An Official Publication of the United States Distance Learning Association

# Volume 10 Number 1 2013DSSTARAGEDSSTARAGEDSSTARAGEDSSTARAGEDSSTARAGEDSSTARAGEDSSTARAGE

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#### PURPOSE

Distance Learning, an official publication of the United States Distance Learning Association (USDLA), is sponsored by the USDLA, by the Fischler School of **Education and Human Services** at Nova Southeastern University, and by Information Age Publishing. Distance Learning is published four times a year for leaders, practitioners, and decision makers in the fields of distance learning, e-learning, telecommunications, and related areas. It is a professional magazine with information for those who provide instruction to all types of learners, of all ages, using telecommunications technologies of all types. Articles are written by practitioners for practitioners with the intent of providing usable information and ideas for readers. Articles are accepted from authors with interesting and important information about the effective practice of distance teaching and learning.

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is indexed by the DE Hub Database of Distance Education.

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Distance Learning is for leaders, practitioners, and decision makers in the fields of distance learning, e-learning, telecommunications, and related areas. It is a professional journal with applicable information for those involved in providing instruction of all kinds to learners of all ages using telecommunications technologies of all types. Articles are written by practitioners for practitioners with the intent of providing usable information and ideas. Articles are accepted from authors with interesting and important information about the effective practice of distance teaching and learning. No page costs are charged authors, nor are stipends paid. Two copies of the issue with the author's article will be provided. Reprints will also be available.

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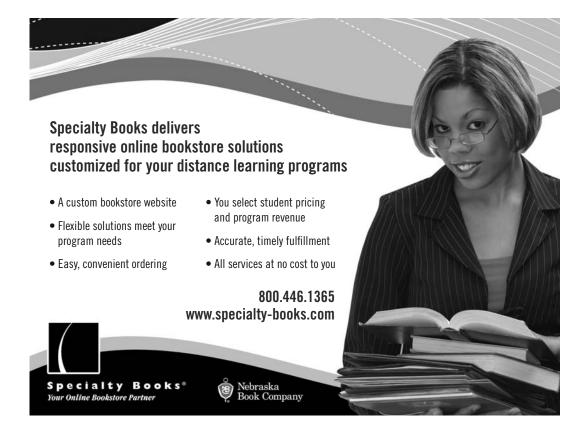
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A Small Private University in the United States Delivers an Online MBA Program in Ukraine: A Success Story	Carol Gravel and Lilia Dubko

#### Volume 10, Issue 1

# Encouraging Critical Thinking in Distance Learning

Ensuring Challenging Intellectual Programs

# Frederick A. Ricci

#### INTRODUCTION

istance learning dialogue, threaded discussions, and chats are exciting and intellectually stimulating when used in helping students to master intellectual skills. One of the

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instruction is the cultivation of critical thinking within every assignment. The oft repeated saying that distinguishes the difference between giving out fish and teaching people how to fish is most often used in the business world. It conveys the idea that providing people with good jobs is better than giving them handouts. The same phrase has been used by countless educators within professional and technical educational environments. The ideal online classes provide challenging experiences through assignments and exercises, which should create new visions. Assisting students to develop critical thinking skills presents them with the desire to go beyond the content knowledge from their online courses. Critical thinking allows them to analyze the process, to understand the purpose of the subject content, and to utilize information to extend and improve their knowledge, skills, and abilities toward effective decisions toward professional and personal achievement. Critical thinking cultivates a student's intellectual curiosity, engagement, integrity, empathy, and responsibility.

most necessary skills involving online

# CRITICAL THINKING: WHAT IT IS AND WHY IT MATTERS FOR EDUCATORS

A Google search of the question: "What is critical thinking?" can result in more than a million and a half hits. Although numerous researchers have defined critical thinking, one can find a comprehensive explanation on the Critical Thinking Community website at http://www.criticalthinking.org/ pages/defining-critical-thinking/766:

Critical thinking is the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action. In its exemplary form, it is based on universal intellectual values that transcend subject matter divisions: clarity, accuracy, precision, consistency, relevance, sound evidence, good reasons, depth, breadth, and fairness.

This comprehensive definition provides most of the universal standards applied to critical thinking. Earlier writings of Paul (2008) indicated that critical thinking is the ultimate goal toward better student reasoning. For a simpler explanation of critical thinking, Ennis (1962) defined critical thinking as "a reasonable reflective thinking focused on deciding what to believe or do" (p. 466). Throughout the studies identifying critical thinking, most authors agree that it allows individuals to pursue the element of gathering information. It is the ability to exercise sound reasoning by asking questions that lead toward effective decision making and by analyzing and synthesizing information while understanding different points of view. Most educators view critical thinking as a path toward professional and personnel success.

# STATUS OF CRITICAL THINKING AMONG LEARNERS

The World Wide Web provides unprecedented access to information. Peck (2012) discussed the urgency with which stakeholders in education want students to graduate with critical thinking skills to compete in the expanding global economy. Peck claimed that even as access to the Information Age expands, students appear less prepared than in the past to evaluate the information received critically and defend their beliefs. Such skills are sorely needed in a rapidly changing era. Most educators agree that critical thinking allows students to navigate through the decision making process and provides transfer of learning, which leads to academic and job success as well as a clear world view. Within the interconnectedness, rapidity, and complexity of information, the ability to think critically is crucial toward having a successful life. Hogan (2012) revealed what concerns educators, employers, and organizations worldwide are expressing about the ability of students to be prepared for this century. At the same time, organizations such as the European Higher Education Area and the U.S. Department of Education have incorporated these issues within their international educational standards primarily because critical thinkers have the ability to make better decisions throughout life and in financial, legal, medical, professional, and interpersonal area (p. 49). In a survey of human resource professionals in who were asked to identify the most important skills needed both for employers and employees for the present and future, Chartrand, Ishikawa, and Flanigan (2006) found that critical thinking ranked on top, even higher than innovation or information technology knowledge.

Paul (1993) discussed the status of critical thinking today and the importance of critical thinking within the curriculum for providing a sustentative concept that students are able to construct knowledge and later transfer this knowledge within the "multiple facets" of their lives. Paul continued by indicating that critical thinking provides a concept which "... affords the durability, flexibility, and richness of detail essential for planning long-term professional development to serve that end" (p. 27).

Ricci (2010) analyzed the importance of leadership and critical thinking: like critical thinking, strategic policies in organizational leadership require an approach to thinking, planning, and decision making for an organization. Critical thinking leads to managing vision and allows individuals to prepare for change, utilizing their analysis and forecasting competencies to plan and direct institutional operations. The managing vision allows administrators to concentrate on positive achievements, while adding discipline to the planning and analysis of the process and providing a clear path toward implementation. Any path can be a dead end unless leaders plan an ultimate objective and clear outcome (Ricci, 2011).

#### IMPORTANCE OF CRITICAL THINKING FOR DISTANCE EDUCATORS

At the college level, students need to improve their critical thinking skills. Critical thinking is essential in all venues of education, especially in online venues where students are not in direct contact with their instructors and peers. Earlier studies indicated that 72% of respondents believed critical thinking to be an important outcome of any program (Ratcill, Johnson, LaNasa, & Gaff, 2001). Learners are taught that in critical thinking, concerns are identified, appropriate questions are asked, assumptions are analyzed, information is synthesized, and individual abilitv to evaluate results undergoes reasoning. A critical thinker applies what is often tagged as a higher order of thinking by utilizing knowledge and abilities in analyzing and processing information toward

reaching effective solutions. Critical thinking is considered a learned ability, similar to excelling in sports, learning to drive, or using a computer, all of which require basic skills and practice toward achievement. It is an active exercise in which individuals learn the ability to analyze how they and how others think, behave, and arrive at successful achievements (Jerald, 2009).

Facione (2011) argued that instructors should focus on critical thinking to assist students to make good decisions by giving them an opportunity to improve their futures and contribute to society. Such thinking allows them to learn the ability to practice good judgment, and although it does not guarantee a high level of economic success or happiness, the ability to think critically can make such desired goals more obtainable by helping them make good decisions rather than bad ones. Ruggiero (1990), in a guiding text on critical thinking, emphasized that although the challenge of improving thinking is great, there is no other kind of self-improvement that can affect all areas of life in such a positive manner.

# CRITICAL THINKING FOR DISTANCE LEARNING

Critical thinking should be encouraged throughout every online education course for conveying information and enhancing discussions in an organized manner. As emphasized by Paul and Elder (2006), whose writings were instrumental in the development of a critical thinking foundation website, higher levels of thought have to be cultivated systematically and teaching should include the goal of critical thinking, which is to foster the development of individual intellectual areas (Foundation for Critical Thinking, 2011). Paul and Elder (2008) highlighted other aspects of critical thinking by claiming that critical thinkers are well cultivated, clear thinkers. They can easily identify questions and find problems. They can figure out important facts and evidence that are related to the criteria with which they are working and can also find other solutions when the present ones do not seem to be appropriate. The most important attributes of these thinkers are that they are clear communicators and competent problem solvers (Paul & Elder, 2009).

Essentially, critical thinking involves reasoning in a logical manner, evaluating what is written or spoken, reflecting on individual thoughts and ideas, and being prepared as questions are posed to clarify understanding. For instructors to be assured that these skills are developed and used in online education, they need an understanding of the character of critical thinking, one that leads toward higher level orders of thought. A prime objective of any educational program, especially through distance education, should be to provide the opportunity to use thinking skills for discussions, dialogue, and online assignments. McKenna (2011) cited an American educator, Robert M. Hutchins: "It must be remembered that the purpose of education is not to fill the minds of students with facts [but] to teach them to think" (para. 4).

Because most distance education classes utilize the Internet for information and educators should research. distance encourage critical thinking when utilizing this powerful tool. Browne (2000) emphasized the importance of critical thinking for student use of the Internet. He likened the Internet to any other form of educational discourse and named critical thinking as a "liberating mechanism allowing us to select the arguments that best meet our rhetorical standards" (p. 5). Browne admonished instructors to acknowledge the heavy use of the Internet and the consequent mandate for critical thinking that leads students toward crucial decision making in accepting, rejecting, or suspending judgment so that they can reach a final decision.

## CRITICAL THINKING: CONTRASTING DISTANCE EDUCATION FROM THE TRADITIONAL ONSITE CLASS

In a traditional classroom, the instructor has a physical presence. Therefore, the instructor's voice, expressions, body language, intonation, expressions and gestures assist with the instruction and information conveyed. Instructors can hear in a student's voice the thought process, and observe one's facial expressions during students' questioning, processing thinking, and gestures such as scratching one's head, or see the "I get it" physical expression of excitement surging individually or collectively. Keefe and Walberg (1992) claimed that critical thinking can be drawn out on a physical level through visual aids and even seating arrangements, which obviously cannot be practiced with online learning.

Critical thinking is less observed within the virtual classroom, for the majority of online courses rely on words, where the style. attitude, and intonations are expressed within writings. The cognitive domain of learning process (Bloom, 1956) emphasizes thinking and is most conducive to online learning. The thinking or cognitive domain focusing on knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, as well as interpretation, application, and examination of knowledge is where critical thinking skills play a major role with online instruction.

Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, and Zvacek (2008) noted it that is clear from the research literature that distance education works when courses are developed, designed, and assessed with a focus on virtual classrooms. Simonson et al. continued by indicating that the keys to successful distance education are in the design of the courses. Some studies have compared achievement of critical thinking skills online vs. face to face. Huff (2000) pursued this question by focusing on students within an interactive television course and face-to-face. One of the purposes was to determine if the Huff pretest-posttest model had any significant differences regarding the two groups on their critical thinking skills.

Derwin (2009) studied and compared critical thinking skills of adults in online and face-to-face courses at West Coast universities, analyzing student achievement by testing both before and after those students using the California Critical Thinking Skills Test (CCTST). Also, student's grades were compared on critical thinking assignments required within the course. The research provided a comparison of online to onsite learning. Students were allowed to select either format. No significant difference was found between achievements of an online liberal studies class when comparing the test scores using the CCTST utilizing a quasi-experimental nonequivalent control group study method. In addition, the second hypothesis was based on whether scores were significantly higher than face-to-face student scores for assignments requiring interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and inferences. It was found that students had similar skills in completing course assignments that required critical thinking skills.

Muirhead (2002) wrote that, when integrating critical thinking into online classes, educators need to focus on class structures and online teaching. Muirhead stated that creativity, reflective thinking, and selfdirected learning need to be encouraged and enhanced through online media, simulations, and other aspects that support development of critical thinking skills. The application of cognitive learning psychology and instructional design are important when developing courses within an online environment.

# CRITICAL THINKING STRATEGIES ONLINE

To facilitate critical thinking strategies in online discussions, researchers have devel-

oped specific guidelines for the students within the course of study. This information is often prepared by checklists, rubrics, guides or developmental models used by others or prepared by the instructor can help students be aware of what was expected and thus provide better and more thoughtful exchanges (Black, 2005, p. 19). Bai (2009) introduced to students the practical inquiry model developed by Garrison et al. (2001). Bai concluded that student postings focused on a model facilitated critical thinking among students because they provide an awareness of what is expected. Bai's study indicated that, to promote higher levels of thinking in online discussion, an instructor needs to inform students about what information they are expected to present, which will provide a clear vision of the discussion. The practical inquiry model in this case aided them cognitively in their online discussions, even with little involvement from their instructors. Bai added that well designed discussion questions are fundamental in developing critical thinking skills at high levels (p. 162).

A good method of eliciting critical thinking is to encourage students to ask questions so that they can understand, examine the evidence, consider any implications, question their assumptions, explore different perspectives, and consider other questions (Purdue University Center for Student Achievement, n.d.). For online discussions, it is suggested that some questions be provided at the beginning that refer to whether a student might agree or disagree with a statement so that individual viewpoints can be encouraged that can contrast to other viewpoints. Also, the starter question might refer to readings and classroom/online discussions and even evoke a variety of scenarios where students can apply knowledge and analysis (Purdue, n.d.).

Browne and Keeley (2007) focused on the importance of asking good questions by searching for issues, initiating a ques-

tion process, checking for ambiguity, identifying value conflicts and assumptions, seeking evidence and reasoning, checking for significant information included or excluded, and finding evidence and conclusions. An extensive list of questions can be found on the changingminds.org (2012) website. This site focuses on several types of Socratic questioning toward challenging the accuracy and completeness of thinking into categories beginning with clarifying concepts involving what is being said; asking for specific examples; questioning assumptions by encouraging students to ponder the beliefs that underlie their opinions; exploring different viewpoints and acknowledging that they are equally valid and listening to these other points of view; imagining possible consequences of an idea; and circling around on the original question and even using their attacks upon themselves.

New exercises based on the outcome of enhancing critical thinking skills can create excitement about the course, expand student curiosity, and encourage developing the talent to ask focused, creative questions. If student curiosity is aroused, then not only can students be prepared to accomplish academic tasks, but they will also be better problem solvers in the workplace. Their approach to thinking in any learning task will be scientific and they will readily expect to find credible sources, ask for clarification, and request additional information in their scholarly endeavors.

## CRITICAL THINKING DEVELOPMENT IN DISTANCE LEARNING

To integrate or expand critical thinking within an online class for distance education students, an instructor, for a start, can create or rewrite a course emphasizing the importance of critical thinking within the class assignments to expand and improve each student's thinking abilities. The reason for integrating critical thinking within online assignments is that such thinking is an important goal of distance learning, and certain methods do provide better outcomes in encouraging critical thinking. One method is to encourage students to spend more time on assignments and to make these areas a significant part of their final grade (Arend, 2007). Arend (2007) concluded that if instructors wish to encourage critical thinking online, they should ask students to focus on specific critical thinking techniques.

Furthermore, being able to use critical thinking techniques would allow one to transfer this knowledge toward organizational leadership and become good decision makers and problem solvers. In history, great scholars used strategic thinking. Paul (1993) indicated that the Socratic Method is the basis of critical thinking because it enables an individual to crossexamine the claims of another individual to see if there are any inherent contradictions or inconsistencies in the claims. If individuals use Socratic questions, they are able to determine accuracy and comprehensiveness of thought so that people can learn to their highest ability. Not only can critical thinking help people address others' thoughts but also their own so they can reflect and elaborate on their own assumptions, ideas, and interactions, an ability that is reflected in a transformational leadership style (Paul, 1993).

