones. Some classes may be inappropriate for distance learning. An example, according to some faculty, are health care classes that require hands-on training. Some professors worry distance learning may be stealing their control and ownership of their courses. In a traditional class, the syllabus and lecture notes often are largely the professor's domain. (McKinnon 31)

In the case where the instructor is fearful that their hard work, in the form of class materials, will be "owned" by the institution once it has been put into fixed form, there needs to be a two-pronged response from the administration. Reassure the instructor that their work is theirs, and that the institution will not re-use or re-purpose their materials without their consent. Second, be sure to make the case to the instructor that the institution requires certain duties of him or her in the classroom, such as attending for three hours a week, holding office hours, and giving assessments of student progress on a regular basis. Likewise, the institution expects that an instructor hold up similar duties in distance-ed courses, such as contributing to class synchronous and asynchronous discussion, and posting lectures and supplementary materials.

If your institution does not have as part of its written policy the responsibilities and rights of faculty members who teach at a distance, investigate the way in which specific language can be written to cover such situations. Most institutions also have codes of conduct for their students and instructors, as well, and one of the less appetizing features of being an administrator is dealing with disputes regarding inappropriate language.

Inappropriate Classroom Behavior

Francis Burre teaches a videotape telecourse on Sociology. In his class, he supplements pre-recorded content from a PBS videotape course with his own videotapes, which show Burre lecturing, referring to maps and charts, and posing questions for his students. Recently, a student came to campus to show the administration one of the tapes: in the lesson on the archaeological digs at Ashurbanipal, Francis refers to the people who lived in ancient Sumeria as the forerunners of today's "ragheads and terrorists" in Iran and Iraq. In another section of the tape, Burre says that the library of cuneiform tablets at Ashurbanipal "must have been a really goddamn big building."

Part of the difficulty in dealing with faculty whose lectures are flavored with salty language is that administrators must take into account three competing principles. Academic freedom allows faculty members to teach their classes in whatever fashion they deem pedagogically sound. The strictures of law concerning harassment are not always interpreted consistently. Also, instructors have an obligation to represent the institution in their classroom manner, materials, and techniques. Research has suggested that among the possible reasons why some distance-education classes are unsuccessful are

> 26. No fun or humor integrated into learning. . . .
>
> 28. Not enough meaningful interaction between remote site learners and trainers. . . .
>
> 30. No follow-up learner support in place.
>
> (Gividen and Mantyla 16)

These reasons point to some delicate issues, chief among them the definition of "humor" and "fun." An instructor teaching at a distance may use jokes and humorous examples that have played well in his or her face-to-face classes before, only to see them fall flat or, worse, be seen as insensitive or offensive by his or her distance-education students. Why is this so?

> Facilitating discussions effectively requires skill and experience. Facilitating on line may be even harder because of the lack of tacit clues, such as smiles, nodding, looks of puzzlement, etc.[,] but learning from effective face-to-face facilitators may be useful. Like most activities involving social interactions,

> there is no guaranteed formula for successful facilitating. (Preece)

Contrary to the conclusions in the citation above, there are some very definite things that faculty can do in order to make discussions and class materials unambiguous. Because instructors do not have the benefit of the audio and facial feedback cues that a class gives when the instructor says or does something slightly out of bounds, some faculty members go too far, thinking that their students will speak up or email them if they go overboard. More than once, faculty with whom I've talked about offensive language claim that they use the same language in the classroom on occasion, but in a joking or an unserious way, and it usually gets a laugh from the class (whether this laugh is one of nervousness or humor is for our purposes a moot point). My advice to faculty whose language raises student complaints is always to ask the faculty member to apologize, even if he or she has done nothing "wrong," and to follow up with a query to the students about what is and is not acceptable language for the classroom.

In the long term, I always advise faculty to institute a language policy in their syllabi that includes specific examples of good and poor ways of expressing oneself in class.

> It is helpful to provide examples of discussion messages that do, and do not, conform to the rules of engagement (with the names removed to preserve privacy). (van Rooij)

Note that such a policy need not be exclusive to the point of being stifling: if an instructor likes a little salt in his or her examples, it is perfectly okay to set a policy that when jokes or humor are used, the writer or speaker will use written or spoken parentheses (he said with a wry administrative smile). Such a tactic is very unnatural to many faculty, as it forces one to think critically about one's motivation and intent, but the benefits of adopting these kinds of "open chat" techniques gain in specificity and better understanding what they lose in spontaneity.

