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## 10 Tips to Extend the Shelf Life of Your Online Course

By Darren Crone

Building your online course took a tremendous amount of time and effort. You created a syllabus, selected a textbook, wrote learning objectives, recorded lectures, developed learning objects, designed course activities, and carefully planned out your assignments. Once your course was complete, you couldn't help but feel a sense of pride. This magnum opus of binary code was built to stand the test of time and be offered ad infinitum/ad nauseam ... right? More than likely the answer is no. Without proper planning and design, a large portion of your course may have to be redeveloped for the next offering. If planned and designed properly, however, an online course can be offered relatively intact from semester to semester. As with traditional courses, online courses will need a change here and a tweak there, but major reconstruction can be largely avoided. This article will present 10 common online course design pitfalls (each experienced by yours truly) and discuss solutions to assist instructional designers and instructors in building a lower-maintenance course.

**Problem 1: The publisher short-**

### **cycled your textbook.**

There was once a time when you could count on a textbook edition to remain current for at least several years. Now, it is not unusual for "new" editions to come out every 24 months. To avoid having to constantly implement a new edition, a custom textbook may be created. Several companies are offering this service, in which the instructor determines the content by integrating sections of existing textbooks, articles, and even original material. This custom textbook is then given a unique ISBN and may be used as long as desired. Other advantages include lower cost and the availability of an electronic version for students.

### **Problem 2: A course is built using a publisher's content and you change textbooks.**

Many textbooks come complete with online course content. With a few clicks of a mouse, an empty shell in Blackboard can be transformed into a dynamic interactive learning environment to accompany your book. Students can access videos, online lectures, practice quizzes, and more. The only drawback is that when you change

CONTINUED ON PAGE 3 >>

## TIPS FROM THE PROS

### 4 Time Management Tips

The flexibility of teaching online can blur the boundaries between work and personal time. Teresa Marie Kelly, a faculty member at Kaplan University offers the following advice on managing this aspect of teaching online:

- **Let go of the guilt.** Online learners do their coursework when they can. As a result, you may receive questions or comments at any time. The desire to serve students and the desire to avoid the guilt of having students wait for your responses might tempt you to log on frequently. Resist this temptation. Just because you receive a message does not mean that you have to respond immediately.
- **Set your working hours.** Select blocks of time to dedicate to your course and stick to the schedule, realizing that your hours may not correspond to a standard workday.
- **Manage your time, and learn to explain to others.** "Arrange [your schedule] so you are not kissing deadlines," Kelly says. If you build extra time into your schedule, you will be able to

CONTINUED ON PAGE 7 >>

2  
Using Video Clips to Stimulate Discussion

4  
Online Teaching Fundamentals: Media for Online Instruction: Getting Around Typical Obstacles, Part 2

5  
What Do Students Say about Online Discussion?

6  
Teaching Online With Error: Keep Up with the Techie Side of Teaching!

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# Using Video Clips to Stimulate Discussion

If you're looking to improve threaded discussions in your online courses, consider using brief video clips as discussion prompts. When carefully selected and integrated into a course, these clips can lead students to higher-order thinking and appeal to auditory and visual learning styles.

Stacey Williams, distance learning council cochair and director of distance learning at Naugatuck Valley Community College, uses video clips to prompt discussion and says that her retention rates and student satisfaction have improved as a result. The key is to use these video clips within the context of scaffolding assignments rather than as stand-alone course elements.

Each unit in Williams' courses incorporates the following elements:

- **Concept quiz**—After the PowerPoint presentation, Williams has students do practice assignments, typically multiple-choice or true/false quizzes. “They tend to do those practice tests or quizzes a little bit more readily when it’s a safe environment, so I keep those as a tool just for them,” Williams says.
  - **Video clips**—Williams uses brief (up to five-minute) video clips from sources such as corporate websites, textbook publishers, [www.merlot.org](http://www.merlot.org), [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com), and [www.teachertube.com](http://www.teachertube.com). “One of the biggest challenges is finding videos to use in a streaming format, but I do like the challenge of going out and finding them,” Williams says.
  - **Discussion**—After viewing a video clip, students participate in a discussion based on the video. Williams typically asks students two questions based on the content of the video clip, and they are required to respond with a minimum of two paragraphs and responses to at least two classmates. “This gets the conversation going. It simulates what happens in a classroom, and it does tend to draw out the students who wouldn’t necessarily participate in a discussion in person. For me, it becomes a key part of an online course,” Williams says.
- Each of these unit elements builds on the next. “I give them the foundational information first and then bring in the video to kind of get them to that application point where they can see the things that we talked about or the things that we read about. They can see these