Bruning (2005) described the importance and value of critical thinking online, emphasizing that online instructors need to provide students with in-depth critical thinking exercises that apply theory to practice. This strategy will require distance educators to construct curricula that will encourage and inspire students to apply critical thinking techniques and standards, which is the most important aspect in an online learning environment. Most educators agree that online instructors have the responsibility to create and develop assignments, exercises, discussions, and other projects that will continue to expand critical thinking knowledge, skills, and experiences toward achieving future success.

# ENHANCING CRITICAL THINKING WITH ONLINE TEAMS

Group assignments are an effective means of practicing and enhancing critical thinking skills. This kind of approach supports critical thinking, allowing a focused discussion, and builds cohesive communities within the groups. Instructors can lead discussion threads and boards with questions that will encourage student discussions to the higher level of thinking. Instructors should provide enough time and a structure so that students can actually think about their thinking, synthesize their knowledge from prior readings, and readily provide their comments in either synor unsynchronized chronized group discussion threads (Kinne & Eastep, 2008).

In groups and team assignments, critically thinking students would look for alternative explanations and seek different positions as they increase their ability to debate the authenticity or decisions of the other students in group assignments. They would be encouraged to become focused thinkers who relate back to the main intent of the issues, questions, or discussion. They learn how to withhold judgment of other group members when evidence is not sufficient and are eager to seek the evidence needed. More importantly, they would become open-minded students who consider other opinions and points of view and are willing to change positions when facts, logic, or evidence are sufficient or evident from group members. This skill would be applicable to their present and future organizations and prepare students for teamwork necessary toward organizational success.

Organizational change takes place when a team-setting environment incorporates critical thinking skills. Implementing the process of critical thinking, team judgment, analysis, interpretation, and inferences within a team-setting environment are crucial to successful organizational changes (Natale & Ricci, 2006, p. 272). Because critical thinkers realize the limits of being able to know the entire factual information required for an opinion or decision, they are ready for developing the foundation for decision making among teams within an organization. Within the online classes, they focus on probability of the information available and most often produce effective results leading toward the most appropriate reasoning for each situation. Students will be able to identify the relationships among ideas within team and group discussions and can practice categorizing information received on a range of issues from that of major importance to complete irrelevance. On successful completion of the online course, students will become not only knowledgeable within the subject content area, but will also become more reflective thinkers. Those reflective thinkers will be able to analyze, synthesize, evaluate, and draw conclusions toward reaching a rational judgment within each step of the group dynamic process.

# ONLINE LOCAL AND GLOBAL THINKING

Students who think critically become sensitive to diversity in culture. They display a degree of sophistication and knowledge in their verbal and written discussions. This sensitivity is often a result of developing the ability to analyze in parts a problem or concern, focus on complex concern, and provide a logical and orderly process for changing opinions. Eventually they will be able to transfer their skills to other situations from online discussions to their onsite work or academic environment to enhance the outcome of everyday decisions.

In a presentation at an international conference on education, research, and innovation in Madrid, Spain (Ricci, 2009),

learning beyond the boundaries of cultural conditioning by focusing on critical thinking was broached. My research indicated that differences of opinion on decisions often are based on backgrounds or "cultural conditioning." Our thought process and decision-making process often is influenced by background or heritage. Barry (1984) wrote that cultural conditioning can block an individual's ability to think critically. However, Barry concluded that an instructor recognizes the role that critical conditioning has in the thought process; thus, critical thinking can be applied and allow groups to develop best solutions within a given situation, which was reiterated by Streib (1992) in an historical dissertation on critical thinking. Streib argued that cultural influences do affect individual thinking systems and influence personal thinking preferences. A more comprehensive discussion on culture and distance learning can be found in the research of Simonson et al. (2008).

## ENCOURAGE CRITICAL THINKING THROUGH ANALYTICAL RESEARCH PAPERS

Critical thinking is crucial when students are writing research papers. A distance educator can create and enhance the critical thinking writing skills by developing assignments for which students have to evaluate other writings within the course content areas. Students can be encouraged to judge the credibility of the sources, identify the assumptions, judge the quality of reasoning and evidence, and take a position on an issue developed and defended by critical thinking (Foundation for Critical Thinking, 2007). Instructors should encourage students to pursue a logical and sequential pattern when discussing online information and teach them to formulate a logical thinking process beginning with figuring out the problem, getting relevant information together and analyzing it. In

using deductive reasoning, students can address their original ideas or consider alternatives. Then the teacher can help them self-evaluate so that they can draw appropriate conclusions (McGraw Hill Companies, 2000). Perkins (2008) concluded that students who employ critical thinking are better strategizers in that they are more analytical in problem solving than the students who are not good critical thinkers. They think at a higher level than their peers and always employ good logic and organization in the learning process. They can easily distinguish the main issues from the details and are competent at judging statements as backed by evidence or assumptions (Perkins, 2008).

Critical thinking allows online students to consider issues and evidence carefully from all viewpoints when gathering data for online research papers. It assists their ability to determine what is rational and realistic, allowing them to separate truth from opinion. Reading, writing, and learning in a critical light can provide the analytical thinking necessary for successful completion of most online experiences. Doherty, Hansen, and Kaya (1999) discussed the importance of critical thinking and the need for librarians to teach information literacy within their online programs. Doherty et al. have developed instructional programs that work with students on the Internet toward applying critical thinking skills to all resources within their specific areas of interest. They stressed the need for critical thinking and foresaw their continuing role toward the development of thinking and information, utilizing the new and emerging technologies that enhance the objectives of all information specialists. Such approaches will assist students to utilize these skills when "surfing" the net for information and continuing on to their professional careers in which strategic thinking is most often identified as the key to success.

#### CRITICAL THINKING ON NETWORKS: DISTANCE EDUCATION IS HERE TO STAY

The main source of information today is the virtual world. Most people use e-mail communications, video and audio recordings, social networking on Twitter, Facebook, and personal blogs via computers, smart phones, and tablets among other hardware, all of which are developing at a rapid pace. Information is so abundant that critical thinking is crucial for everyone, particularly students, who need critical thinking when reviewing all the electronic information. They need to determine accuracy levels as well as the credibility of the authors in addition to how updated the information is. Although search engines have become the presentday gateway to information, education will continue to be the economic engine of a society attracting those with knowledge in providing research and innovation to the world as they contribute to the global economy (Ricci, 2012, p. 155). Furthermore, the means and transfer of education and information will continue to change with the emergence of expanding online instruction within the elementary, secondary, and postsecondary educational environments.

As world populations expand their opportunity to obtain information through electronic media, educators will need to encourage students to seek reasoning in every piece of information with which they engage so that they can evaluate blogs, statements, and discussions on present global social media networks. Their reasoning, evaluating, analysis, and decision-making activities will be more crucial than any other time in history as the Internet continues to expand its applications. The qualities of critical thinking including clarity, accuracy, precision, relevance, depth, breadth, logic, and fairness will be sorely needed to evaluate the vast amount of information available daily

from those in all cultural, social, or economical levels worldwide. Everyone will need to know how to identify if the information submitted by those within and among all nations is accurate, reliable and valid, and supported (Foundation for Critical Thinking, 2007).

# DISTANCE EDUCATORS: LEADING TOWARD GLOBAL ACCESS LEARNING

Distance educators will be the leaders toward cultivating critical thinking online as they assist students to communicate effectively in a rapidly growing online world to solve complex problems in business, industry, government, and education, both locally and globally. Distance educators need to update and refresh the critical thinking, knowledge, and vocabulary of their students continuously so that within each written assignments and course outlines the thinking process can be fostered and transferred to all areas of individual lives (Foundation for Critical Thinking, 2007). These teachers are at a critical position toward leading the way toward clear, accurate, precise, relevant, consistent, logical, complete and fair thinking by assisting with examples and exercises online. A well organized and comprehensive website provides instructors with valuable insights on critical thinking (Foundation for Critical Thinking, 2007). Reviewing these insights will expand and improve distance educators' knowledge and provide a good method to begin improving one's proficiency and appreciation of the basic skills of critical thinking.

Other websites that provide supportive information on critical thinking can be utilized as an instructor's reference or as a student supplement such as a critical thinking website (Lau & Chan, 2012; http:// philosophy.hku.hk/think) and a critical thinking community (Foundation for Critical Thinking, 2011; http://www.criticalthinking.org/pages/critical-thinking-whereto-begin/796). Most educators would agree that thinking critically is essential for job ambitions, democratic aspirations, a growing world economy, and employee diversity, all of which enhance quality of life and help students keep an open mind. Instruction focusing on critical thinking in online courses generates more analytical problem solvers at school and work who are part of an ever-advancing society in a social, economic, and political world.

An extensive study of Ohio business and government leaders led to a list of the most important skills needed to succeed in the global economy in addition to ways educators could strengthen the educational system toward fulfilling student needs. The result of this work is a Top 10 list of what it believed to be the most important skills, knowledge, and behaviors for students, indicating that critical thinking, problem solving, and applying knowledge to get results were at the top of the list (Subcommittee for Education in the New Global Economy, 2007).

#### EXPANDED SUGGESTIONS FOR TEACHING CRITICAL THINKING ONLINE

Almost all aspects of distance learning involve writing, whether in essays and other submitted assignments, discussion posts, or communications with instructors and peers. Online instructors can encourage good writing by asking questions. When students are asked to post written assignments, instructors could encourage them to analyze and evaluate writing to enhance critical thinking skills and writing outcome. Paul (2006) stressed the importance of understanding the logic of the author's position in a reading assignment can be made clear by being able to determine the author's purpose of writing, ask questions that can be answered with the content of the piece, make inferences in reference to convicting or persuading, identify concepts and reflect and elaborate on them effectively, and state assumptions

if any, including different points of view from the students. Paul claimed that students should be able to judge whether writing in reference to those areas employ intellectual standards of clarity, precision, logic, relevance, significance, depth, fairness, and accuracy. Examples of questions suggested by Paul (2006) to encourage students to pursue include, among others:

- Am I clear in reference to what I am thinking and conveying into words?
- Do I have adequate information to assist readers in the understanding of what I wish to convey?
- Are my writings clearly and logically conveying my ideas?
- Have I identified the significance of what I am writing?
- Did I provide accurate information supported by facts, logic, and evidence from credible resources?

These questions would enhance the students' written assignments along with their ability to think clearly and critically while applying intellectual standards (Paul, 2006). In a peer-reviewed electronic journal at http://pareonline.net/getvn.asp v=4&n=3, Potts (1994) revealed three strategies that would help instructors teach critical thinking skills: (a) building categories, (b) finding problems, and (c) enhancing the environment.

Critical thinking checklists are often helpful to both the students and the online instructor like the one provided by Wilson (2009). This general checklist that can be http://www.sussex.ac.uk/s3/ found at index.php?id=91 focuses on what is important and emphasizes that critical thinking should be developed within the context of the subject area or discipline being taught. The categories are (a) identifying what is important (e.g., what are the key ideas, problems, arguments, observations, findings, conclusions?), (b) evaluating what is discovered (e.g., is there engagement with relevant, up to date

research?), (c) looking beyond what one is reading/hearing (e.g., what other viewpoints, interpretations and perspectives are there; what is the evidence; and how do they compare?), (d) clarifying perspectives (e.g., reach conclusions on the basis of your reasoning).

A guide from the Centre for Teaching Excellence at the University of Waterloo at http://cte.uwaterloo.ca/teaching\_resources/ tips/promoting\_and\_assessing\_critical\_ thinking.html is directed toward online and classroom instructors. Some highlights of this simple guide are useful generic question stems for instructors such as (a) what do we already know about ..., (b) how does ... affect ..., (c) how does ... tie in with what we have learned before, (d) why is ... important, and (e) what is a counterargument for ..., to name a few.

## CRITICAL THINKING MEASUREMENT USING A RUBRIC

Online professors can assist students when the latter are reading and writing in social media, reviewing textbooks and academic journals, writing essays or papers, and contributing to discussion forums and group assignments. Soni (n.d.) summarized a variety of sources of rubrics for assessing critical thinking skills to help instructors make their courses more consistent and objective and to help students assess the quality of their work and improve their performance (see http:// litre.ncsu.edu/toolkit/Critical Thinking Rubrics.htm). Three of the rubrics listed are The New Critical and Integrative Thinking Rubric, Template for Developing a Customized Critical Thinking Rubric, and Collegiate Learning Assessment: International Critical Thinking Test. Instructors are encouraged to adapt rubrics that "can be used across disciplines in an attempt to highlight the importance of integrating ideas and perspectives across boundaries of discipline, viewpoint, and practice" (Soni, n.d.).

# DISTANCE EDUCATOR CREATIVITY ON CRITICAL THINKING

On the role of critical thinking within an online environment, Buring (2005) wrote that the instructor can create interactive exercises in a learning community where students interact and share ideas. Buring's Create-A Problem exercises provide critical thinking exercises within the online environment and can be used as an example for online instructors. It allows students to relate to their problems or concerns in a story format, to which other students respond by creating detailed solutions and feedback within the discussion threads. There, analytical and problem solving skills were stimulated for the students toward realistic problems online.

# SUGGESTIONS FOR DISTANCE EDUCATORS

For educators who wish to enrich their courses of study by creating critical thinking methods and techniques toward expanding and improving students' critical thinking skills, I have listed several suggestions that will lead to ensuring challenging and intellectual online classes:

- Create problem-solving discussions and emphasize the relevance and validity of the information.
- Identify possible solutions to problem assignments and welcome alternative methods of finding solutions.
- Promote interaction among students online by encouraging questions and responses to student postings, chat sessions, and other online activities.
- Select visually attractive web pages, videos, blogs, or tweets on a topic of general interest to the learners.
- Select or create scenarios and case studies where there is no correct answer. Encourage students to think critically and respond without concerns about incorrect answers.

- Teach toward transfer of learning by discussing how students can apply the new information learned to other situations that may contribute to their personal or professional life.
- Create problem-finding activities and assemble groups or teams to pursue the assignment and discuss methods of identifying and solving problems.
- Provide online students with the opportunity to express their knowledge in ways that are personally meaningful and beneficial to others.
- Define the content and conceptual knowledge that the students need to demonstrate on completion of an assignment or at the end of the semester.
- Encourage students to demonstrate their acquisition of knowledge by indicating the process used and how it will benefit their immediate and future wants and needs.
- Create alternative strategies for accurately assessing student content for student discussion such as investigations, self-assessment, reflection, e-portfolios, e-projects, asynchronous discussions, or video presentations.
- Add case studies, debates, research projects, Wikis and blog assignments, simulations, podcasts, and educational games to encourage critical thinking techniques online
- Provide and discuss rubrics, standards, and indicators of student's performance on critical thinking skills.
- Question students on how each project is aligned to the course and program of study objectives.
- Include critical thinking rubrics as part of the discussion and evaluation process
- Implement grading systems that accurately present student achievement within each objective and intended outcome.
- Utilize critical thinking strategies for students who have varied talents and skills and uses appropriate

- Provide activities, modified as necessary according to diversity and cultural differences, that enhance critical thinking skills relevant to the needs of the learners.
- Encourage collaboration and interaction among all students by leading them to employ critical thinking in teamwork.
- Develop online student-centered activities based on critical thinking and relate to outside world applications.
- Help students to stretch their critical thinking while maintaining realistic expectations on solutions.
- Provide provisions for assistance with technology tools and indicate where to seek help when needed.
- Provide opportunities for team and group activities for promoting critical thought such as case studies, task-related group projects, peer reviews, debates, etc.
- Allow students to evaluate their own critical thinking skills thorough the course.

Distance educators have the opportunity to provide numerous opportunities for conveying and providing critical thinking activities, exercises, scenarios, and online experiences that allow students to identify issues, devise "what if" scenarios, and formulate arguments and hypotheses.

## WORLDWIDE ONLINE REVOLUTION

The traditional classroom is undergoing a significant transformation that requires new teaching methods adapted for an online venue. Online education is giving rapid rise to innovative information technologies. The future of distance education is secure, yet the key to engaging with the content in the most effective way is a strong emphasis on critical thinking for students and instructors alike. Distance educators should collaborate to develop critical thinking skills in all elements of online coursework to enhance the learning environment for students everywhere. The latter represent a diversity of ethnicities and cultures but are the same in their needs for viewing a changing world with a critical eye.

