

Moran Teaches Online Learners How to Fly Through His Technical Writing Courses

By George Lorenzo

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Tom Moran, associate professor in the College of Applied Science and Technology, has a very specific point of view in relation to the technical writing and editing courses he teaches in the online learning modality: “I guide unseen students so that they can progress through a ten-week course with a reasonable level of confidence that they are doing the right thing and attaining our overall learning objectives.” The specificity of that statement sounds like it came from a technical writing instructor, but Moran is much more than that.

Moran is an RIT Online Learning Department Exemplary Distance Learning Teaching Award recipient and Chair of the Center’s Technical Communication Certificate Programs, which includes two fully online undergraduate certificate programs in basic and advanced technical communication and one fully online graduate certificate in technical information design. Moran teaches online courses in Technical Writing and Editing, Writing for the Sciences, Technical Information Design, Introduction to Public Relations, Managing the Project, and Media Relations

Students as Airplanes

He can also claim an illustrious career in the aerospace industry, working for such notable firms and organizations as NASA’s Jet Propulsion Laboratory at the California Institute of Technology, McDonnell Douglas and North American Aircraft (Rockwell), before taking on a teaching job at RIT nine years ago. So, it may come as no surprise that Moran often describes himself as an air traffic controller when talking about online teaching and learning.

“You’ve got 20 planes in the sky or 20 students in your class,” he says. “You have messages coming in from all 20 at different times, and you are sending messages back to all 20, telling them to change this direction a little bit, make a correction here, or change your altitude. It’s really just information coming back and forth, and instead of adjusting aircraft movement, you have progress in their learning.”

Making Learning Relevant

In the addition to his dedicated vigilance in an online teaching and learning environment, Moran says he tries to make the subject matter of his online courses as relevant as possible to his students’ lives. In his technical writing classes, for instance, he explains that writing from a technical standpoint is similar to creating a recipe that a new cook can easily follow to create a main course. With that notion in mind, Moran says that writing assignments in his courses are based on students’ individual areas of expertise and interest. “I provide assignments that are of interest to my students, where they get to learn the process of writing and learn how to relate to an audience and lead that audience through a process,” he notes. “They (students) don’t have to learn about content that they find boring or of little interest or too challenging for them to understand writing about.”

Basically, students have plenty of good things to say about Moran’s online teaching philosophy, as attested by one of Moran’s online learners who happens to reside at a significant distance in a small village in the southwest of Ireland. “Professor Moran was never more than a mouse click away,” she says. “He responded to even the most trivial of queries within hours and with insight and concern. In each class, I had an exceptional learning experience which was taken well beyond the textbooks.”

Another online learner says that Moran is “able to lead students through unknown territory without shackling them to an unbending set of directions. . . . He is able to teach students to think through processes for themselves, leading them to a better overall understanding of the subject matter.”

And Moran understands the benefits of learning online. “Being in a class where your classmates are all over the globe and who bring in different experiences is a rich environment for learning,” he says. “It’s just a tremendous opportunity that online learning opens up.”