Who Knows What Lurks in the Hearts of Men?

I will now turn from specific examples of situations that require immediate administrative response to some more general steps we can take to insure that our students and our faculty never reach these flash points. The main task of all long-term research and policy implementation is to provide specific, written, measurable guidelines by which administrators, faculty, and students can abide.

> Research [on online conflict] must be actionable, so faculty, administrators and students can proactively deal with potential online conflict. (van Rooij)

It's entirely likely that by the time a matter of contention is called to your notice, it's been festering for quite some time. Students having difficulty with their instructors will already have started gripe sessions with their classmates. Faculty who have difficult students have likely already confided their frustrations to their colleagues. The tightrope we must walk as administrators is to put the metaphorical genie back in the bottle while making sure that all parties to the dispute believe that they have been treated fairly, listened to, and that the problem has been settled in a way complimentary to all involved. In other words, our administrative task in not so much to set things right (although that would be nice, too) as it is to save face for the combatants.

> Once teachers [and students] become aware that you know of inappropriate approaches it is important to touch base with them. You may gently ask if everything is okay. . . . It is important not to validate behavior by ignoring it.

Let us consider some possible tactics for proactively avoiding problems with difficult students and faculty members. These steps may take time to implement, but they all help to foster a collegial, friendly, and open learning environment.

In my 2000 survey of distance-education administrators, I received a number of responses from administrators who also taught at a distance, and the responses I received often echoed this one:

> I generally do not have disruptive students. Last semester I did sort of, where a student was very angry about something, nothing that I think I did. She would post things publicly that should have been private emails, etc. but nothing terrible. Posts were sarcastic, theory was not the same as practical, etc. I just rode out the storm with this one and it seemed to turn out OK. I just responded to her questions in a timely and professional manner. If it continued to escalate I would have developed online etiquette rules and regs. (Brownson)

Note that the author envisions enacting specific policy only after problems become so severe that they cannot be resolved informally. This reactive approach is too often the model for distance education: the software is developed, faculty and students are trained how to use it, but the policy of the institution is not updated to cover situation unique to distance education, most often because those in charge of the written policy have little idea about what issues are unique to distance education, and are unsure of what questions to ask in order to find out.

With this in mind, let us look at some of the ways in which distance education and on-ground education are similar.

> For me, "online community" is defined broadly as a group that has. . . policies: language and protocols that guide people's interactions. Folklore and rituals that bring a sense of history and accepted social norms. Formal policies to provide governance. (Preece)

The classroom dynamic is controlled by written or unwritten policies that are acceptable to (or forced upon) all of the members of the class. Classrooms, no matter their medium, also share some basic traits when it comes to conflict resolution:

> 1. Socializing: Listen to the teacher and student's language, metaphors, and self-description so you can align yourself to their description.
>
> 2. Problem Definition: If you talk about the problem, get each person's view of it.
>
> 3. Setting Goals: How does the student or teacher want things to be different?
>
> 4. Separating the person from the problem:
>
> 5. Identifying exceptions to problem-dominated perceptions and behaviors: there are times when you would expect the problem to happen, but it doesn't. How do you get that to happen? (Metcalf 70-71)

Thus, there are likely already some written policies at your institution about appropriate ways to handle classroom disputes, from minor infractions that can be resolved between students and

instructors to serious difficulties that require the intervention of many different sectors of the administration. However, the issue "kicked upstairs" most frequently is that of incivility, a seeming inability to "play by the rules":

> Sociability focuses on social interaction. Communities with good sociability have social policies that support the community's purpose and are understandable, socially acceptable, and practicable. Success of an online community is encouraged by a blend of well-designed software (i.e., usability) and carefully crafted social policies (i.e., sociability).
>
> (Preece)

There, now all you need to do is go back to your administration and ask them to factor into their written policy some of the specific problems I've already put forward, right? Well, perhaps.