Distance educators will be in the forefront of this pedagogical transformation in an environment in which every aspect of the world-be it technological, political, societal, or theoretical-does not share the same status of even a few decades ago. Such a transformation does not come easily and presents numerous challenges. However, distance educators must continue to encourage students to be ready to meet the challenges. Simonson (2008) predicted that at a time when technology, society, economics, politics, and theories of learning are all in transition, distance education will continue to be contested, which will challenge the distance educator and Such circumstances researchers. will encourage these academics to develop more ways to continue to meet the needs of learners worldwide. One of the greatest needs of human beings is the ability to think critically. Distance education instructors will lead the way toward assuring that prepackaged and repacked information will not supplant acquiring reasoned judgment. Developing critical thinking skills among students is the common objective of all the disciplines conveyed thought distance learning. It is the necessary skill needed to conquer the information explosion and the future technological communication changes worldwide.

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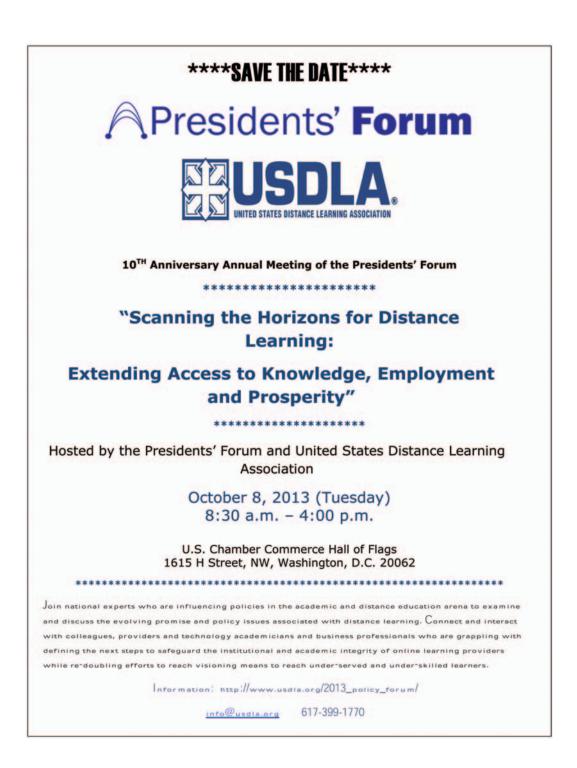
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# **Broward Virtual School**

# Nova Lishon-Savarino

#### **OVERVIEW**

B roward Virtual School (BVS) delivers education to K-12 students around the world through technology and media. The school gives students the opportunity to work at their own pace and develop strong relationships with their teachers and peers while growing into productive members of society. The curriculum design and community service opportunities stimulate positive learning experiences for students in a unique way.

#### MISSION

The goal of BVS is to provide students with equal and excellent education. Through successful student graduation rates, the



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program is able to continue; students obtain quality education that prepares them for post secondary education (community colleges, universities, and Ivy League schools around the nation). BVS (2012) "offers full-time enrollment to students in Grades K-12" and "home educated students in Grades 6-12 may enroll parttime" (para. 1). BVS is an obvious choice in that "Virtual learning provides flexibility of time and location, and promotes development of the skills, attitudes, and self-discipline necessary to achieve success in the 21st century" (para. 1).

#### ACCREDITATION

According to the Broward Virtual School (2012) website, "the BVS administrative office is located in Davie, Florida inside the BECON TV building" (para. 5). This is the main working center for BVS where administrators, support staff, and educators report. There are also meetings and student events held within the BECON TV building. BVS is fully accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) and the Commission on International and Trans-Regional Accreditation (CITA). All of the BVS educators meet state standard requirements to teach for BVS, even if the educator is located outside of the state of Florida.

#### **EDUCATORS**

BVS offers a wide array of courses with experienced and well-trained instructional staff. The diverse educators' expertise range from individual or a combination of knowledge in: Spanish; science; language arts; reading; physical education; health; critical thinking; business; social studies; mathematics; career education; world cultures; English; and Advanced Placement (AP); Grades K-5 specialty; and Exceptional Student Education (ESE) specialty. This team of educators assists in broadening the collaborative learning experience for BVS students while providing individualized attention when needed. The courses offered at BVS encompass all the subjects any traditional public school would have (math, science, history, english, reading, the arts, and elective work).

All of the educators are very knowledgeable and patient when working with their students. However, one particular educator was recognized on the Broward Virtual School (2012) website as being an outstanding educator. Math teacher Melanie McCutcheon is the "2013 Teacher of the Year." Her devotion and active involvement in her students' learning experiences is outstanding. She spends considerable time with students over the phone and via live Elluminate chats. Even though McCutcheon resides in Texas, she has the ability to meet her students' diverse needs and can personalize instruction of any mathematical concept.

#### **ADMINISTRATION**

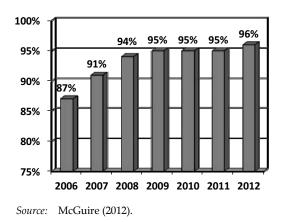
Administrators help to engage students and provide opportunities for success. Students have the ability to communicate openly and regularly with administrative staff. The importance of the administrators is not only to communicate with students; rather they are also greatly involved in development of programs for BVS. BVS administration is constantly working to continuously improve curriculum development, delivery techniques, and manage effective budget spending for the school.

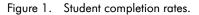
# **S**TUDENTS

The school has a unique and diverse population of students from all over the state of

Florida and beyond. Public school, private school, and home school students all have the ability to attend BVS; the students may either register as a full-time or part-time student (Broward Virtual School, 2012). The students take BVS courses as a way to accelerate, catch up if they are behind, or have a more flexible school schedule so they can participate in activities that normally wouldn't be possible in a traditional classroom setting (e.g., sports training and competitions, acting careers, running a community service organization, or just having more time to enjoy life in other ways).

The most important indication of whether or not a school is successful is apparent from completion rates. Quillen (2011) discusses that "Articles in the 'New York Times' questioned not only the academic results for students in virtual schools, but also the propriety of business practices surrounding the use of public dollars for such programs" (p. 1). BVS is a successful program and has student statistical data to prove why. The following graph, Figure 1, shows student course completion success rates over the years. The percentage of completion rates is the highest it has been within the given time frame. BVS targeted an appropriate learning strategy that enables the majority of students to complete coursework.





# Cost

BVS is a public school and is, therefore, free to Broward County residents. As a public school, BVS does not charge tuition fees. The school is fully online and also partners with other schools to give traditional classroom students the opportunity to experience distance education methods. The more exposure that students have to varying modes of communication and technology tools, the better prepared they will be for future studies and/or job related responsibilities.

## ATTENDANCE

There is a strict student contact policy that encompasses continuous contact between students, parents/guardians, and educators. "Only through continuous communication can students be successful in an online course. Within each course the instructor outlines the weekly minimum work requirements. There is an essential component to a successful course completion that the student and instructor maintain regular contact" (2012, para. 1). If policy is not followed, there are follow-up procedures in place to deal with inconsistent contact. Communication is essential to student success in a distance education program such as BVS.

## **COMMUNICATION DELIVERY**

BVS communicates with its students in the classroom in a variety of ways. Lishon-Savarino (2012) discusses the concept of Coldeway's Quadrants in accordance with the varying modes of communication technology that BVS utilizes. BVS incorporates three of the four delivery methods. As opposed to a traditional classroom that delivers at the same time and in the same place, BVS delivers via: a learning center, same time and different place; synchronous distance education, different time and same place; or asynchronous distance education, different time and different place (Lishon-Savarino, 2012).

The successful understanding of the material being covered is dependent upon what modes of communication are utilized in the virtual classroom. Belair (2012) concluded that "a variety of communication methods must be employed in order to facilitate effective virtual schooling" (p. 26). Prerecorded lessons are good for students to be able to review, while live chats give students the opportunity to collaborate with one another and ask their instructors questions to define their understanding of the concepts. Discussion boards are also used so that students can openly respond and discuss topics amongst themselves. In another perspective, a learning center might give a student a better ability to focus and easily ask for help from facilitators. Every student's learning style is different, so the approach to teaching educational material should be just as customized and personalized based on the students' needs.

# **STUDENT ACTIVITIES**

A common misconception among the general public is that distance education programs lack collaborative efforts and extracurricular opportunities. BVS offers many opportunities for students to collaborate with one another and experience life as traditional classroom students do. The following "face-to-face" extracurricular activities are offered to BVS student (Broward Virtual School, 2012): Broward Teen News Internships; National Honor Society membership (for qualifying students); National Junior Honor Society membership (for qualifying students); Key Club; Florida Future Educators of America: monthly enrichment activities; student talent show; field trips; academic competitions; college planning seminars; junior and senior prom; and formal graduation ceremony for seniors. These events allow students to collectively work with one another, engage in constructive programs, raise awareness for good causes, enrich their personal learning experience, and actively participate in community services activities.

#### PARTNERSHIPS WITH ORGANIZATIONS

According to the Broward Virtual School (2012) website, "Broward Virtual School is a franchise partner of Florida Virtual School for middle and high school curriculum" (para. 4). Florida Virtual School developed a thriving distance learning program; serving students all over the state of Florida. Broward Virtual School caters specifically to Broward County students. As a result of the customized education Broward County residents receive, "BVS is proud to be the top performing Florida Virtual School franchise in Florida" (Broward Virtual School, 2012, para. 4). In addition to the strong middle and high school grades program, BVS has a K-5 program as well; the school is partnered with K12 Inc. (Broward Virtual School, 2012).

BVS also has aligned itself with schools that participate in videoconferencing sessions. These videoconferencing sessions have students from various schools in the district in one online classroom; students can see each other and their instructor via a television screen. Microphones are set up in the rooms to pick up audio spoken by students and teachers as to keep a steady pace and allow active participation amongst the schools. The students enjoy engaging with one another and obtaining quality education from some of the best teachers in the state.

## **TECHNOLOGY REQUIREMENTS**

Students who take online courses must have access to the technology needed to view and complete coursework. High speed Internet is required so the students can log onto the website and access their courses in a secure account. Additional computer hardware requirements are an efficient high powered processor, Windows XP (or higher), and 256 MB RAM (Broward Virtual School, 2012).

Flash Player is another technical need for students so they can view multimedia presentations and the lessons for each section. The students must also have a safe and secure way of saving their coursework such as a jump-drive or removable disk. Audio equipment is needed for assignments, presentations, live chats, and so on; the computer must have a sound card, reliable speakers (to hear lessons, instructors, and peers), and a microphone or headset (to speak into for recording assignments or live active participating chats). If a student has a Macintosh computer then a comparable setup is required (Broward Virtual School, 2012).

# TECHNOLOGY UTILIZED

The courses are comprised of interactive multicomponent lessons organized into easily navigated modules. Depending on the type of course a student is taking will depend on what type of technology is utilized. For example, in a Spanish course, the use of video and audio is required to illustrate and equip students with what is being said and how to say it. The students must record themselves orally saying things as per assignments and writing simple sentences to long papers in that language.

Technological skills of how to access special symbols specific to that language are also taught to students. The verbal, reading, and writing skills are equally important; therefore, all skills are taught via multimedia presentation delivery. A reading course, on the other hand, may have more assignments related to writing and utilizing synchronous and asynchronous chats for in depth discussions on required reading literature. A geometry class may require students to utilize graphic drawing tools to show shapes and related properties (e.g., labeling a triangle's angles and sides as per congruency theorems).

## TECHNOLOGY SUPPLEMENTS AND SUPPORT

BVS has a user-friendly support system for parents and students. The E-Resource Library on the BVS (2012) website provides links to orientation presentations, downloadable software (e.g., Cute PDF Writer and OpenOffice Software Suite). Students and parents have access to the FLVS Technical Support Center to address any technical issues hindering the ability of a student to complete coursework. Another form of support is supplemental resources available for instructional purposes, such as BrainPop (activity page with interactive videos), Florida Virtual School Math Help Pages (tutorial sessions), Khan Academy (tutorial sessions), and Lit2Go Audiobooks.

#### VIDEOCONFERENCING

Videoconferencing is a very valuable tool in distance learning. BVS utilizes videoconferencing so students, educators, and administrators can collaborate with one another. The students and educators have the ability to see, hear, and communicate with each other easily. In addition, software may be downloaded for utilizing an e-board; the educator can write on the blank board so the student can follow along with verbal commands or steps of a problem. The setup is required in every room that has videoconferencing classes. The network system expands so that schools from across the district can communicate with one another. Latency is very small, only 1-3 seconds.

At Coconut Creek Elementary School, fifth grade students learning mathematical concepts via videoconferencing are given dry erase boards and markers. The television screen is set up in the front of the classroom, microphones pick up speech, and a camera is set up to show the entire classroom.

Multiple schools may be videoconferencing at one time. The educator is set up in one of the classrooms, in this case Coconut Creek Elementary. The reason the educator is actually in a classroom is to assist the educator in knowing if the pacing of the lesson is appropriate. Students enjoy seeing each other on the television screen and actively participating in completing mathematical problems. The students compare answers to every problem and then the educator reviews how to obtain the answer to the question. Students also participate in other activities such as art projects (making geometrical shapes) and utilizing creative ways to learn more difficult concepts. The classes are divided based on the level of the students (grade level and cognitive abilities).

## **S**TATISTICS

Videoconferencing is an effective way to distribute effective educational material on a massive scale. Educators who participated in videoconferencing courses were asked a series of questions related to lessons plans and the overall effectiveness of the instructor from BVS providing the lesson. McGuire (2012) provided numerical data that indicated the number of educators that agreed or disagreed with specific statements. The relevancy of the lessons with integrated videoconferencing is indirectly analyzed from the results of the surveys.

The lesson plans were evaluated by educators present in classrooms during videoconferencing sessions. The majority of educators strongly agreed that the course objectives were met with quality planning and implementation. Very few respondents of the entire polled population sample disagreed that the videoconferencing course lesson plans were effective. The colleagues appear to be in

Answer Options	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
The lesson plans reflect a correlation to the Sunshine State and/or Next Generation Standards.	5	0	2	26	151
The lesson plans contain measurable objectives.	4	0	3	28	148
The lesson plans introduce concepts measured on the FCAT.	4	0	20	23	137
The lesson plans include student activities that address a variety of learning styles.	4	0	5	34	141

#### Table 1. Video Conference Course Lesson Plans

Source: McGuire (2012).

Answer Options	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
The instructor reflected knowledge of appropriate instructional strategies for the subject taught.	6	0	0	21	156
The instructor displayed knowledge of appropriate learning activities for the subject taught.	6	0	0	22	155
The instructor actively engaged students.	6	1	1	26	149
The instructor maintained student interest.	6	0	2	35	138
The instructor effectively integrated technology into lesson presentation.	5	1	2	28	146
The instructor's pacing during lesson presentation was effective.	5	3	4	33	137

#### Table 2. Instructor of Video Conference Course

Source: McGuire (2012).

strong agreement that videoconferencing lesson plans are very good for students and meet the needs of the standards set by the schools, state, and testing requirements (see Table 1).

The instructor implementing the videoconferencing lesson was evaluated by educators present in classrooms during videoconferencing sessions. The majority of educators strongly agreed that the instructor was knowledgeable and enhanced the students' learning experience. A relatively small amount of the polled population sample disagreed that the instructor was effective in implementing lessons via videoconferencing. The data show a clear indication that many educators feel the videoconferencing instructor is well equipped to handle diverse classroom environments and keep the students actively engaged (see Table 2).

#### Awards and **Recognition**

The standards for BVS are high, as it "was the first and only district virtual school to be rated as an 'A' school by the Florida Department of Education in 2010. BVS offers courses and a diploma approved by the NCAA" (Broward Virtual School, 2012, para. 1). BVS has achieved many special recognitions and partnerships with programs. Last year BVS was very active in expanding their program academically and via extracurricular activities. McGuire (2012) discussed the following BVS achievements:

EOC (End of Course) exam results (100% passed Algebra, 100% passed Biology, 97% passed Geometry); trained 56 students and staff in CPR; partnered with Atlantic Technical Center to provide every ninth grader an opportunity to earn online learning credit (Reading for College Success); partnered with 10 elementary schools and 3 middle schools to offer acceleration opportunities. (p. 4).

