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How to Survive Teaching Distance Learning

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How to Survive Teaching through Distance Learning

Rule #1	<p>This the most important one: Do not let students turn DLP or a Web course into an independent study. One of the advantages of DLP is that students get a lot of personal attention that they cannot in an f2f class (especially through email). HOWEVER, that does not mean that they can do whatever they want, whenever they want. You must set deadlines for work and then be immoveable about extensions and excuses. I usually allow five days for students to take an online exam. After that, there is no mercy. Yes, students are notorious for churning out eleventh-hour work. And, yes, it is certain that technology will not cooperate when one needs it the most. Post announcements to warn students not to wait to the last minute and remind them that no late papers, exams, discussions, whatever will be accepted once the window closes, regardless of reason. This is not an unreasonable request. And if you relent, I promise you that the student to whom you showed mercy will tell others, and then you will be bombarded with demands to accept late work in the previous assignments. Don't bend. Staggered discussions are not conducive to community building and classroom efficiency. Even though most students are focused on grades, your job is to teach and ensure learning through DLP. This happens mostly in the discussion board. In an f2f class, if you have a class discussion one day, you don't allow the five who were absent to hold up the next class with late contributions. Furthermore, if you yield about late work, you will spend time you don't have, trying to keep up with the logistics and the management of the course (resetting questions and time, remembering to grade out of sequence, revisiting discussion posts when you are most likely to end up with over a thousand of them to read before the course ends, etc.). It will drive you crazy. Don't let it happen! You cannot handle 35+ independent studies!</p>
Rule #2	<p>Prevent email avalanches! Anticipate questions that students will have, even when you think the answers are already inside the course---somewhere. Remember, students (and sometimes you) have trouble finding information in the course. Do not expect students to spend the time searching for information, like, the number of pages required for an assignment. Post information in announcements. Train your students to read announcements every time they open the course. When a student emails you a question, suppose that others have the same question, reply to the student, and post the information in announcements.</p>
Rule #3	<p>Make sure that your reply to a student's email will end the discussion. Again, email communication with students is great until you have over a hundred every day to answer. Anticipate further questions when you answer. And do not delete an email without replying to it. Emails that do not receive a reply do not go away. And they hurt students' feelings.</p>
Rule #4:	<p>Repeat information. Don't assume that students will spend the time trying to find information in the course. It is much easier for them to email you. So, post everything you want the student to know, daily, in announcements. This will cut down on emails and possible problems (missed deadlines, etc.).</p>
Rule #5	<p>Practice tough love. Even though DLP gives students and you some flexibility, do</p>

	not let flexibility become "an occasion to the flesh." See Rule #1. You will receive so many requests like, "May I turn it in even though it's late?" and "May I do it over again?" You simply don't have the time for this. Do what you can to give students sample papers, sample exams, practice on the board, etc. After that, students must turn in their work on time (unless you are allowing multiple drafts) and when it's due. If you have the time for them, encourage early drafts. Encourage students to email you their ideas before they write a paper. Communication beforehand will prevent a lot of communication after a disaster.
Rule #6	Don't try to make all of your students happy or you'll go nuts. One student whined that I had chosen an obscure quote to ask about on an exam. Here was the question: "Identifying the story, explain the significance of this quote: "everyday use." Well, "Everyday Use," is the title of an Alice Walker story. It was the first story (of nine) we discussed in this class. And students were allowed to use their books and notes to take the exam. Expect that students will "talk" to you in email in ways they wouldn't think of doing face to face. On one hand, this can be a very good thing; it allows students who wouldn't normally talk to you, for whatever reason, now to have a non-threatening forum through which to communicate. On the other hand, you will get an "earful" sometimes that will not "sound" very respectful. Keep in mind that people do not always come across through email with the tone that they mean. Give your student the benefit of a doubt, and do not reply right away. And then write: "Before I respond to your last email, please help me to understand exactly what you meant. Were you really angry because....? Encourage the student to rephrase his/her message. Hopefully, either you will get a clarification and find that the student didn't mean what you thought or else you will get an apology. However, you can anticipate that some students will say things to you through email that they would never think of saying to you face to face. Regardless, do not return anger with anger or sarcasm with sarcasm.
Rule #7	Gently, but firmly let students know that you are not available 24/7 . Periodically, in an announcement, remind them that you promise to reply to email within 24 hours of a posting, but not over breaks or over weekends (or whatever is your policy). If students need technical assistance, they should contact the Help Desk (info is listed in the opening pages of BlackBoard).
Rule #8	Try to do much of your work online in your most comfortable chair, in your sloppiest wardrobe, with plenty of chocolate candy (if that helps), with relaxing music in the background, at the time when you are psychologically the most "on." Remember DLP's flexibility can work for you too. If you feel yourself going nuts, walk away from that computer.
Rule #9	Support Group. It helps to talk to other people who teach DLP. People who don't teach DLP have no idea.... Find out what other people do to survive. And don't think there's something wrong with you if you feel as if you're drowning. It comes with the territory.