CONTINUED ON PAGE 8 >>

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## << FROM PAGE 1

books, you must also stop using the content. A way to bypass this is to avoid taking the easy path; create your own course content. There are several low-cost and free programs out there to help you accomplish this. While it will be considerably more work up front creating your own lectures, acquiring copyright permission for multimedia materials, and building your own self-quizzes, the extra effort will pay dividends in the long run.

### **Problem 3: A learning object becomes obsolete.**

Learning objects can take a lot of time to create. Before developing an original learning object, you should be relatively certain that it is reusable. For instance, an interactive exercise demonstrating the Pythagorean Theorem is likely to be usable for years to come as the concept does not change, while an interactive world map with detailed information on all countries may become dated shortly after completion. Also, there are a growing number of repositories that offer low-cost or free learning objects for educators.

### **Problem 4: Your course material is no longer correct/relevant.**

By judiciously selecting the medium for getting the information to your students, considerable trouble can be avoided. Instead of creating a multimedia lecture that touches on every detail of a topic, try sticking to the higher-level concepts. This way if something minor changes, the entire lecture does not have to be redone. The details that may be more prone to changing can be addressed in a more dynamic forum, such as on a discussion board, via a Web conference, or in a chat session.

### **Problem 5: The publisher updates the textbook, changing**

### **the order of chapters. The course, which was based on the order of the textbook, is now out of sequence.**

During the design of the course, determine the order in which *you* want the material to be presented. There is no law against presenting Chapter 9 before Chapter 1. Instead of organizing a course by the chapters of a textbook, consider breaking it into modules based on topics. This way if the publisher pulls the old switcheroo, all you need to do is change the reading assignments in your syllabus (as opposed to reorganizing your entire course). It should be noted that if you are using a custom textbook, this is a nonissue.

### **Problem 6: Your textbook was updated, and page numbers/figures referenced in course materials do not match up with the textbook.**

It is recommended that specific page numbers and figures not be referenced in course materials that are expected to be reused. Try creating your own examples, or if a specific page/figure must be referenced, consider doing this on the discussion board.

### **Problem 7: Your contact information or course software requirements are out of date.**

There are some things that will always change. Consider using your syllabus to communicate your office hours and contact information for instructors and teaching assistants in the course. Isolating information that is likely to change makes it much easier to keep track of. For information that will be included in multiple courses, such as software requirements, consider creating a Web page and adding a link to it in each course's syllabus.

### **Problem 8: You have broken hyperlinks.**

There is a tremendous amount of

useful information on the Web, but you are taking a risk when linking to any site outside your course. The possibility exists that the information will be moved or deleted. Whenever possible, keep your course materials (videos, case studies, self-assessments, etc.) inside your course management system. When you must link to an external page, consider providing the link on the discussion board.

### **Problem 9: Your academic institution has upgraded/changed its learning management system (LMS).**

When switching to a new LMS, courses must be moved. Many times this is a painful and laborious process. To avoid having to reconstruct your course file by file, consider developing your course as a package file. To do this you should create an HTML page linking all course materials inside a folder. The folder can then be zipped, uploaded, and unzipped into any LMS.

### **Problem 10: Academic integrity issues prompt the creation of new tests.**

Instead of creating a single test for all students to take, consider using a large test bank. Test settings can be adjusted so each student receives a different test with all questions and answers randomized.

This article reviewed some common issues that are encountered in online course development. Developing an online course is a lot of work. A little preplanning will help to ensure that you don't have to start from scratch each time the course is offered.

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## Media for Online Instruction: Getting Around Typical Obstacles, Part 2

By Patti Shank, PhD, CPT

Media can be extraordinarily powerful learning tools when they are selected to support instructional goals and don't cause needless frustration or confusion. Last month, I discussed three common obstacles to using media, including limited resources and limited faculty and learner technical skills, and ways to mitigate these obstacles.