In 2010, BVS was the recipient of the International Association for Online Learning (iNACOL) Outstanding Online Learning Practice award (Broward Virtual School, 2012). This award encompasses the ideals of a distance education program. The focus is on the students and the best deliveries for the students. Since this particular award was international, this shows the versatility and capabilities that BVS has in distributing good, quality education. The curriculum is the same to that of a traditional school setting; however, the delivery system is different.

## GOALS

Broward Virtual School has ideas for projects and programs to be implemented for the future. McGuire (2012) discussed that BVS would like to see the percentage of their students rise in ability to pass with higher scores of 3 or above on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT), maintain a 95% student course completion rate, and that 95% of students and parents will have verbal communication with their instructors at least once a month.

# CONCLUSION

In terms of accountability, McGuire (2012) outlined important aspects BVS considers: "student learning; successful course completions; school improvement plan goals; graduation rate; customer surveys; and student success act (Marzano Evaluation System)" (p. 10). With these goals and measurable objectives at the foundation of BVS, the room for growth is limitless. BVS is a good option for students seeking a flexible learning environment that considers their individualized needs.

Broward Virtual School (2012) states that "Our courses engage students in reallife projects, requiring the use of critical thinking, problem-solving skills, and the ability to apply the knowledge they have acquired" (para. 9). BVS keeps a few main stakeholders in mind: administrators, educators, students, and parents. Funding is necessary to keep BVS operational; new programs and partnerships are constantly being formed to expand and enhance the distance education program for students. Broward Virtual School is revolutionizing distance education by providing students with opportunity to complete school studies with a fully online program utilizing the latest and greatest technology available.

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# Trends and Issues in Distance Education

**International Perspectives, Second Edition** 

Edited by Lya Visser, Yusra Visser, Ray Amirault, and Michael Simonson

A VOLUME IN PERSPECTIVES IN INSTRUCTIONAL TECHNOLOGY AND DISTANCE EDUCATION

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# Instructional Technology and Distance Education in Nigeria

# Historical Background and a Critical Appraisal

#### Titilola Obilade

#### INTRODUCTION

he purpose of this article is to examine the use of instructional technology in distance education in Nigeria and to trace the historical origins of distance education in Nigeria. Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa. It is located in West Africa and bordered by



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Niger to the North, Benin to the West, Cameroon to the East and the Atlantic Ocean on the South. One-third larger than the state of Texas (Infoplease, 2011), it is the sixth largest country in the world. Nigeria had a population of 167 Million in 2011 (National Population Commission Nigeria, 2011). It has 36 states and a Federal Capital territory. The fifth largest producer of crude oil in the world, it has been a member of Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) since 1971 (2010/ 2011 OPEC Statistical Annual Report). Oil is responsible for 20% of its gross product.

English is the official language. Nigeria has over 250 ethnic groups and more than 300 languages (National Commission for Mass Literacy, 2008). The literacy level among the male population is between 40.9% and 82.6% (National Commission for Mass Literacy, 2008). In the female population, the literacy level is between 14.6% and 74.7%. In the adult population, for those aged 15 years and above, the percentage range of females that are literate is between 14.6% and 62.8% while for males, it is between 40.9% and 81.3% (National Commission for Mass Literacy, 2008).

There have been various definitions of distance learning and e-learning (Oguzor, 2011; Olusola & Alaba, 2011). In this article,

e-learning is defined as delivery of instruction through electronic media. Distance education is defined as a form of learning that involves less physical contact than the traditional classrooms and communication through electronic means or print. These electronic means include mobile telephones, e-mail, CD-ROM Packages, videophone system, computer, digital library, and radio and television broadcasts.

In Nigeria, students involved in distance learning are sometimes referred to as sandwich students or part-time students (Adesoye & Amusa, 2011). They are usually workers or students who were not able to gain admission into a university, as the entrance examinations into the various universities are highly competitive and spaces are limited (Adesoye & Amusa, 2011). They usually take a correspondence course during the year. During this time, the instructional materials may be sent through mail or the student drives to designated centers to pick up the study materials and use the library resources. At Olabisi Onabanjo University and Tai Solarin University of Education, in addition to the distance education, the students get face-to-face instruction for a period of a few weeks while the full-time students are on the semester break (Adesoye & Amusa, 2011).

The first education ordinance took place in 1882 while Nigeria was still a protectorate under the British government. These ordinances were revised and several educational policies were established because the Nigerian government wanted to close the gaps in educational disparities among the over 300 ethnic groups in Nigeria (Fabunmi, 2006). Nigeria has 36 federal universities, 37 state universities and 45 private universities (NUC, 2011).

The earliest offering of distance education in Nigeria was in the 1930s, when some Nigerians had to take courses through correspondence from British universities (Enukwu & Ojogwu, 2006). Distance education between Nigeria and Britain progressed until the establishment of the first Nigerian university, the University of Ibadan in 1948. By 1950, the University of Ibadan began a part time course for workers in the faculty of education.

The establishment of distance education took off in various universities under different names. At the University of Lagos, in 1973, a distance education unit was established under the name "Correspondence and Open Studies Unit." As distance education developed this name was later changed to "Correspondence and Open Studies Institute" in 1983. In 1997, for the first time at the University of Lagos, the name of the Correspondence and Open Studies Institute was changed to "Distance Learning Institute."

In 2002, Nigeria's first open university, National Open University became fully functional. The National Teacher Institute is the second national establishment that caters to distance education in Nigeria (Adesoye & Amusa, 2011). Other institutions that provide distance education include University of Lagos, Olabisi Onabanjo University, and Tai Solarin University of Education (Adesoye & Amusa, 2011; Enukwu & Ojogwu, 2006).

The mode of delivery of instructional materials at the National Open University is through television and radio broadcasts, through physical transportation of the printed materials, and through "electronic transmission of materials in multimedia (voice, data, graphics, video) over fixed line (telephone or leased lines) terrestrial and VSAT [very small aperture terminal] wireless communications" (Enukwu & Ojogwu, 2006, p. 190).

#### **CHALLENGES**

Distance learners are unable to access the Internet on a 24-hour basis because of the bottlenecks in the development of infrastructure by the Nigerian government (Ofulue, 2011). Several Nigerian researchers have concluded that the main challenges facing information communication technology in distance education is the high cost of Internet connections, the inconsistent electric power supply, and the long hours that distance learners (in the Open University) have to commute to the study centers to get the print materials and use the library resources (Ofulue, 2011).

In Nigeria, distance education is not just for students at tertiary institutions. Distance education can be effectively used to reach elementary school children in rural areas (Isiaka, 2007). According to a report cited in Aderinoye, Ojokheta, & Olojede (2007), a 2000 report by the Federal Ministry of Education stated that there were 9.3 million nomads and 3.1 million of these were children who were of school- and preschool age. The literacy rate of the pastoral nomads is 0.28%. The nomads have a mobile school that is easy to assemble and dissemble. Radio and television broadcasts are being used to teach the nomadic children. Mobile telephones are now being proposed to supplement the radio and television broadcast.

In a survey of 215 distance learners from three open and distance learning institutions in 2008, print media was the most common form of instruction (60.5%) (Ofulue, 2011). This was followed by radio (13%), e-mail (10.2%), text messaging (8.4%), television (6.5%), online learning (4.7%), and teleconferencing (3.7%). When the respondents were asked to identify the challenges faced in distance education, 35.8% identified lack of access to informacommunication tion and technology equipment, and 31.6% identified financial constraints as a major factor. Lack of electricity was identified as a major constraint by 26% of the respondents, while 20% identified lack of Internet as the major challenge. Some of the ways the respondents coped with these challenges included reading all the course materials and attending tutorials, participating in peer group discussions, and using Internet at cybercafés and at work. The author concluded that 60.9% of the distance learners had to print hard copies of learning materials or make photocopies of learning materials.

Adeoye and Wentling (2007) examined the relationship of culture and the use of elearning. The 24 study participants were international students attending a university in the United States and came from 11 different countries. Two of the participants were from Nigeria. The study concluded that there was no relationship between the national culture and the use of e-learning. However, there was a relationship between uncertainty avoidance and the use of the e-learning system. Those who were not familiar with the e-learning system spent more time on the system.

In a study involving 301 lecturers from federal universities, Okore (2011) concluded that among lecturers, the use of information technology for communication was the same for both females and males, irrespective of their rank. In addition, she concluded that the gender of the lecturer was not a barrier to the development of information technology in the Nigerian academic field.

Agbonlahor (2008) conducted a study in 2003 to find out the attitudes of older professors to information technology. She surveyed 718 lecturers from ten of the federal and state universities in Nigeria. The results showed that there was no difference in the attitudes of the lecturers with respect to their academic ranks. The results also showed that the female lecturers were more anxious on the use of information technology. Lecturers from the medical sciences and veterinary group scored highest on the enjoyment scale of information technology use, while lecturers in the education and agricultural departments were the least anxious about the introduction of information technology. The implication of studies on attitudes to information technology is that the results can be used in the planning and designing of systems that would be acceptable to the user (Davis, 1993).

Similarly, in a study on web-based learning among pathologists, the results showed that 83.7% of the study participants used the Internet for their literature reviews, 67.6% used it for tutorial, and 19% used it for chats (Ekanem, Olasode, & Jombo, 2009). There were 37 study participants. These study participants had practiced for more than 10 years and they all lived in urban and semiurban areas in Nigeria. Ninety-two percent of the participants agreed that web-based learning had improved the quality of their practice. The implication of this study is that the results can help in the planning and in the development of the use of instructional technology in learning and teaching (Davis, 1993).

Some private universities in Nigeria are advocating for e-learning as part of the system and not just for administrative purposes. In some universities the electronic portal is made available for payment of fees and registration of students. It is not made available for teaching. Some of these universities are now advocating for a personal learning system (Awodele, Idowu, Anjorin, Adedire, & Akpore, 2009).

The University of Lagos, a federal university, has a student population of 30,000 and 3000 academic and administrative staff (Okiki, 2011). The students are able to register for their courses online. The university has subscribed to Moodle, Blackboard, and Makau e-learning systems. It is possible to access the portal through the university system.

However, the University of Lagos faces a lot of challenges in the area of e-learning. These challenges range from the prohibitive cost of hardware to the "maintenance culture" (Okiki, 2011, Para.18).

This article has set out to examine the historical background of distance education in Nigeria. It has described the state of distance education in Nigeria today and has also highlighted the challenges peculiar to the Nigerian situation.

## CONCLUSION

Although Nigeria started distance education in the 1930s, distance education in Nigeria has not reached its full potential. Distance education began as a result of correspondence courses between students from the university of Ibadan and universities in Britain. Distance education is the only way to effectively reach nomadic children and children in rural areas (Aderinoye, Ojokheta & Olojede 2007; Isiaka, 2007).

Various articles cited in this article have identified the political situation and poor infrastructure as contributory factors to the poor development of distance education in Nigeria (Enukwu & Ojogwu, 2006; Oguzor, 2011; Okiki, 2011).

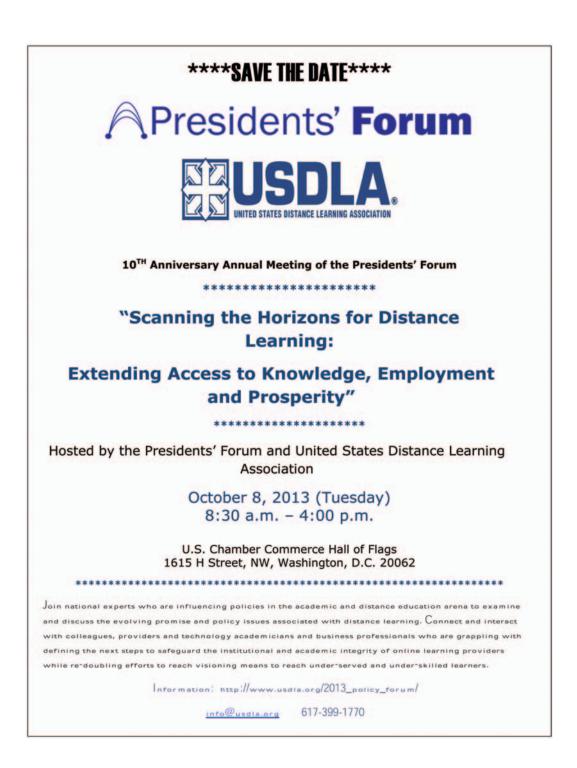
The recommendations from this article are to strengthen the existing infrastructure and to lower the costs of Internet access.

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# Student Autonomy and Satisfaction in a Web-Based Foreign Language Distance Learning Classroom

## Marina Kostina

#### INTRODUCTION

he purpose of this article is to explore the relationship between student satisfaction within a webbased distance Russian language course



Marina Kostina, CEO & Founder, Wired@Heart. E-mail: mkostina@sbcglobal.net Web: www.wiredatheart.com and learner autonomy. This article will present the rationale and theoretical background of this research, its research questions, methods of the study, results, contributions to the field of distance learning, and limitations.

#### **RATIONALE OF THE STUDY**

Web-based distance learning (DL) has gained popularity in the last few years and is expecting tremendous growth in the near future (Pisel, 2008). Despite its numerous benefits web-based DL is far from being a perfect educational environment. While high-tech developments bring attractive and glamorous features to the DL environment, these very same technological advancements have been criticized for dehumanizing the educational process and have posed several challenges that are specific to this learning environment. One of the challenges of the DL context is that there is still no unified theory developed to account for this educational setting (Gokool-Ramdoo, 2008). Moreover, the foreign language (FL) context brings its own unique difficulties that must be taken into

account in DL (White, 2009). In addition, technological innovations may create obstacles in the learning process and demand constant growth and expansion of learner autonomy. Students need to exhibit and develop new skills, motivation, and commitment (Rogers & Wolff, 2000). They also need to know how to use these hightech tools to build their language competence and to navigate in a complex, interconnected, and constantly evolving community of peers through discussion forums, chats, blogs, teleconferencing, and other types of interactive activities that were not previously available (White, 2009). Therefore research on student autonomy in the FL DL field is crucial.

Studying students' perceptions is also important as it may provide understanding for distance instructors on how to adapt course structures and match the appropriate level of interactive dialog with the specific abilities and needs of individual students. Nonetheless, student satisfaction has not been given the proper attention in the DL environment (Biner, Dean, & Mellinger, 1994). It is, therefore, important to conduct more research that examines the teaching and learning process from the student's viewpoint (Areti, 2006; Biggs, 2006; Clayton, 2004; Thiagarajan & Jacobs, 2001; Trinidad & Pearson, 2004). Student satisfaction can be defined as "the student's emotional reactions to college" (Reed et al., 1984, p. 68) and the student's favorable evaluation of the outcomes and experiences associated with his/ her educational experience (Astin, 1993; Oliver& DeSarbo, 1988). The research that has been conducted in a classroom-based environment has shown that there is a high correlation between student satisfaction and retention (Astin, 1993; Edwards & Waters, 1982). Studies in DL (Bailey et al., 1998; Northrup, 2002; Omoregie, 1997) and FL (Horwitz, 1990; Kern, 1995) demonstrate similar results. Satisfaction is seen as an important intermediate outcome (Astin, 1993, p. 278) because it does not directly

affect student academic success but is indirectly connected with it (Moore & Kearsley, 1996). Student satisfaction is linked with the student's level of motivation (Chute, Thompson, & Hancock, 1999; Donohue & Wong, 1997), which, in turn, is important for successful foreign language learning (Dörnyei, 2003, 2005; Gardner & Lambert, 1959).

### THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The complexity of the constructs of student autonomy and satisfaction in a DL FL classroom puts extra demands on any researcher's choice of an appropriate theory that would provide a solid framework for the analysis of these concepts. Consequently, much of the research and practical work in the field have been carried out in an atheoretical manner (Gibson, 2003), which may create a situation where technology supersedes pedagogy and sacrifices the latter in the process (Gokool-Ramdoo, 2008). This study paired theoretical framework of transactional distance theory (TDT) (Moore, 1993) with the contextual framework of dynamic interrelational space (DIS) (La Ganza, 2001, 2004).