> When deciding to implement a new policy or "rule," there is a quick three-question quiz you can ask yourself to determine whether this policy is likely to have a positive or a negative effect. These three questions are: 1. What is my true purpose in implementing this rule or policy? 2. Will it actually accomplish this purpose? 3. How will my most positive and productive people feel about this policy?
>
> (Whitaker, Dealing with Difficult Teachers 13-14)

Most of the people who teach for you at a distance, and most of the students in your distance-education program, are there in order to do well and to learn. The majority of the folks for whom you are responsible (on both sides of the desk) don't give you any problems and often are the first to suggest new approaches and solutions to making distance education run more smoothly and work better for fostering good learning and scholarship. What effect will written policy have on these folks? They'll follow it, of course, and those folks because of whom you wrote the policies will likely continue to disregard it, and will likely point to the written policy as yet another way of restricting their academic freedom, First Amendment rights, and civil liberties. How, then, can administrators strike a healthy balance between effecting change through social pressures, as I've outlined in some of the specific examples with which I began this essay, and effecting change through the use of written policy, as I've offered as a solution to other of the specific examples?

Regardless of a faculty member's specific instructional responsibilities, there are basic expectations of professional faculty performance. Kennesaw State University lists some core competencies that it expects of all its faculty, and it may serve as a model of brevity and clarity:

- Be on time. Faculty should start and end their classes and appointments at the scheduled time.
- Provide feedback to learners in a timely manner (e.g., returning graded papers and evaluated materials or responding to messages). Learners need feedback about the quality of their performance in order to understand what they do well and in what ways they need to improve.
- Relate instructional methods to learning objectives.
- Respect and maintain confidentiality (e.g., grades, personal information, incidences of alleged academic dishonesty, advising or special needs).
- Apply stated standards and expectations of the instructor, department,

college/school, and university consistently, regularly and objectively to all learners.

- Communicate and enforce KSU's policy with respect to academic integrity.
- Provide a syllabus for each course at the beginning of the term.
- Provide written expectations/contracts for individualized learning experiences (e.g., clinical experiences, internships, cooperative learning courses, and directed studies).
- Be accessible to students: faculty should provide and publicize multiple means of contact for students and colleagues.
- Respect religious, cultural, and gender differences.
- Adhere to KSU's policy prohibiting sexual harassment both in and out of the classroom.

("Instructional Responsibilities")

In addition to the written policies outlined in KSU's expectations, crisis management and active listening skills are essential for defusing situations that explode after a long dormancy. They can be applied to many aspects of our administrative duties other than as distance-education mediators. However, there are a few very discipline-specific skills that we can employ right now in order to help to reduce the number and severity of interpersonal problems down the line. For the purposes of this argument, I have made an artificial distinction that some of these skills are directed specifically at ensuring student satisfaction with and good behavior in our distance-education classrooms, and that some skills address only ensuring consistent quality and communication from our distance-education faculty, but these skill sets often overlap. Rather than present these strategies as received wisdom, I prefer to suggest some methods that have been successful for myself and others, and to encourage administrators to adapt these suggestions to fit their own managerial and interpersonal styles. Poor instructors often end up at the bottom of the teaching heap:

> Demoralizing. The effect of even a few bad teachers in a school can be profound. Students who have just one bad teacher have lower test scores two years later than do comparable students with solid teachers, according to a study by researchers at the University of Tennessee--Knoxville. Bad teachers demoralize good teachers. "It causes significant resentment among teachers who are working hard and shows those who aren't that there's no consequence to low performance," notes Kathy Christie of the Education Commission of the States. Bad teachers also tend to wind up teaching [those] who need help the most: poor, low-performing students who "aren't squeaky wheels and won't complain," says Christie. (Glastris)

To compound this problem, unless training is mandated for all faculty who teach at a distance, it's possible that many of the instructors who adopt the new media do not have enough background to adopt intelligently new methods, as well.

> Subject matter expertise does NOT always equal teaching ability and that teaching doesn't come naturally. Many professors are ill prepared to teach in the classroom and clueless when it comes to teaching at a distance. Paradoxically, the professoriate is notoriously resistant to "faculty development"--teaching is generally not rewarded in the P[romotion] & T[enure] process--and on most campuses it is a hard sell to persuade faculty, except the usual suspects--to turn up for anything remotely resembling

"teaching lessons." (Collins)

One of the responses I received from my 2000 survey was a lament from a staff member responsible for training new online instructors:

> It seems that faculty either don't understand what I mean about posting questions to the students that will help the students go deeper into the subject matter knowledge, or faculty don't want to be bothered.