This month, I'm going to continue the discussion of media obstacles and will focus on cost and infrastructure.

### Obstacle 4 (the big one): Cost

Cost is often one of the largest obstacles to using media in online courses. I find that this obstacle is often misunderstood. Many clients I work with initially think that "good" online instruction *requires* lots of bells and whistles. But more expensive media often aren't needed and can be problematic.

If you want learners to work through a case study that includes lots of documents it would make sense to provide these in a downloadable text format so learners can read them off-line and make notes in the margins, rather than, for example, building a complex Flash interaction that can only be used and read online. If you want learners to listen to opinions of experts in the field, a picture with audio isn't much different than video of the same people speaking, but the cost of the former is far lower, as is the use of bandwidth.

Some inexpensive and more expensive media have similar characteristics and potential uses. So the first way to mitigate the cost obstacle is to consider appropriate but more cost-effective media for your online

courses.

Here are some costs that may not be obvious when determining how much media will cost to produce:

- Costs of needed development tools and equipment
- People costs for building media, including learning curve, salaries, benefits, overhead, and consulting costs
- Maintenance costs for updating tools and equipment and making changes to media elements over time
- Opportunity costs and alternatives (and benefits from those alternatives), which are forgone whenever money and other resources are allocated to one purpose and are therefore not available for another

The decision to build media elements should be made by considering the value of the medium for learning and an analysis of the cost of producing and maintaining it.

Resources for building media are too often allocated in ways that do not maximize the gains from those resources. Rather than having each instructor advocating for scarce resources for his or her own specific needs, it makes more sense to allocate resources based on the ability to impact the instructional quality of multiple courses.

A third way to moderate the cost is to buy media development tools that tech-savvy instructors can learn to use themselves, such as Articulate Presenter ([www.articulate.com/products/presenter.php](http://www.articulate.com/products/presenter.php)), PowerPoint with narration, and numerous game tools such as Hot Potatoes (<http://web.uvic.ca/hrd/hotpot/>) or Studymate ([www.respondus.com/products/studymate.shtml](http://www.respondus.com/products/studymate.shtml)).

A list of easier-to-use tools for

creating media components can be found at [www.learningpeaks.com/Tools\\_pshank\\_2007\\_1004.pdf](http://www.learningpeaks.com/Tools_pshank_2007_1004.pdf).

Want faculty to learn these tools? Buy ones that are not hard to learn and teach faculty how to use them. In other words, spend more money helping faculty become proficient with easier-to-use and more generically useful tools rather than tools that are hard to use or useful for only a limited number of faculty.

### Obstacle 5: Infrastructure

Even if you can get the tools to build good media, infrastructure may limit what can be used. For example, if you buy a digital video camera and edit your own video sequences, the servers hosting the media may not have enough bandwidth to deliver it to learners. And if you have the infrastructure to deliver the media but learners don't have the infrastructure to use it, it's still basically unusable. So make sure to check infrastructure at both ends before building media.

Here are some useful questions to ask:

- What media types do our course management systems support?
- Is there enough bandwidth to serve content to learners?
- What connection speed, players, hardware, and software are learners expected to have, and will they support the media elements I want to build?

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## What Do Students Say about Online Discussion?

By Glenna L. Decker, EdD, and Sarah J. Cox

We know that the literature suggests that online collaboration and discussion are key elements to success for an online course, but what do students think about online discussion? We decided to find out by conducting an anecdotal study to see if what our students (undergraduate and graduate students in a midsize Midwest university) reported matched what the literature suggests.

After years of listening to varied comments from our students, we surveyed two classes at the beginning of a semester. Of 32 surveys sent, 25 were returned. We then held focus groups with an additional 20 graduate students and with 20 undergraduate students. Our topic was their perceptions of course online discussion. We asked such questions as

- “Do you participate in face-to-face class discussions?”
- “How much do you generally read of online discussion?”
- “What motivates you to participate?”
- “What has made for good (and for poor) experiences of online discussion?”