TDT (Moore, 1993) assumes that the most profound impact on distance education is pedagogy and not the physical or temporal distance that separates instructor and learner. Hence, transactional distance is a cognitive space between instructors and learners. Moore's theory was based on the interplay of three constructs: autonomy, instructor-student dialogue, and structure. In addition to describing its three main components as autonomy, dialogue, and structure, TDT has identified unique relationships that exist among these three constructs. According to Moore (1993), "When a program is highly structured and teacher-learner dialogue is nontransactional existent, the distance between learners and teachers is high" (p. 27). Dialogue and transactional distance are inversely proportional: as one

increases, the other decreases. Transactional distance and learner autonomy are directly proportional. Moore (1993) asserted, "the greater the structure and the lower the dialogue in a programme the more autonomy the learner has to exercise" (p. 27).

TDT has been popular for more than 20 years and was designed to be applicable to all forms of DL (Gokool-Ramdoo, 2008). However, research studies that used TDT have had some limitations and have been extensively criticized by Gorsky and Caspi (2005) who suggested adding qualitative methodology for testing this theory. My study attempted to take into account these limitations. By using mixed methods, I incorporated qualitative research into what has been mainly quantitative work utilizing Moore's (1993) theory. Besides, the context of FL presents unique challenges that can be explored in depth only by using a qualitative approach. As such, a consideration of another theory of autonomy that is based in FL DL context and that is founded on qualitative research enriched and opened other paths for my analysis.

contextual framework The of La Ganza's (2001) dynamic interrelational system (DIS) model describes four interrelaevery climates tional in language classroom. The development of a learner's autonomy is largely characterized by a climate wherein a teacher restrains from influencing the learning experience and a learner resists a teacher's attempts to influence. La Ganza (2001) believes that extent to which a learner can realize these achievements depends upon his or her relationship with the teacher. Therefore, learner autonomy is seen as an achievement, attained interrelationally, between a learner and a teacher. Since the DIS model originated from qualitative research in the context of FL DL, it provided an additional perspective from which I conceptualized my study.

### **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The purpose of this study was to explore the relationship between student satisfaction and learner autonomy using a mixed method design.

The following research question was addressed in the study:

RQ 1. What is the relationship between perceived learner autonomy and student satisfaction?

The extent of change of this relationship throughout the course was also measured in this study.

### **RESEARCH DESIGN**

It has been suggested that research questions should determine whether qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods should be used (Bryman, 2006). Since my research deals with the complex constructs of learner autonomy and satisfaction, the very nature of each of these constructs calls for both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Therefore, the chosen methodology for the study was mixed methods, which according to Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) focuses on collecting, analyzing, and mixing both qualitative and quantitative data in one study in order to obtain a better understanding of the reality.

The research questions of the study should also specify the type of research design, the sampling procedures, the type of instruments, as well as the data analysis techniques used (Johnson et al., 2007). In order to answer the research question, an exploratory design with the elements of explanatory design was used (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). This sequential design started with qualitative interviews in Phase 1 to explore the constructs of autonomy and satisfaction, and then built to a quantitative survey in Phase 2 designed to test the themes that emerged in the interviews. An additional quantitative survey in Phase 3 was used to investigate the change in time that occurred in the main variables and in their relationships. The final qualitative interviews in Phase 4 were added to explain and expand on the results of the quantitative phases and to compare students' perceptions at the end of the course with those at the beginning of the course.

### **DATA SOURCES**

Forty-six students enrolled at two universities (School 1 and School 2) participated in this study. They were matched based on the same curriculum, LMS, textbook, number of synchronous and asynchronous hours, language level and start and end dates. The qualitative and quantitative phases involved different students in order to avoid sample contamination and prevent influencing subjects by the research method. Eight participants took part in the qualitative Phase 1, of whom six took part in the follow-up interviews (Phase 4). In the quantitative phase 2 quantitative phase 3 quantitative phase 2 quantitative phase 3 quantitative phase 2 quantitative phase 3 quantitative phase 2 quantitative phase 2 quantitative phase 3 quantitative phas

tive survey, of whom 37 took part in the follow-up Phase 3 survey (Table 1).

### **DATA ANALYSIS**

For my data analysis of Phase 1, I utilized content analysis in which I created an initial set of main master categories that corresponded to my main variables of the study, and analyzed the entire data set using these codes. Then, I used deductive codes based on the quantitative DELES instrument categories used in Phases 2 and 3. New themes that were not previously included in the DELES instrument were identified and added to the original DELES survey. The question formation process was based on DeVellis' (2003) scale development guidelines.

After the new questions were formed from the themes that emerged from Phase 1, the enhanced DELES survey was given to the participants at the midpoint (Phase 2) and at the end (Phase 3) of the semester in order to investigate specific aspects of student autonomy and student satisfaction in a DL Russian language

Characteristic	Category	Participants	
		Survey (N = 38) N (%)	Interview ( $N = 8$ ) N
Age	17 or less	15 (39.5%)	3
	18 to 24	18 (47.4%)	4
	Over 24	51 (3.2%)	1
Gender	Male	19 (50%)	4
	female	19 (50%)	4
Online experience	No	24 (63.2%)	5
	yes	14 (36.8%)	3
Other language**	No	21 (55.3%)	5
	Yes	17(44.7%)	3
Russian year	1	27 (73.0%)	5
	2	7 (18.9%)	2
	3	3 (8.1%)	1
School	School 1	27 (71.7%)	4
	School 2	11 (28.9%)	4

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Study Participants

*Note:* \*\*Languages reported: French- 2 subjects, German-3 subjects, Spanish-10 subjects, Japanese - 1 subject, other- 2 subjects; 2 subject reported two foreign languages.

course and to explore whether these phenomena change over time. The DELES results from the Phase 2 and Phase 3 quantitative surveys were analyzed both separately and in comparison with each other. Reliability (Cronbach alpha) analysis, correlational analysis, *t* test, and nonparametric Wilcoxon and sign test were used for the data analysis of the surveys.

### **R**ESULTS AND INTERPRETATION

### Relationships Between Autonomy and Satisfaction in the First Half of the Study

In order to answer my research question, both quantitative and qualitative data from all four phases were utilized. The statistical analysis from Phase 2 demonstrated that there were definite relationships between autonomy and satisfaction in the first half of the course. For this purpose, Spearman correlations were calculated and showed statistically significant positive correlations between satisfaction and autonomy ( $\rho = 0.42, p < 0.01$ ). Qualitative data from Phase 1 not only supported these quantitative findings but showed that each construct is multidimensional and demonstrated which features of autonomy were connected with satisfaction, thus providing a more precise understanding of these relationships.

Such attributes of autonomy as control of learning (Benson 2001; Dickinson 1995; Holec 1979), making own decisions (Benson 2001; White 2006), working at one's own pace (Dickinson 1995; Little 1991), and metacognitive awareness (Benson 2001; Little 1991; Van Lier 1996) seem to be connected with student satisfaction. Moreover, an attribute that was important in the discussion of autonomy was that of isolation. These two constructs seem to be very closely related (La Ganza, 2001, 2004, 2008) and may either make students satisfied with the course or frustrated. Most students admitted to feeling isolated from their peers and from their teachers to a certain degree and expressed their negative attitude toward this feeling. One student even saw isolation as an inevitable part of the online learning experience and called it a "sacrifice" that one needed to make when taking an online class. He said, "I do feel a little isolated. There is an advantage to being able to interact with the teacher or fellow classmates. I guess it is a sacrifice that one must make when choosing online learning."

### Relationships Between Autonomy and Satisfaction in the Second Half of the Study

Ouantitative data from Phase 3 demonstrated that each construct grew in time. However, despite the fact that autonomy and satisfaction demonstrated significant correlations in the first half of the course, this trend was not displayed in the Phase 3 survey. These correlations were not statistically significant at an alpha level of 0.05. In order to see if this discrepancy between Phase 2 and Phase 3 surveys depended on outside factors, various exploratory analyses were performed. Correlational analysis by school and by age did not show that these factors could explain such discrepancy. Moreover, the newly developed scales were compared with the existing scales, but the analysis ruled out the possibility that any additional items could have been the cause of this inconsistency. Such a difference in correlations at two points of data collection could be explained by decreased variability (ceiling effect) for scale scores for most of the subjects since median values for the scales increased between surveys more than mean values. Further investigation of this finding is required before any definite conclusions can be drawn about the nature of the relationships between the variables.

The qualitative data from Phase 4 enhanced the quantitative findings and revealed that learner autonomy not only increased but its quality changed. These findings support research that has emphasized the developmental nature of autonomy as a progression from being dependent to being fully autonomous (Wenden, 1991). Autonomy also seems to be unique for different students (Little, 1991). Qualitative data also demonstrated that the growth of autonomy is not just something that happens on its own in the online classroom (Benson, 2001). Autonomy needs to be developed and supported by instructors (Hurd, 1998; Little, 2001).

My analysis of student satisfaction demonstrated that technical issues, the seemingly fast pace of online classes, and high workload negatively affect students in a web-based courses. However, these obstacles are overshadowed by the convenience and flexibility that the online courses have to offer. Many students consider their webbased experience to be enjoyable and exciting, while some even prefer this environment for all other classes.

### CONTRIBUTION TO THE FIELD OF DISTANCE LEARNING

This study was developed to utilize transactional distance theory, one of the most popular theories used for distance learning contexts. This study was developed after a thorough analysis of the main advantages and limitations of transactional distance theory and research that has empirically tested this theory in various educational settings. My study supports TDT. It also supports the findings that this relationship is dynamic and demonstrates that autonomy changes over time and is individual for each student (Little, 1994). The majority of the studies that utilized transactional distance theory measured only one-time perceptions obtained from one-time questionnaires and does not account for any change over time that might occur in the variables themselves as well as in their relationships. Collection of data at several points in time however, as was done in my

study, show intriguing changes in the relationships between the main variables.

One more limitation of the previous studies testing transactional distance theory was in their lack of connecting main variables with the student outcomes of learning achievements or student satisfaction (Gorsky & Caspi, 2005). My study incorporated student satisfaction as a dependent variable and explored the relationships that exist among autonomy and satisfaction. This finding provides direction for further investigations and suggests that any study incorporating transactional distance theory should involve student satisfaction.

Moreover, Gorsky and Caspi (2005) recommended that future research include both interview and observational data. This study is a mixed methods study that involved two qualitative and two quantitative phases. The addition of qualitative phases was crucial as it helped to reveal those factors that related to student autonomy and satisfaction that were not measured bv the original quantitative instrument. Qualitative data also provided insights where quantitative data alone was not sufficient and helped discover dimensions of the main constructs that otherwise would have not been apparent.

In conclusion, Moore's (1993) transactional distance theory can be applied in the FL DL context. However, this theory needs to be enhanced to account for this unique context. One possibility is to consider La Ganza's DIS model as a supplemental framework through which FL DL can be seen.

### LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The first limitation of my study is in its sample size and sample make up. Moreover, despite the fact that the combination of several groups of students in one study is justified in this research, it would be interesting to create a more homogenous group to further investigate whether the same relationships hold among the main variables. In addition, it may be difficult for the results of this study to be directly generalized to other Russian distance programs as it is difficult to account for the differences caused by varying online course structures, course contents, and instructors.

### SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Several possible directions for future research can be identified. They include selecting a larger and more homogenous sample, adding objective measures of learner autonomy to compare with the perceptions of learner autonomy, using measures of teacher perceptions along with those of student perceptions, and additional research that measures the relationships of the main variables and their change over time.

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# **Georgia Schools** Virtually Here

### Lynn M. Hawkins

### INTRODUCTION

he appearance of Georgia schools is changing. No longer are all Georgia students heading off to school each morning on the traditional yellow school bus. Some students are heading to the Internet via smartphone, tablet, laptop, or desktop.

This is not the only change taking place around the state of Georgia. Georgia citizens made a historical decision on November 6, 2012. The state's voters ratified an amendment to the Georgia Constitution in favor of charter schools. Local school districts no longer hold the power; a state commission will now approve these institutions.

Couple the virtual concept with a charter school and the new product on the market in Georgia is virtual charter schools. Brick and mortar move over; cyber city is virtually here.

This article examines the culminating historical timeline of online learning's birth in the state of Georgia. By examining the two current parties involved in Georgia's cyber learning (Georgia public schools and Georgia charter schools), Georgia's certification process for teaching online, and the recent turn of events in legislature, explanations for how and why Georgia's elearning environments were founded will be presented, in conjunction with a look of what's to come.

### **GEORGIA'S VIRTUAL CERTIFICATION**

To make the transition from brick-andmortar teaching to cyber instructing smoother, the state of Georgia offers teachers an online certification. Starting in 2006, Georgia became the first state to offer certification for online teachers. This certification, according to the PSC Rule 505-3-.85, is in effect to prepare educators to teach in an online environment.

Prior to teaching in the state of Georgia, all Georgia teachers must hold a certificate from the Georgia Professional Standards Commission (PSC). This document from the PSC certifies the teacher's qualifications and classifications.

To receive the online endorsement, candidates must hold a valid teaching certificate and complete an online preparation program. The preparation program or practicum focuses on three standards: instructional technology concepts, online teaching and learning methodology, and online assessments.

The first standard addresses the teacher's knowledge, skills, and understanding of instructional technology concepts. In addition to the instructional technology terminology, candidates are expected to be competent with technology pertaining to online instruction.

The second standard tackles the ins and outs of online teaching and learning methodologies. Through this preparation process, teachers will be able to provide an active, meaningful online learning environment with prompt feedback and clear expectations, while modeling appropriate online behavior. In addition, the teacher will be prepped to be considerate of students with disabilities and aware of cultural differences, all the while encouraging cultural diversity and inclusive learning.

The third standard examines effective online assessments. Here, candidates will demonstrate the creation (and implementation) of valid and reliable assessments in an online environment.

Using this virtual certification, teachers can transition from the little red schoolhouse to the cyber portal. Combine this certification with the training that most online institutions require (and provide) and the virtual instructor is born.

### GEORGIA VIRTUAL LEARNING FOR PUBLIC SCHOOLS

### HISTORY

Virtual instruction or Georgia's e-learning took shape in August of 2001, when a need for high school Advanced Placement (AP) classes and core curricular classes arose. With a shortage of qualified staff, the absence of course offerings and scheduling conflicts, the Georgia State Board of Education made provisions for these courses by establishing the Virtual Learning Business Plan.

In October of 2001, the Virtual Learning Business Plan was transferred to Georgia Department of Education's (GaDOE) Technology Services. However, GaDOE tech services had its hands full with the AP Nexus grant. This grant, sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE), was designed to increase the number of low-income, disadvantaged students who took AP classes. In collaboration with South Carolina, Tennessee, and Apex Learning (an online AP course provider), Georgia hoped to increase the availability of these AP courses to this specific group of students by offering an online setting.

During the next several years, several school districts in Georgia created their own online learning community, 13 of which convened in Atlanta and worked with Governor Sonny Perdue to produce the first statewide online program called Georgia Virtual School (GaVS). This cyber school was officially signed into law in May of 2005.

Governor Perdue conducted the first live broadcast after signing the bill. He spoke face to face to an AP class at Winder Barrow High and online to 18 other classes and libraries across the state. The entire event was broadcast live by Georgia Public Broadcasting (GPB).

### GEORGIA VIRTUAL SCHOOL (GAVS)

GaVS does not have a physical location, but it does have an address. That address is, however, a URL. And just like any other school, there are host of intricate details. But because the Georgia Department of Education established this entity, the school's set-up is exactly like a Georgia public school, with the exception that it is fully online.

### GAVS ACCREDITATION AND CERTIFICATION

Accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS), Georgia Virtual School offers middle school and high school level courses across the state in a virtual classroom setting. Equipped with an online media center, guidance support and online teachers, GaVS offers more than 100 courses in core curricular (math, language arts, science, social studies); foreign languages; electives; career, technical and agricultural education (CTAE); and AP studies.

In line with the Georgia PSC, GaVS teachers must possess a valid Georgia teaching certificate and be certified in the appropriate subject area. Teachers must complete a training program hosted by GaVS, as well.