> (Sawyer)

Instructors often are not schooled in pedagogical techniques, and it's possible that some faculty really <u>don't</u> comprehend such strategies as "posting questions to the students that will help the students go deeper into the subject matter knowledge." Faculty engage in a variety of instructional activities that facilitate learning. The three most common of these are teaching, supervision, and mentoring, which are not mutually exclusive categories. Teaching involves the development of knowledge, understanding, and application in an environment where the instructor must monitor, manage, and facilitate the learning process. An instructor should provide a rich learning environment that allows for a range of individual learning styles. Following a syllabus designed by the instructor, specific topics in a discipline are presented through various forms of teaching and discovery based on a selection of reading materials and other resources. The learning outcomes and expectations should be identified in the syllabus and formally assessed.

Supervision occurs in situations where a learner is engaged for a fixed period of time in a structured academic experience for credit or pay with specified learning outcomes. The learner is expected to demonstrate competence in performing the learning outcomes, and the purpose of supervision is to improve the quality of that performance by guiding, monitoring, and providing feedback. The supervisor observes, evaluates and provides feedback about the quality of the performance of tasks and appropriate professional behavior ("Instructional Responsibilities"). Although a faculty member may be responsible for supervising a group of students, actual observation and conferences typically occur in a one-to-one relationship between learner and instructor. If distance-education students have no one-on-one contact with their instructors, this element of the faculty member's responsibilities is made much more difficult to enact.

The purpose of mentoring is to facilitate and enhance the academic and professional success of an individual. Mentoring may take many forms, ranging from providing resources for learning and development to forming professional relationships with students and colleagues. Faculty mentor students in order to attract them to a discipline, retain them in degree programs, and enhance their professional success. Faculty mentor colleagues in order to retain them in the institution and to help them develop professional expertise. A primary focus of all mentoring is the development of ideas and an understanding of a discipline. Mentoring activities challenge both the mentee and the mentor to consider new ideas and construction of knowledge and encourage both to engage in reflection and scholarly activities. Frequently, in mentoring relationships, faculty challenge the mentees by setting high expectations for the quality of the mentee's work and the development and achievement of their long-term goals. Although the mentee ultimately selects the mentor, faculty invite students and colleagues to engage in a mentoring relationship through their actions during teaching, supervision, and other professional activities. For example, faculty can directly initiate contact and conversations; be available, open, and receptive; nurture potential by providing messages of encouragement and support of scholarly efforts; provide resource information and materials for professional development; and

invite students and colleagues to engage in collaborative endeavors. This aspect of faculty responsibility is most often missing from the duties expected of distance-education instructors, and is the most crucial in the process of keeping things civil and unambiguous, since a student who has a faculty advocate--and a faculty member who has insight into the experience of a student in distance-education classes other than his or her own--are much better able to appreciate the stresses on and concerns of the "other" side.

Without all of these activities going on in our distance-education classrooms, it will be difficult to implement policies and to enforce social strategies that will help to steer our faculty and our students toward a rewarding learning experience. However, we already have the necessary tools at our disposal.

Conclusion

Problems with students and faculty members who don't observe the rules of politeness or uphold the educational contract are among the most frustrating ones distance-learning administrators face, mostly because there are seemingly so few avenues by which such problems can be dealt with in a way that leaves everyone involved satisfied with the fairness of the outcome. However, the basic tactics that we use every day in our face-to-face meetings with students and faculty members continue to serve us in good stead, so long as we remember that the limitations of the distance-education medium require extra diligence and extra care in the wording of messages, active-listening skills, and team-building concepts. Some things that sound innocent and harmless when spoken can be interpreted in print as being apathetic, or, worse, actively hostile.

The strategies I have offered here are not intended to replace the skills and rapport that administrators have with their students and their faculty; rather, they may be thought of as new tools that help to refine and strengthen those behaviors that help us to be effective administrators who are compassionate toward the situations of others, yet as fair as we can be toward all. Just as instructors who teach at a distance must not discard their good classroom techniques, but build on and tweak them so that they are as effective in the distance-education classroom as over the television or online, administrators need also to remember that we're already good at what we do, and it takes only a conscious effort to add a few new wrinkles to our proven methods. It's much better than letting frustration add new wrinkles to our faces.

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