More than 80 percent of graduate and 66 percent of undergraduate students reported generally contributing to face-to-face class discussions. More than 80 percent of the total reported that they had participated in online discussions in previous courses. On average between the two groups, nearly 12 percent reported that they read 100 percent of the online discussion, and approximately 55 percent reported that they typically read 75

percent to 99 percent of online discussion. Just over 24 percent read less than half, while nearly 10 percent chose not to answer.

We were interested in what motivates students to participate. In a preclass survey, 100 percent expressed that interest in the subject will get them to participate; on average, 78 percent reported that they participate if it is graded. This last number, however, rose to closer to 85 percent in a postcourse survey. Few claimed that peer pressure served as a motivator, but comments included the importance of other students also participating. Other comments suggested comfort in the online environment because they have time to think before responding. Of particular interest is how much of the online discussion students read. Approximately 23 percent of graduate students and no undergraduate students reported reading all of the online discussion; an average between the two groups indicates that approximately 58 percent read between 75 percent and 99 percent. The rest (except for the 9 percent who did not answer) read less than half, with about 8 percent of graduate students reporting reading less than 25 percent.

Equally interesting was looking at their reasons for not participating in online discussion. Responses varied between the anticipation of the online course discussion and the postcourse reality. Half of undergraduate and 65 percent of graduate students believed that a lack of interest would keep them from participating, but fewer than 19 percent reported the same at the end. The biggest barrier to participating was time. At the end of the courses, an average of nearly 88 percent reported that lack of time

kept them from participating. Half of undergraduate students thought that too much text on the discussion board was a barrier, as did 38 percent of graduates. On average, 12 percent did not complete the preparation work, 10 percent did not participate in nongraded discussion, and 14 percent did not respond.

Summarizing their responses, along with the literature, we determined our own “best practices.”

**1. Make the topic interesting and relevant.** The online discussion must be a topic of interest.

Questions that have relevancy to the students, whether in their immediate lives or that they can connect to their future, will elicit higher participation. Take time to inform students why you value discussion and what you hope they gain from it. Identify ahead of time the educational objectives, and inform students how the discussion will add to their understanding of the content (Jenkinson, 1994).

**2. Encourage timely participation.** Students reported that they preferred when all participated in a timely manner. The instructor can be prescriptive in this, allowing only a few days for initial responses, with follow-up responses one or two more times throughout the duration of the discussion. Another approach that has been successful with the author’s graduate students is to spend the first week of the course having the students themselves define the parameters. As they discuss their own positive and negative experiences in online discussion, the students can then vote on their own expectations, including when and how often they should contribute. With a social contract,

CONTINUED ON PAGE 7 >>

## Keep Up with the Techie Side of Teaching!

By Errol Craig Sull

Because our means of teaching courses is through a computer, we are constantly tinkering, configuring, rebooting, tweaking, uploading, downloading, deleting, reviewing, and defragmenting. This, however, is not enough, for the world of the computer is one that is full of constant changes in hardware, software, accessories, and peripherals, and to remain an effective online teacher it is imperative to stay in step with these changes.

The following suggestions are by no means inclusive; you may have others to add (and please send them along so I can share them with all our readers). But follow these and you'll never be left behind the computer eight ball:

**Scan through computer articles, columns, and ads.** In addition to several computer magazines, more newspapers are offering computer columns; additionally, there is a ton of computer info online. Embrace this, scan this, and read it when it applies: not only can you learn about new software, hardware, accessories, and peripherals, but there are many tips and suggestions out there to make your online life smoother.

**Read campus and school tech postings.** Whether in the form of email, newsletters, or info sheets available around brick-and-mortar schools, IT departments offer much info on the computer system and configurations employed by your school(s). They may offer patches or downloads necessary for smooth running of email or course platforms, suggestions on how to better use an existing software program, and all-important "who-do-I-contact?" info.

**Watch for "Critical Update"**

**notices.** These are very important and often offer patches to plug a security problem with a piece of software or an upgrade on an aspect of the software. Often, folks ignore these, thinking they are annoying ad pop-ups. They are not, so read each, and, if appropriate, welcome it into your computer.