### **GAVS** TIMES AND TUITION

The schedule for GaVS high school is summer, fall, and spring semester courses,

while middle school is summer semester only. Students enrolled in a course during fall or spring may have their tuition covered by their local public schools, while full time equivalent (FTE) monies can be used to cover private and home school students. Tuition for high school is \$500 per Carnegie unit, while middle school costs \$250 per course. All students pay tuition during summer semesters and out of state students must pay full tuition.

### CREDIT RECOVERY

Another online experience offered by the GaDOE is the Credit Recovery Program. Here, high school students have an opportunity to retake courses online that they previously failed.

### COURSEWORK/SCHEDULE

Core curricular classes and limited electives, mainly health, are offered in a 26 week completion time, with the focus being on fulfilling graduation requirements. Each course contains the Georgia Performance Standards (GPS) content, as laid out by the Georgia Department of Education.

The schedule is flexible and not facilitated by a teacher, with the exception of test monitoring. Through the use of webbased learning activities and unit assessments, credit recovery is designed to help students complete state requirements for graduation.

### GRADING

A pretest sets the wheels in motion. The results of this exam determine a student's direction. If a score of 85% of higher is attained at the beginning of each unit, the student is allowed to test out, with the unit posttest. But if the pretest score is lower than 85%, the student must review every content item in the entire unit before the posttest is made available again.

To complete a course, students must score 70% or higher on the posttest and final exam (or EOCT). Upon this final grade, credit for the course will be granted and students will then earn credits based on their proficiency and competency of the state standards.

### Cost

This program is provided free of charge to participating Georgia public high schools. However, no money has been designated for the test proctors or monitors. As such, this cost may be passed on to students.

### **ExPreSS**

ExPreSS is another online learning environment established by GaDOE. It is not a school, per se, but rather a free online tutorial program set-up to help students who were unsuccessful in passing the Georgia High School Graduation Test. This program consists of self-paced modules based on the GPS content areas (science, social studies, English language arts, and mathematics).

### GEORGIA VIRTUAL CHARTER SCHOOLS

### GEORGIA CHARTER SCHOOLS

Switching gears from public schools to charter schools, the Georgia Charter Schools Association (GCSA) was established in 2001, as a nonprofit corporation whose mission is to advocate and serve all Georgia charter schools. By increasing awareness of charter schools; communicating with state and local officials; network-Georgia charter schools; ing and advancing the cause of charter schools, GCSA supports school choice, student achievement, collaboration, innovation, communication and accountability (GCSA, 2012).

There are over 100 charter schools in Georgia. These schools are considered public schools, as they receive public funding, have open enrollment, and serve all populations of students (GaDOE, n.d.).

Although similar to public schools, charter schools are different on two main fronts—governance and accountability. The charter school is run by an independent board of directors, as opposed to the public school's board of education. The other difference is in their flexibility with state and local rules/regulations. This flexibility comes at a price, as charter schools are held to a higher standard of accountability.

As for online charter schools, GCSA lists three as virtual charter schools: Georgia Connections Academy Charter School, Georgia Cyber Academy, and Provost Academy. A brief examination of each follows.

### GEORGIA CONNECTIONS ACADEMY CHARTER SCHOOL

Georgia Connections Academy Charter School is a tuition free K-12 virtual school. Approved by GCSA in 2011, the school served K-8 in its first year and expanded to K-12 in the 2012-2013 school year.

This cyber school provides highly qualified, state-certified staff; social and community events; and Connexus, their very own education management system (Connections Education, 2012).

### GEORGIA CYBER ACADEMY

Established in 2008 as a program of the Odyssey School, the Georgia Cyber Academy served grades K-9 for 3 years. Then in February of 2011, the state board unanimously agreed to expand the school to Grades K-12 (Georgia Education News, 2011).

The head of the school has referred to Georgia Cyber Academy as an "education support system" for students (Georgia Cyber Academy, 2012). However, recent allegations regarding failure to provide services to special education students could prove otherwise (O'Connor, 2012).

### PROVOST ACADEMY

Approved in 2010 by the Georgia Charter Schools Association, Provost Academy did not open until July 2012. As this is their first year in business, they have not yet been accredited. This institution serves Grades 9-12 online through a student portal. Monitoring of student access to coursework is recorded and attendance is taken through this portal.

Coursework at Provost Academy is based on Georgia Performance Standards, but additional focus is given to electives. Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) are offered to students to "develop the skills necessary to succeed in today's high-tech world" (Edison Learning, 2012).

Included in the Provost Academy package is a supplemental software subscription that is offered to all students. The program is called Study Island and is designed to help students master Georgia Performance Standards.

### GEORGIA'S AMENDMENT 1

Charter virtual instruction may be closer to the norm in the years to come, as Georgians passed Amendment 1 in November 2012. Amendment 1 asked the question, "Shall the Constitution of Georgia be amended to allow state or local approval of public charter schools upon the request of local communities? (Horne, 2012).

### THE CHANGE

In the past, charter schools were approved or disapproved by the local school board. If disapproved, the group could go to the State Board of Education. The problem was that if the group was granted the charter by the State, the new charter school could not receive local tax money. It would receive only state and federal funds (Krache, 2012).

With this new law, charter schools will be approved by a state commission; a charter school that had been denied by the local school board or State Board of Education could be approved.

### SUPPORT

Support for the Georgia Amendment came from some unexpected folks, such as Alice Walton, the daughter of Wal-Mart founder Sam Walton. Also, the Koch brothers, billionaires who founded the Tea Party organization Americans for Prosperity, donated support in favor of Georgia Amendment 1. Others that gave included companies that manage charter schools, like K12 Inc., which supports the Georgia Cyber Academy.

### HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

What does this amendment mean for Georgia? Georgia voters who supported the amendment believed that "charter schools give parents more opportunities to be actively involved in their child's education" (Patel, 2012). As such, the idea is that the power of choice was given to the people/parents in deciding what is best in educating their children.

### WHY E-LEARNING IN GEORGIA

As technology advances and allows for more user-friendly devices and applications, the thinking is that everything else in life should follow suit. Hence, teaching and learning should move from sticks and bricks to virtual worlds and cyberspace.

Originally the online learning community in Georgia was developed to fill a need. AP classes, core curricular, scheduling conflicts and lack of qualified staff were just some of the reasons named by the Georgia Department of Education for the development. Team these needs with an individualized education and charter schools surface in the state of Georgia. Charter schools give parents and students an alternative to public schools, by filling the need of quality education on an individual instruction plan.

Establishing "online" charter schools was sure to follow suit. These cyber schools add one more ingredient to the pot—freedom to choose. As these establishments are accessible anywhere/anytime, that convenience adds spice to any student educational life.

### CONCLUSION

What happens now? The ratification of the charter school amendment was just the beginning. Freedom comes with a price; it is never free. Parents want the freedom to choose the best education plan for their children. What will it cost?

Will there be a surplus of charter schools, virtual and the like, all clamoring for parents' attention? Are too many choices a bad thing? Let's ask the lunch ladies who serve our students on the five different lunch lines.

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## How Expensive to Get In? Distance Learning Out-of-State Approval Costs

### **Willie Broussard**

### INTRODUCTION

uring my first trip to New York City, I was excited about attending one of the popular clubs I had heard about from friends. As we approached the entrance, the long line that contained other anxious partygoers astonished me. Not to be discouraged, I joined the ranks of these hopeful attendees. After a brief, yet thrilling, wait I made it to the entrance. My next surprise came when I was greeted by the hostess/cashier and informed of a cover charge of \$50 to enter this establishment. Coming from a small



Willie Broussard, Associate Director of Academic Partnerships, Division of Distance Learning, Lamar University, Beaumont, TX. E-mail: willie.broussard@lamar.edu town, I had never experienced a cover charge higher than \$5. Hesitantly, I acquiesced, paid the fee to enter, and enjoyed my first nightclub experience in the Big Apple; however, for future visits to unfamiliar nightclubs, I learned to research the cover charges in advance.

Higher education institutions offering distance education are experiencing the similar aforementioned astonishment as a result of the U.S. Department of Education's State Authorization Regulation Chapter 34, C.F.R. § 600.9. It requires institutions offering distance education and correspondence courses in a state in which they are not physically located, to meet the state's requirements (State Authorization, 2010). Specifically it states,

If an institution is offering postsecondary education through distance or correspondence education to students in a State in which it is not physically located or in which it is otherwise subject to State jurisdiction as determined by the State, the institution must meet any State requirements for it to be legally offering postsecondary distance or correspondence education in that State. An institution must be able to document to the Secretary the State's approval upon request. (p. 66862)

In June 2011, the United States District Court for the District of Columbia struck down a portion of the state authorization regulations, but still gave states the authority to regulate distance education in their respective states (Career College Association dba Association of Private Sector Colleges and Universities vs. U.S. Department of Education et al., 2011).

Online education is one of the fastest growing phenomena in higher education. With the availability of new technologies and changing learner needs, traditional universities are successfully delivering instruction to students at remote locations who would otherwise be unable to complete their studies. The success has not come without drawbacks, however. Many universities are faced with a demand for their distance education programs, which overwhelms the existing campus infrastructure.

The introduction of the World Wide Web has aided in the migration from distance learning delivery methods (correspondence, interactive, etc.) to predominantly online delivery (Calvin & Freeburg, 2010). The availability and affordability of online degree programs have grown and continue to grow exponentially, providing prospective and continuing students with a myriad of choices to complete their educational goals. Previously dominated by for-profit and private universities, online degree programs are now seeing tremendous growth, popularity, and success with public institutions. Within the adult learner population, single parent, minority, and low-income women have become the largest group among online learners (Miller, 2008).

The growth of online education has not only allowed for the diversity of the profile of learners, but also has given those learners an expanded portfolio of choices among institutions of higher learning. Online degree programs allow students to complete their educational pursuits at institutions that may originally have been inaccessible due to location, costs, etc.

The initial directive stated that noncompliance with this mandate would result in loss of Title IV finding for the institution. Educational institutions, both 2-year and 4year, profit and nonprofit, found themselves in a mad rush to identify where their distance students originated and the regulations governing approval in those states. Each state controls the process for approval and the fee structure, if any, associated with the process. This leads to many institutions asking the question, "How expensive is it to gain approval in your state?" as they seek approvals in other states.

Asking the previous question while undertaking this process at Lamar University, it became apparent that although the requirements vary from state to state, there appeared to be three major categories by which states could be classified. Grouping the states into these broad classifications allow institutions the opportunity to gain insight (at a broad level) into the level of simplicity/difficulty in which approval can be obtained.

### CATEGORY I: THE "CHEERS" STATES

Similar to the popular and long running sitcom "Cheers" about a friendly neighborhood bar in Boston, the states in this category are characterized by the ease in which approval is obtained. Ranging from relatively inexpensive to no costs, minimal paperwork, or exemption from approval (based on factors such as regional accreditation, nonprofit status, etc.) these states may not "know your name," but the approval process requires minimal cost and/or manpower from an institution in order to gain approval. These states include:

- Arizona
- California
- Colorado
- Connecticut
- Delaware
- Florida
- Idaho
- Illinois
- Indiana
- Maine
- Maryland

- Michigan
- Mississippi
- Montana
- New Jersey
- New Mexico
- New York
- North Dakota
- Oklahoma
- Oregon
- South Carolina
- South Dakota
- Utah
- Vermont
- Virginia
- Wisconsin

### CATEGORY II: THE TRENDY CLUB STATES

Over the years, we have become familiar with popular and trendy clubs that became synonymous with a particular era. The Cotton Club during the Depression and the Harlem Renaissance, Studio 54 in New York during the disco era, and now PURE and Tao in Las Vegas are a few examples of clubs that define a time in history. A more selective process characterized these establishments (e.g., longer lines and waits, VIP sections/lounges, etc.); yet they also made themselves available to the population as a whole. States in this category tend to be more selective in the approval process for those institutions offering distance or correspondence education. Slightly higher application fees, extensive paperwork, and/or degree program curriculum may be requirements of the states in this category. States in this category include:

- Alaska
- Georgia
- Hawaii
- Iowa
- Louisiana
- Missouri
- Nebraska
- Texas
- Wyoming

### CATEGORY III: THE ELITE COUNTRY CLUB STATES

The final category of states is typified by many of the same requirements as the Trendy Club states but to an exponentially greater degree. In addition, some of these states have eccentric requirements unique to their state. States in this category may be some of the most challenging for institutions based on costs, manpower, and other factors arising from the state's prerequisites. Similar to an elite country club, states in this category have restricted the amount of institutions gaining approval by mandating conditions that deter many of them from beginning the approval process. These states include:

- Alabama
- Arkansas
- Georgia
- Kansas
- Kentucky
- Minnesota
- Nevada
- New Hampshire
- Ohio
- Pennsylvania
- Rhode Island
- Tennessee
- Washington
- Wyoming

### THE FINE PRINT

There are a few items institutions must consider as they undertake this process. As states grasp an understanding of the mandate from the Department of Education, they have the right to amend their regulations. States once considered to be in Category I may ultimately decide to revise their regulations and be in Category III. Institutions must regularly check the state regulations after initial approval for subsequent changes.

### CONCLUSION

Online education has grown and will continue to grow exponentially over the next few years, even decades. Higher education institutions wanting to offer their distance education programs and courses need to prepare themselves by gaining a clear understanding of the requirements for each state.

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#### CATEGORY I: THE "CHEERS" STATES CATEGORY II: THE TRENDY CLUB STATES CATEGORY III: THE ELITE COUNTRY CLUB STATES

# Global Collaboration to Ensure Patient Safety

### Sheila Y. Grangeiro and Rachel M. Vital

### INTRODUCTION

**P**atient safety is an important issue that touches every corner of the globe (World Health Organization [WHO], 2009). Distance technology and healthcare are working hand in hand to meet today's health demands around the world. The WHO's agenda focuses on specific health objectives, strategic needs, and operational approaches (WHO, 2012d). Collaboration with various non-governmental organizations and institutions of higher education are key aspects of ensuring patient safety on a global scale. The University of Miami and the WHO have partnered to promote health for all people through global health research and educational activities by addressing disparities in low-income regions in the Americas and the Caribbean. Through the use of Moodle, an open source learning management system, free online nursing and patient safety education courses are available globally to nursing students and professionals (University of Miami, 2012a).

### WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION

The WHO is the authorized institution that leads and organizes global health matters for the United Nations (UN) (WHO, 2012a). The WHO is a nongovernmental



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organization that is responsible for research, setting standards and policies, providing technical assistance, and observing and evaluating health trends in countries that are a part of the UN system. The organization is currently reforming to become better prepared with solutions to respond to issues faced in the 21st century through shared responsibilities and accessibility to essential healthcare needs in any environment. The WHO creates global guidelines which impact health policies or clinical interventions while addressing its six core functions of providing healthcare leadership, contributing to and expanding healthcare knowledge and research, implementing and monitoring standards, advocating healthcare ethics, assisting with technical issues, and building the capacity of health systems based on assessments of current health trends (WHO, 2012c).

### WHO Collaborating Centre for Human Resources Development and Patient Safety

The WHO achieves its strategic goals by partnering with various private and nongovernmental organizations and institutions of higher education around the world. The WHO designates specific institutions as WHO Collaborating Centres, creating partnerships that allows these institutions to implement initiatives in underprivileged regions that support the WHO's vision of health for all. Of the WHO's six core functions, three of these are encapsulated in the WHO Collaborating Centre for Human Resources Development and Patient Safety. These include socioeconomic promoting progress through meeting the basic healthcare needs of remote and underprivileged populations, improving healthcare systems by building the technical capacity of nursing professionals through distance education courses, and strategically collaborating with international partners within specific countries or regions.

### HISTORY OF THE WHO COLLABORATING CENTRE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI

In 2003, Nilda Peragallo Montano became the Dean of the School of Nursing and Health Studies at the University of Miami. Her vision for the School of Nursing and Health Studies included taking a leadership role in the ongoing transformation of international healthcare that is resulting from globalization in order to ensure that healthcare knowledge regarding nursing workforce development and patient safety is disseminated to remote and underprivileged populations in the Pan American region. Peragallo Montano applied for the designation of WHO Collaborating Centre for Human Resources Development and Patient Safety, and in 2008, this designation was awarded to the University of Miami School of Nursing and Health Studies (University of Miami, 2012c). Over the course of the next 4 years, the Centre successfully executed several productive international initiatives. This led to a renewal of the WHO Collaborating Centre designation in 2012 for another 4year period.

