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Online instruction: Or, how to avoid the seven deadly presentation sins

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Online Instruction— The Seven Virtues

Or, How to Avoid the Seven Deadly Presentation Sins

Michael Simonson

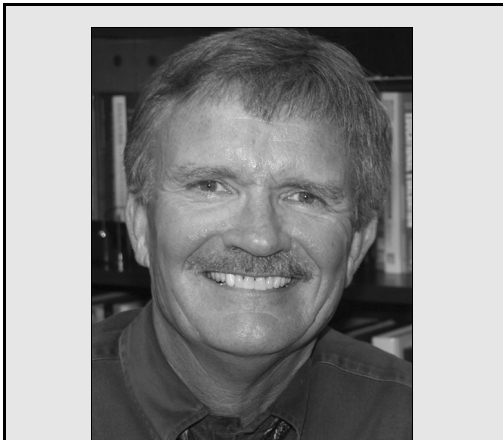
Luck and mystery have long been associated with the number seven. Seven is a prime number. It is the most important number in dice games. There are 7 days in a week. There were 7 years of plenty and 7 years of famine. Who

can forget the Magnificent Seven? And, there are seven deadly sins that are balanced by seven virtues. The seven virtues are humility, charity, patience, diligence, kindness, temperance, and chastity. Centuries ago, these seven virtues were proposed to help people avoid the seven deadly sins.

When it comes to education and online teaching, seven is an important number. It takes seven years to get tenure, seven is the number of classes normally taught in a year, and there are seven best practices of the online instructor. We could call these practices virtues, and apply them as ways to avoid the seven deadly presentation sins often seen in classrooms, webinars, and videoconferences.

Humility is the first of the seven virtues and is the virtue that counters the sin of pride. For the distance educator, humility means *avoiding the talking head*. In other words, when presenting in a webinar or videoconference the person doing the presenting should not dominate the screen, the monitor, or the podium. Certainly, the speaker should establish themselves, but

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quickly more relevant visual information should be shown—graphics, visuals, definitions, and examples.

Charity is the virtue that counters the sin of greed. When teaching online, charity means *keep the length appropriate*. Sometimes presenters think that their topic is so important and complex that they “over-present.” To minimize the tendency to run-on in a lesson, the class should be organized around single concepts. The single concept is the building block of effective instruction. The single concept is easily presented in 3-5 minutes with a strong introduction to the concept, an explanation with examples of the concept, and a summary statement that clarifies how this concept fits with others.

Patience is the virtue that is the opposite of the sin of wrath. In online teaching the instructor needs to *plan for interaction*. Expecting students to interact automatically, without prompting, is foolhardy. Instead of being disappointed, even wrathful, if no one asks relevant questions, the online teacher should plan for interaction by seeding questions, using chat areas for small group discussions, and developing strategies that tease out interaction.

Diligence is the virtue that wards off the sin of sloth. For the distance educator, this means *preparing and planning*. No matter how many times a topic has been taught or hardware has been used, the need for careful planning and preparation are a must. Review the materials, test the equipment, and practice. A last minute arrival to the course management system or at the webinar site is sometimes unavoidable, but this should be the exception rather than standard practice.

Kindness is the virtue and envy is the sin. The online presenter should *design for the audience*, and plan presentations around what the audience wants and needs to know. Certainly, personal anecdotes are

fun, and “war stories” can enliven a topic. However, these distractions might be amusing, but playing to the audience is best left for other performances, not online instruction.

Temperance is a goal and gluttony is to be avoided. The online instructor should have *presenting as the goal in order to avoid lecturing*. Talking is the easiest for most experienced teachers. Unfortunately, the lecture is often the poorest way to promote an understanding in students. Rather, it is best to present, based on a careful design while using visuals that support the topic.

Chastity, yes chastity, is the final virtue that is the counter to the sin of lust. It is important to examine the intent of the organization that is offering online instruction. This institution *must be above reproach*. If the phrases “return on investment,” or “cost effectiveness” become the primary reasons why distance education is offered, then the sin of institutional lust may be evident. Chastity also implies *purity*. For the distance educator, intentions are critical. Teaching at a distance is a way to promote learning through the appropriate use of instructional and communication technologies. The dedication to high-quality materials, rigorous instructional standards, and uniform expectations are necessary if distance education generally, and live, online instruction specifically, are to be considered as equivalent alternatives and partners of more traditional approaches to teaching and learning.

And finally, Renaissance philosophers thought that great personal efforts and external enforcement would be required to help the common person avoid the seven deadly sins. To help, the seven virtues were identified. Today, great personal effort applying best practices is needed by distance educators. We do not want external enforcement. Let’s be virtuous!