**Learn from faculty conference calls.** Departments will often have a conference call for all online faculty in a discipline. This is a great opportunity to ask technical questions that are specific to the school. The conference call is a rare opportunity to chat with other online instructors, so don't hesitate to "pick their brains."

**Sign up for free tech emails; look for other related freebies.** Microsoft, Corel, Adobe, Dell, and many other software and hardware manufacturers—as well as professional and amateur associations, retail outlets, and user groups—offer free emails that contain information, coupons, discounts, websites, Listservs, and other info that can prove very helpful in any number of areas related to a computer.

**Be aware of any licensing "deals" your school has.** Because of the large number of computers, many schools have licensing arrangements with software, hardware, and computer accessories and peripherals manufacturers/distributors to offer faculty reduced prices on varied computer-related items.

**Join professional teaching organizations.** Whether for a fee or for free, professional teaching associations and organizations often have special computer-related discounts for their members as well as newsletters that contain helpful computer tips. Additionally, many have Listservs, blogs, and members-

only websites that offer helpful tech info and the chance to ask tech questions of members.

**Take advantage of professional conferences.** There are thousands each year that are sponsored by schools, professional associations, and corporations. Pay closer attention to those that seek you out. There is a proliferation of tech info to be had at each of these conferences—and this often includes free software and computer accessories/peripherals.

**Cruise computer stores on occasion.** Even if you are not looking to purchase anything, an hour spent in a computer store can make you more aware of new software, new features on hardware/software, upgrades, and accessories/peripherals. You might also come across a discount or two just too good to pass up, run into some folks who can offer a suggestion for a computer problem you might be having, and discover some new approaches to software/hardware configuration that could make your online teaching life a bit easier.

**Make use of helpful online sites for more effective teaching.** There are so many the computer can offer; here is a very brief selection:

- online calculator: [www.google.com/ig/adde?source=call0](http://www.google.com/ig/adde?source=call0)
- plagiarism: [www.plagiarism.org/](http://www.plagiarism.org/)
- date and time: [www.timeanddate.com/](http://www.timeanddate.com/)
- area codes: [www.bennetyee.org/ucsd-pages/area.html](http://www.bennetyee.org/ucsd-pages/area.html)
- dictionary and thesaurus: <http://dictionary.reference.com/> or <http://m-w.com/>
- word counter (for most frequently

CONTINUED ON PAGE 8 >>

## << FROM PAGE 5

they own the criteria and hold each other accountable, allowing the instructor to be less prescriptive.

**3. Ask two or three open-ended questions** to provide opportunity for ongoing dialogue. Students will contribute more when they learn from the discussion and find the dialogue thoughtful and meaningful. They are more interested when there are a variety of perspectives and opinions. Encourage their opinion, backed up by referencing the literature. Students want somewhere to go with the discussion; they do not want a closed response or to feel forced to reword the same response as others. Be clear that simply agreeing with a colleague is insufficient without explaining what informs their opinion.

**4. Encourage clear, concise dialogue.** Students shared that time restraints were a barrier to participating and they welcomed succinct, to-the-point responses. Model for students how to write for online dialogue. Short, inverted paragraphs and bullet points are more effective for reading online (Nielsen, 1997).

**5. Rotate students or groups.** Staying on topic is important to students, and a reminder of this may dissuade ill-prepared students from posting solely for credit. One way to manage this is to rotate students or groups to be the topic facilitators. Students will then hold each other accountable for the relevancy of the contributions to the topic at hand.

**6. Create a safe environment.** The quickest way to shut down discussion is for someone to feel attacked. Students need (and deserve) to feel safe in class discussion (Doyle, 2005), and this is perhaps more challenging in the online environment, where typed messages are easily misinterpreted. Students report the need for an

honest, open, and respectful environment. The instructor has the responsibility of setting this tone from the beginning. Model appropriate responses and challenges through additional questions.

**7. Make expectations clear.** One challenge with online discussion is that it is not contained within the period of a class meeting. Students look for clear expectations and guidelines, with an identified beginning and ending. Address this with a rubric that clarifies expectations of quality discussion, including how often, when, and how posts must contribute to the ongoing dialogue.