The University of Miami's geographic location in South Florida provides a unique opportunity to connect the Americas and the Caribbean and make an impact by assisting countries in this region that have limited healthcare resources to tap into medical expertise from leading medical institutions, researchers, and practitioners. The WHO Collaborating Centre's program goal for its 2012-2016 period is to strengthen collaboration with the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), which is a global public health agency that serves as the main hub of the Americas for the WHO (PAHO, 2012). The center WILL focus on strengthening nursing education, disseminating critical information regarding patient safety to increase nursing expertise, and developing research centers

in remote and underprivileged regions in the Americas and the Caribbean.

### Nursing Workforce Development Initiatives

The WHO recognizes that nursing professionals play a critical role in increasing the quality of healthcare that is delivered to patients (WHO, 2012b). It strives to link nursing professionals through worldwide virtual communities of practice to promote quality healthcare to their patient populations. The WHO builds collaborative practices among nursing professionals, harnessing their experiences and expertise to develop professional competencies to support global health initiatives. The WHO Collaborating Centre at the University of Miami initiated several collaborative projects to build the capacity of nursing professionals, increasing the skills and knowledge of the nursing workforce throughout the Pan American region. These initiatives have included developing specific nursing education courses and programs, proposing long-term health improvement projects, and hosting an international colloquium that addressed current global research challenges in the field of nursing.

One nursing education course designed by the School of Nursing and Health Studies is entitled "Strategies for Clinical Nursing Education Using Simulation." The course targets healthcare faculty and clinicians, which includes faculty who visit the University of Miami from Latin America and also University of Miami healthcare faculty who regularly travel to and teach in various Latin American institutions of higher education. The focus of the course is to educate faculty and clinicians about best practices for incorporating simulation techniques into existing patient safety curricula in nursing programs at other institutions.

The WHO Collaborating Centre designed and executed research studies in

some of the poorest regions of the poorest countries within the Western Hemisphere (University of Miami, 2012b). These areas have been identified by the WHO as regions of critical need. In Haiti, the center conducted a 1-year research study to provide healthcare knowledge and education. The research study, "Increasing Capacity at Hospital Justinien in Response to Haiti Earthquake," focused on expanding the mental health capacity of healthcare workers in Cap-Haïtien, Haiti, to diagnose and treat trauma patients in the aftermath of an earthquake that devastated the island nation in January 2010. In 2011, 113 Haitian healthcare professionals completed this educational program over a period of six months. While analyses of the research study's impact are ongoing, preliminary reports have determined that local healthcare professionals, including the trainees themselves and local health leaders, are highly satisfied with the program (M. Padron, personal communication, November, 13, 2012). Currently, the center is working on expanding the program into other areas within Haiti, providing educational materials in multiple languages, including Haitian Kreole, French, and English.

In 2011, the WHO Collaborating Centre conducted another 1-year research study in Nicaragua. This study, "Exploring the Health of Adolescent Young Adult Creole Bluefields. Nicaragua," Women in researched high risk behaviors such as substance abuse and unsafe sexual practices among females in that targeted population. Currently, the study continues to explore the health and psychological assessment of this population, while engaging the local institution of higher education to build its research capacity. The overall goal of this research study is to establish a baseline for a continued collaboration on community-based health initiatives between the University of Miami School of Nursing and Health Studies and the Bluefields, Nicaragua Indian and Caribbean University School of Nursing.

As a result of the WHO Collaborating Centre's impact on increasing international healthcare knowledge and knowledge dissemination to date, in September 2012, the Centre was selected to host the XIII Pan American Nursing Research Colloquium in Miami Beach, Florida. This was the first time that this prestigious global conference was hosted in the United States. The colloquium brought together over 1,000 nursing leaders, scholars, researchers, and students from 40 countries around the world to discuss nursing research challenges in the 21st century.

Most recently, the WHO Collaborating Centre, in conjunction with Haiti's Ministry of Health and its École Nationale des Infirmières in Les Cayes, Haiti, submitted a proposal in October 2012 to secure private funding for a 5-year project to improve maternal-child health in the southwestern part of the country. The center's faculty conducted an extensive needs assessment evaluation on the equipment, infrastructure, workforce, and services that are currently offered to mothers and children in Les Cayes, Haiti, as well as these patients' needs based on interactions with Haitian women, healthcare professionals, and local community leaders. As a result of the needs assessment, the center proposed a 5year plan to expand the healthcare workforce and the family planning capacity of healthcare professionals at the École Nationale des Infirmières in Les Cayes (M. Padron, personal communication, November, 13, 2012).

### **PATIENT SAFETY**

Research has shown that unintended clinical outcomes that negatively impact patients' lives occur because of the complexity of health care, where "the successful treatment and outcomes for each patient depend on a range of factors" (WHO, n.d.). The WHO recognizes that patient safety is a worldwide challenge in the field of healthcare, which encompasses every aspect of patient care. At a microscopic scale, patient safety examines how individual healthcare professionals interact with their patients and their families, and at a macroscopic scale, patient safety evaluates how a healthcare organization's own protocols affect patients' lives.

The goal of patient safety is to eliminate preventable harm and adverse medical events (Emanuel et al., 2008). Some of the vital areas of patient safety include (a) systems thinking, where health care delivery is integrated into a system that operates under complex conditions; (b) transparency and learning, where sharing information about medical errors that occur results in lessons learned and increases trust between patients and the healthcare organization; (c) accountability, for healthcare professionals to continuously learn and for healthcare organizations to institute safety protocols; and (d) emphasizing teamwork, which promotes functional relationships among interdisciplinary healthcare teams.

### **DISTANCE EDUCATION**

There are a variety of continued challenges revolving around patient safety that impact global health care. In remote and underprivileged regions around the world, patients have limited access to health resources, and healthcare professionals have limited access to medical knowledge and expertise from leading medical institutions, researchers, and practitioners. This situation is increasing health disparities around the world, as the need for educated healthcare professionals is greater than the capacity of the existing healthcare workforce (WHO, 2012e). In short, not only are more healthcare professionals needed around the world, but those who are currently practicing in these regions of critical need lack the skills, competencies, and experience to meet the healthcare needs of their patients.

Distance education is a means of bridging this gap by making medical expertise

and knowledge readily available to healthcare workers regardless of geographic or economic barriers. It is a cost effective method for delivering education to healthcare professionals worldwide, as they are able to learn without incurring the expenses of traveling to locations to fulfill their educational requirements. By building their capacity, these healthcare professionals are able to deliver higher quality and safer patient care that is aligned to address 21st century healthcare needs, and patients have improved access to high quality care at a local level. As healthcare professionals apply the concepts learned via distance education, they become more efficient and effective in their delivery of care, and ultimately, they are able to contribute to better health outcomes for their patient populations.

### PATIENT SAFETY INITIATIVES

The WHO Collaborating Centre at the University of Miami School of Nursing and Health Studies has implemented distance education programs to transfer patient safety knowledge to nursing students and practicing professionals in these regions of critical need throughout the Americas and the Caribbean. The center capitalizes on recent improvements in communications and information technologies, enabling it to enhance nursing education and competencies in a cost effective way and efficiently meet the critical challenges of nursing workforce development.

The center's free undergraduate online certificate program covers three critical topics in patient care safety: awareness and prevention of HIV, medical errors, and domestic violence. The program's webbased courses are available in English, Spanish, and Portuguese, and they are targeted toward nursing students and professionals in remote regions of the Americas that have been identified by the WHO as having low or limited access to health educational resources.

Working with PAHO and the International Network for Nursing and Patient Safety, the WHO Collaborating Centre also developed a free online course entitled "Nursing and Patient Safety" (University of Miami, 2012a). This web-based course was written specifically for a nursing audience, and it covers essential skills related to providing safe patient care, including hand hygiene, patient identification, medication safety, fall prevention, psychological wellbeing, and patient rights (University of Miami, 2011). The course was designed according to current, evidence-based practice guidelines and aligns with priorities determined by the WHO and the Joint Commission, an independent, non-profit organization which accredits and certifies health care programs and organizations in the United States (The Joint Commission, 2012). During its 1-year pilot phase, the "Nursing and Patient Safety" course was deployed in English and Spanish. While evaluations of the pilot phase are still ongoing, it has been deemed a success so far (M. Padron, personal communication, November, 13, 2012). The course has received highly positive feedback from over 2300 participants who have completed the course since September 2011, and it is now in the process of being translated into Portuguese for the next stage of deployment.

### INFRASTRUCTURE

The WHO Collaborating Centre has established a technological infrastructure to support the virtual learning environment for its distance education programs. Working with the WHO, the center identified specific developmental needs that could be addressed using distance education programs. Courses were designed and developed using the expertise of faculty and instructional designers at the University of Miami School of Nursing and Health Studies. The center piloted its courses using the Collaborative Institu-

tional Training Initiative program, a partnership between the University of Miami and the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center that provides web-based training to more than 1,100 institutions and facilities around the world (Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative, n.d.). However, at the end of the pilot phase, it was determined that the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative program did not meet all of the center's needs in managing and delivering these distance education courses. As a result of feedback from both learners and center administrators, the center decided to look for alternative solutions in delivering its distance education courses. For the next phase of this program, the center sought a solution that would meet the needs of both learners and administrators. For instance, the solution needed to be easily accessible and easy for learners to use, while being able to assess learning, track learner progress, and provide accurate reporting.

The center's current solution includes a hosted web server, a learning management system, and the online modules themselves (M. Padron, personal communication, November, 13, 2012). While the content of the courses have not changed, the learners' user interface experience has been enhanced, and the courses are more accessible to learners via the School of Nursing and Health Studies' website. The Linux-based web server is run by a third party, HostGator, which provides unlimited web hosting, disk space, and bandwidth. HostGator provides around the clock technical support and automated data backups, but content on the server is managed remotely by information technology staff at the center via CPanel. This flexibility allows the university to quickly install and remove specific software packages as well as manage other server settings as needed. The center has installed Moodle 2.3.1, a well-known open source learning management system that is used ubiquitously among educators due to its

ability to deploy and manage learning content easily to both small and large learning communities. In order for Moodle to function properly, the center has also installed PHP5 and MySQL, and the transfer of course content files is enabled with the server running an FTP.

The Moodle learning management system is customized to reflect the look and feel of the University of Miami, using the University's color scheme and the logo for the School of Nursing and Health Studies. The "Nursing and Patient Safety" distance education courses consist of 11 online modules, an evaluation of the course curriculum, a certificate of completion, a glossary of terminology, and online additional resources for each topical area. Through these distance education courses, the center is helping to increase healthcare knowledge across diverse geographical regions, facilitate a collaborative learning experience, and build the capacity of the global nursing workforce.

### CONCLUSION

The WHO Collaborating Centre at the University of Miami School of Nursing and Health Studies focuses on addressing both new opportunities and challenges facing the nursing profession today. Through distance education, learning is flexible and can be extended to areas with limited resources. Nurses from remote geographical regions to educational resources are now connected to leading medical instituresearchers, and practitioners. tions. Through its partnership with the WHO and the PAHO, the center promotes the basic healthcare needs of remote and underprivileged populations and improves healthcare systems in regions of critical need within the Americas and the Caribbean by building the capacity of nursing professionals. The continued collaboration between the center and these international organizations will strengthen and develop nursing education and

research, improve patient safety, and work toward eliminating health disparities on a global scale.

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# Working in Groups Online Suggested Tips for Success

### Natalie B. Milman

#### FOUR SCENARIOS

**S** cenario 1: Cameron's peer assessment of his teammates noted that one teammate did not contribute much to the team project. He wrote that he was disappointed all semester with the teammate's caliber of work, even though the teammate was "nice." Instructor Response: The instructor reviewed the team's



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objectives, tasks, and time line—after talking with Cameron, the instructor determined Cameron had different expectations than his teammates. The instructor also recommended more frequent communication among teammates to touch base about their understanding of and progress on their work, goals, objectives, and tasks.

Scenario 2: Ralph wrote in his individual reflective blog that he was very frustrated with his teammates because he felt like he was doing most of the work while they were getting a free ride. Instructor **Response:** The instructor read all of Ralph's peers' journal entries and learned that his teammates were having difficulties with Ralph. Not only was he unsupportive of his teammates, but he also was very bossy. In response to each teammate's blog entries, the instructor posted questions for them to consider. Also, in the subsequent week's lecture, the instructor asked all groups to reflect on and assess their individual contribution to the group project, as well as how they were interacting with their peers.

Scenario 3: Weeks into the group project, Sally left a voicemail for her instructor asking if she could work on the assigned project independently, instead of with her two other teammates because they could not agree on the next steps to finalize the assignment. **Instructor Response:** After talking with Sally, it became clear to the instructor that Sally was not communicating her need for more information about decisions made and tasks completed by her teammates. The instructor coached her to take a proactive approach with her peers by asking them questions about their progress, decisions, and any concerns she might have.

Scenario 4: Nona knew her high-pressure, full-time work responsibilities would pose challenges working in a team, especially across several different time zones all over the world. However, she was surprised to learn the biggest challenge was their different learning and work styles. She was a planner and liked to complete tasks well ahead of time. However, her two teammates had very different styles of working, which did not mesh with hersthey tended to complete work at the last minute. She was very frustrated and emailed her instructor for advice. Instructor **Response:** Her instructor recommended that Nona discuss her "learning and work style" with her teammates so they could come to a common understanding about how they might work together. She also suggested that Nona share her frustrations with them, as well as her *FT workload so they also better understood why* she wanted to work ahead of the deadlines. Moreover, the instructor suggested that for future group assignments, when seeking teammates that Nona should share her learning and work style with potential teammates so that there might be a better match between them.

The scenarios above represent examples of different challenges my students have experienced when working collaboratively and cooperatively on online group assignments, and a brief description of the assistance I offered in helping them solve them. Although the scenarios and solutions are not comprehensive, they shed light on some of the many problems students might encounter when working in online group assignments. They also demonstrate that even adults need to learn, practice, and be reminded of strategies for working in groups; many have these skills, but may not have employed them in online learning environments, which pose similar yet unique challenges compared to face-to-face group work.

Below are some useful tips for students working in online teams or groups.

### TIPS FOR WORKING IN GROUPS ONLINE

- 1. Determine your learning style—and share that information with your teammates. There are many online tools that help you determine your learning style. Complete one and reflect on the style the tool determines you to have. Then, figure out how you can capitalize on your learning style to benefit your group. In some cases, you may even seek teammates with similar learning styles.
- 2. Agree to disagree. Even though most of us strive for harmony and cooperation, it is impossible to agree on every decision made for completing the group assignment. Therefore, keep in mind you will need to agree to disagree with your teammates.
- 3. **Respect others' opinions.** Maintaining professionalism and respecting others' opinions as you work with your peers is of utmost importance. Even if you totally disagree, it is imperative that you respect and tolerate your peers' opinions.
- 4. **Be a good listener.** Some of the best teammates are those who truly listen to their peers' ideas and opinions.
- 5. **Invest in the group assignment.** Even if the assignment is the idea of one teammate, it is important to understand that each member is invested in the group assignment. Refer to the assignment as "our assignment" and not "your assignment" or "your idea."
- 6. **Determine and assign group roles.** Some people are natural leaders whereas others are not. Whatever your learning style and preferred group

role, determining roles among team members will ensure that important work is completed. Some examples of roles one might take are: leader, summarizer, encourager, reporter, and facilitator.

- 7. **Develop a plan:** Simply assigning roles and responsibilities is not enough. It is important to have a plan for each teammate's roles, responsibilities, and timeframe for completing all tasks.
- 8. **Share contact information**: Be sure to provide contact information to all of the team members so they know how to contact one another.
- 9. **Be flexible.** Because life can be complicated, it is important to be flexible and ready to support one another. This may even mean taking on a different role, tasks, or responsibility.
- 10. **Ask questions.** Often we assume that others know why we did something or can read between the lines. However, that is not always the case. Asking questions helps clarify any concerns, as well as assumptions.
- 11. **Trust your teammates.** Have faith that your teammates will complete their work well. While they may not complete tasks as you would, understand that they will need to do it "their way."
- 12. Communicate frequently, effectively, and professionally. Frequent, efficient, and professional communication will help any group function smoothly, even if it entails sending a group e-

mail to touch base about progress on the group assignment, questions one might have, or using some other mode of communication (e.g., chat, phone call, Skype, web conference, etc.). Also, let your teammates know if anything will affect your ability to complete a task on time. Even if they get upset about it, at least you will have informed them.