**8. Use group discussions.** Students reported that they favored group discussion (these groups averaged five participants) and liked having assigned roles. Requiring students to rotate roles such as facilitator, researcher, summarizer, and questioner gave them purpose and eased anxieties. They knew their expectations and enjoyed the dialogue more. The quality and depth of the discussion also improves as the students engage further in higher-order thinking skills.

A final note is to address the instructor's role in the discussion. Be clear with your students about your own participation. Students report that an overly involved instructor will inhibit participation, as students will be waiting to hear the "correct" answer. In addition to the author's own investigation, a study by Rourke & Anderson (2002) concluded that "student-led discussions provide a free and relaxed atmosphere for discussion, which makes students feel uninhibited in asking questions and challenging the statements of others" (p. 4).

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## << TIPS FROM PAGE 1

do your work without feeling rushed and be able deal with things that come up unexpectedly. Questions about time management are often heard as complaints about workload or requests to work harder; learning to communicate with one's colleagues is often a big hurdle to handling time effectively.

- **Be proactive.** If you don't learn to set boundaries, you risk burnout, Kelly says. Allow for downtime. Explain to your students when you will and will not be available, and follow through with check-in and turnaround times. @

<< FROM PAGE 2

concepts being applied by real-world companies,” Williams says.

### Selecting video clips

Video clips can come from a wide variety of sources. When selecting video clips, consider the following:

- **Select video relevant to the course.** There is a wealth of video posted online that has potential for use in online courses. However, it’s important to select video clips that are directly related to learning objectives and the concepts in the unit, Williams says. “Don’t just put up video without context around it. Don’t just build an assignment without telling them why they’re viewing it. Tie it into the topics that you’re trying to cover that week. Don’t let that be the only thing. Scaffold it with the lower-order thinking—objectives, readings, PowerPoint—and then start to get into the application part and let that push the students to think about things and apply the concepts and understand them and demonstrate their understanding through how they respond to questions and other students’ responses.”
- **Check sources.** Textbook publishers are an excellent source of video. To incorporate videos on a

course site requires permission from the publisher. If the videos are in DVD format, they will need to be converted to streaming format, which can take a substantial amount of time. Videos from other sources such as YouTube are easily accessed, but remember that YouTube is not the creator of the video, nor is the creator necessarily the person who posted it. “I pretty much stick to educators or corporations because it’s easy to verify that a certain professor holds a PhD and does indeed work at a particular institution. I also limit my videos to things that are recognizable to the students and companies that are recognizable,” Williams says.

- **Have a contingency plan.** Williams does not currently have access to a streaming server, so she links videos from other sources to her course site. The disadvantage of not hosting the videos is that the creators or hosts of these videos can take them down at any time, which means that it is important to have a contingency plan in case students cannot view a particular video. “I’m always thinking, what if we can’t get to a video? Typically I have reviewed several when I make my choice so there are other possibilities out there. I use a variety of sources as well so

I’m not just pulling [videos] from YouTube. If YouTube were to go down tomorrow, I have some other resources I can use,” Williams says.

Once you have incorporated video clips into your course, it’s important to check the links on a regular basis. “You need to check to see if the videos are still there. You need to keep your course fresh, and I think that’s a really good practice. Using video is forcing us to do that,” Williams says.

### Student reaction

Although she has not yet conducted research on the effects on using video clips to prompt discussion, Williams has gotten positive feedback from students. “They absolutely love them. It’s hard to feel a student’s passion for a topic when they’re not right in front of you, but when I get the conversation going and see a threaded discussion of twenty threads from the first posting, that to me is a measurable outcome. That to me is feedback that these students are really engaging on a collegial level and a scholarly level.”

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<< FROM PAGE 6

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REMEMBER: Online teaching requires that you not only embrace technology but date it and take it home to your mother—this is a rela-

tionship that must last a very long time.

*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](mailto:errol-craigsull@aol.com). And, as always, with each of my columns I offer a sampling of whatever subject I’ve discussed. For this column, I’ll send you a nice sampling of free online tech emails that you’ll find useful.*

*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. He is currently putting the finishing touches on his next book—a collection of his online teaching activities titled *Pebbles: A Most Unusual Approach to Very Effective Writing*.*