- 13. Document and summarize your agreements, tasks, time lines, and next steps. The best groups not only document and summarize what they have agreed to do, but they also summarize the tasks each member will complete and by when, as well as next steps. Often it helps if a member summarizes what group members have agreed to do to ensure that all members are in accord.
- 14. **Be prepared to compromise.** Although you may agree to disagree, at some point you will likely have to come to some compromise when making decisions.
- 15. Contact your instructor for support and advice. If you find that your team is not functioning well, or as best as it could be—even after doing all of the above steps, then get advice and support from your instructor. Chances are that your instructor will be able to give you good advice to try out to help you and your team work cooperatively.

Try This

## **Just Do It** Being a Most Effective Distance Educator in 2013!

### **Errol Craig Sull**

t's 2013, and you are actively involved in your courses. But as each new year taps us on the shoulders we look to improve, to be the best we can be as distance educators. There are many components to go into this, and thus it is easy to



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overlook one or two—and if we do it could hurt our effectiveness in the classroom, something that must never occur. To make sure this year is your best yet as a distance educator, embrace each of these suggestions:

### GIVE YOUR SUPERVISORS WHAT THEY EXPECT

There are certain parameters and guidelines you are expected to follow, but often distance educators can let some slip by simply by virtue of the online environment, that is it's you and a computer, with the daily doses of life also needing your attention. But teaching students online is a job, a very professional one, and the quickest way to please your supervisorsand to show them they were right in hiring you—is to ensure you follow, item by item, all you need to do. As your courses go on, especially if you are teaching more than one simultaneously, more requirements might come your way: it's a wise distance educator who makes a checklist of what is required and when in each course-and consults it daily. This will keep you from falling off any distance education cliff.

### NUMBER 1 RULE OF DISTANCE EDUCATION: BE A CONSTANT PRESENCE

The students cannot physically interact with you, there is no brick-and-mortar classroom office they can visit, it is rare (if at all) they can see and/or hear you-but when they see your postings, your e-mails on a regular basis it goes a long way to keeping your students engaged in the course. Some folks still believe online courses teach in a silent vacuum, i.e. students will do the readings, hand in all assignments, be on time, and walk away satisfied with the course. It ain't gonna happen-no how, no way. You need be there as conductor and coach-it's your guidance, motivation, and input that keeps the course alive.

### Number 2 Rule of Distance Education: Be Timely in All Responses

The importance of responding to all student assignments, e-mails, and in-course office postings, combined with weekly reminders and daily postings of a this or that, can seem daunting-and it is easy to reach a point of taking your time in responding, sending, or posting. But students need your information, they need your clarification-they need your words pretty much right away. And for those students new to online learning this is even more critical. All in your class want to learn, and when they know you can be depended on to help out when they need it-and even when they don't expect itthis goes a long way in giving them a relaxing, enjoyable, and fulfilling distance learning experience.

### Number 3 Rule of Distance Education: Be Enthusiastic and Interested

Words aplenty from the distance educator to his or her students are great—but

they can be simply words one can find in any dictionary or words that come alive with your enthusiasm, your verve, your excitement, your interest in the course and the students. When the students can feel a very positive and involved you in each of your postings and e-mails it results in a student-instructor rapport-so strong important in the learning process. And if you have the opportunity to additionally incorporate phone calls, audio, and/or visual (of you) again—be simply a great instructor with a smile in your voice and enjoyment in your attitude. Flat words, lethargic words offer ... nothing.

### POPULATE YOUR COURSES WITH EXTRAS

Each distance learning course comes complete with a syllabus, readings, and assignment information. By themselves these usually do a good job at presenting the subject information and course requirements so the students can learn and stay on task. But never leave a course as is; there is so much more you can offer students to augment and enhance their online course experience, thus making for learning that goes beyond the course length and will stick with the students for a much longer time. Suggestions: tie in material (articles, essays) that show the relationship between the course subject and the professional world ... post YouTube videos that give extra info on varied course items ... create a webliography with solid websites the students can use for additional information.

### INCORPORATE YOUR STUDENTS' PERSONAL LIVES INTO THE COURSE SUBJECT

Distance learning courses really become interesting to the students—and the material becomes so much more meaningful when the professional lives of your students are tied to the subject matter. Whether in discussion threads or assignments, have student discuss their employment (now and down the road) and how the course subject relates; what experiences have they had with the course material; and how will the course help them in work? These types of questions take what can appear as theoretical, bland information and make it become very important, very real in the students' lives. (A cool exercise: have students post websites that relate to the course subject: they enjoy doing this, it gets them more involved in the course, and each student leaves with more helpful resources.)

### Attend All Facultywide Webinars and Professional Development Courses

Throughout your tenure with each school there will be required and optional faculty-wide webinars to attend, as well as required and optional professional development courses to complete. Certainly, attend all that are required, but also attend those webinars and take professional development courses not required: this shows your personal dedication as a distance educator, and also as one who is constantly striving to be the best as a distance educator. Taking such an approach demonstrates your value as a teaching asset to the school-so important when it comes to evaluations and new course assignments. And you do become a better online instructor.

### USE HUMOR ... BUT SPARINGLY

Humor is a great thing in any classroom—it lightens the tone of the course, it makes students feel more welcome and relaxed in a course, and it is another step in humanizing you. But what no course needs is a comedian; unless you are teaching a course in stand-up comedy the humor should appear now-and-then, not take over the course. And keep in mind that many people cannot use humor: it falls flat, and the result is chasing students away from the course. Certainly, you do not have to incorporate humor, but it is mentioned simply as an additional tool one can employ in the classroom. Suggestion: if you are unsure of the impact of your humor do try it out on a colleague (your parents or significant other or friends or relatives might be nearby—but do they really know what works in the distance learning classroom?).

### INCORPORATE AUDIO AND/OR VISUAL

The technology of today offers a wide variety of options that can make your voice and/or all of you play a role in the course, along with the words you type into the course. Audio files such as .mp3 have proven to be a solid help in keeping students more engaged and interested in a course, and the use of YouTube and other such "movie" software can allow you to make a full-person presence in the course, whether to simply welcome students to the course or offer additional insight on varied areas of the course. Added to this are the use of live chats, PowerPoints and Prezis (and other such software), and phone calls: no longer does any distance learning course need remain with only the printed word in a flat, black-on-white, silent format.

### KEEP YOUR SOFTWARE KNOWLEDGE CURRENT

The New York Institute of Technology is credited with offering the first online course in 1984—it was very basic, and could only use the most rudimentary of computer equipment. Our current hardware and software, as well as social media and varied computer applications, give the online instructor a dizzying array of technological tools from which to choose. Caution must be used, to be sure, in selecting which ones you bring to your course, but what knowledge of anything computer you employ in your course must be fully understood by you, and, as much as possible, keep your software and hardware up to date. This not only makes for a smoother teaching experience on your end but for the students, as well.

### OFFER SOCRATIC QUESTIONS TO HELP STUDENTS BECOME MORE INVOLVED

The use of Socratic questioning in the distance learning classroom is a proven method of getting students to use critical thinking skills and take students into areas of a subject they may not have previously considered. Whether this is used in discussion forums, individual interaction with students, or as part of assignments it puts the one and two-word answers from students on a shelf, instead resulting in sentences and perhaps a paragraph. As an example, instead of asking "Is this what you believe" a Socratic approach would be ""What do you mean by ?" While there are several websites that offer a good variety of Socratic questions this is one of the better ones: http://ed.fnal.gov/trc new/ tutorial/taxonomy.html.

### STAY IN CONTACT WITH YOUR "BOSS"

Although you will have required e-mail correspondence with your supervisor, and perhaps a required phone call or two during the course, it behooves you to stay in contact with him or her with once-inawhile e-mails, if nothing else but to indicate the course is going well. And if you get some great, unsolicited comments from students about your course do send those along as well—it's nice to remind your supervisor that you are a wise choice to have in the classroom. Also, your supervisor may be responsible for so many faculty it can be easy for you to get lost in the crowd—and you don't want that to happen. Finally: don't hesitate to pitch a suggestion that might improve the course or for a professional development webinar it shows your interest beyond merely what you are required to do.

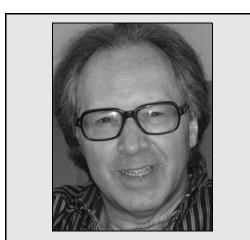
### Give Detailed and Constructive Feedback

One benefit of the online course is returning student assignments with your typed comments; this allows for more detail, and certainly no arduous writingby-hand-on-paper approach, from which one quickly tires. The result is ample room for detailed feedback to students, and it should come in a triptych form: pointing out an error, indicating why the error occurred, and showing how to get it right. This approach makes each feedback effort on an assignment a student's personalized "guide to getting it right"—something useful far beyond the course and great in upping the value of your course. Also: also point out at least a few positives on an assignment, and give an overall comment that is motivating and positive.

*Remember:* Bob Dylan, Picasso, Meryl Streep, Bill Gates, Isaac Stern, and Toni Morrison were not born great, and neither is the distance learning instructor: dedication, practice, and enthusiasm are needed.

# Ask Errol!

nd so we begin a new year, and the questions and concerns regarding distance learning continue! I'll be here to make an attempt to answer whatever you toss my way, and I'm always interested in hearing from you; please drop me an e-mail with your thoughts at erroldistancelearning@gmail.com Here is an interesting mixture I received toward the end of 2012:



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### **Errol Craig Sull**

I am overwhelmed by the variety of software on the market that allows me to offer enhanced audio and visual materials for my students. These are great, but is there any rule of thumb to determine which are best and when X or Y should be used for a class? (P.S. Thanks for the Q & A column: you give me information I've not found elsewhere!)

Wow—you ask a question for which one could write and write and write! The problem is threefold: (1) picking software that fits the needs of your class; (2) using software that best presents your course content and others areas of the course; (3) the overall structure of the course, i.e., what will work best within the length of the course, the course syllabus, and daily time segments. Each of these can only be answered by you, of course, but there are a few things you can do to help you make the right decisions. First, talk with colleagues who teach the same courses, as well as your supervisor. No matter how much I am up on the latest computer software I have learned that someone else can offer me a new piece of software of which I was not aware. Second, reach out to your students: I have set up discussion threads with a focus of students posting helpful software (as well as websites) they feel would work well in my course, and I always come away with new items that can be used in my classes. Lastly, visit one or more of the many online teaching blogs

and forums (do some Google or Bing searches), and ask for suggestions—fellow distance educators will deluge you with responses! (By the way: glad you like the column!)

This may seem like a minor concern, but it's bothered and puzzled me for quite some time, and that is knowing the amount of force, excitement, and minutes I should use with my voice when doing live chats with my students. I have found it's a great tool, but it sometimes seems that what I feel I should be doing and what I must do clash. Any insight you can give me would be appreciated.

This is a trial and error thing-each of us needs find the voice that works best for us in connecting with students. With that said, there are some guidelines that can help: (1) Never use a monotone and don't talk in a soft, "whispery" voice; by varying your tone and speaking with a strong voice you keep the students more interested in what you have to say-and you say it in an authoritative manner. (2) If you have a personality that is somewhat reclusive, shy, and not effervescent it behooves you to take on a more enthusiastic, "I-lovewhat-I'm-doing," excited personality when you are live in the chats: this engages students, and they will feed off the bubbles of interest you are generating. (3) While you are the one in control of the chats you do not want to be a talking head, that is lectures quickly bore students. Keep them involved and active in the chats by asking questions (see my other column in this issue, "Try This," and find the point I make about Socratic questioning), taking polls, soliciting their experiences, et cetera. Finally, an item many people overlook, but it can make a big difference in how students react to your voice: keeping to a minimum clearing of the throat, coughing, laughing, and sneezing; also, don't chew gum, don't eat while speaking, and when sipping a drink—our throats need this! keep the slurping away.

### Is there a rule regarding the use of student assignments and other materials for future classes? And while I use these for the obvious reasons of showing good and poor examples of student work are there any other ways these can be incorporated into a class? Thank you!

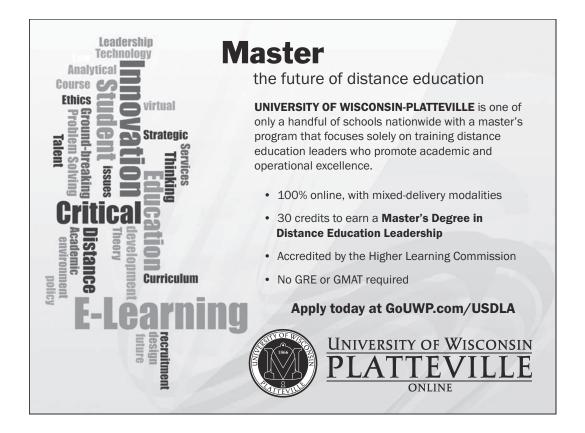
We all find it helpful to use "real life" examples of student assignments, discussions, et cetera to show other classes the good, bad, and ugly. Of course, your students who birthed these items do own them, even though they may appear in the somewhat public forum of a chat room or discussion forum; and the line is even clearer on student ownership when students submit an assignment for your eyes only-there is an expectation of privacy. So, what to do? First, ask students, either in a general beginning-of-the-class announcement or individually, for permission to use their work produced in class. Two important points here: (1) Be sure you indicate their names and no other identifying info (such as student IDs) will appear on any recycled work; (2) Stress that use of their materials will be quite helpful in educating future students in the course subject. Ultimately it's best to have a student drop you a note stating it's okay-and when a student nixes your request not only abide by that but also let the student know, in writing, you accept his/her decision. Finally: if you are using minor portions—a sentence here or there, for example-this can usually be done without permission from the student.

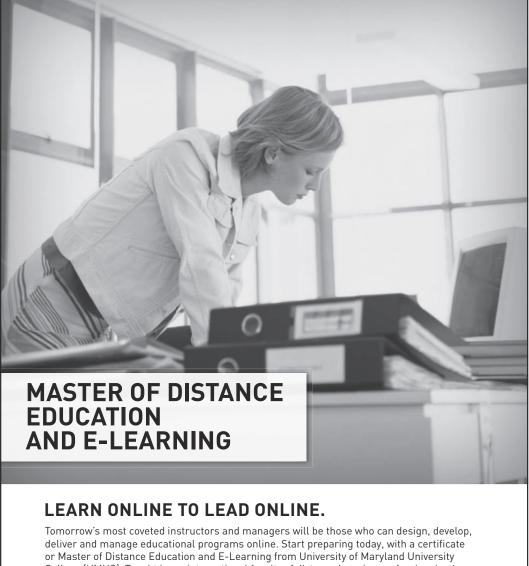
Increasingly, students are signing their emails to me or saying goodbye in phone calls with a phrase such as "Have a blessed day." Also, sometimes they are more direct in their closing salutations by inserting the name of a religious deity. This makes me feel uncomfortable, and I've had a few students complain to me as well. Are there any guidelines on this? I do not want to offend anyone in class, but it seems religion does not

### belong in a secular classroom, which mine is.

I've had an increased number of queries on this subject in the past couple of years, and I've also noticed an uptick in such salutations and end-of-live conversations in my courses. For whatever reason(s) this is happening, there really is no problem with it unless a student begins proselytizing, i.e., "selling" his or her religion to other students (this is not the purpose of a classroom). The type of closing you mention such as "Have a blessed day" —may be part of the student's core belief and is, in essence, a positive message aimed at the recipient, in this case you. While you may feel uncomfortable with it, the statement is rather generic—making a big deal about it to the student could really blow up in your face, as your objection could easily be construed as religious intolerance or bigotry. As for the students made uncomfortable by this, I'd simply remind them folks express beliefs in different ways, and as long as it's merely used as a closing salutation—sometimes as a tagline under one's name—it's not reaching out to convert, but merely saying hello: in the end, a nice thing.

*Remember:* A person is only best when striving to be better—and you can't get there without asking questions.





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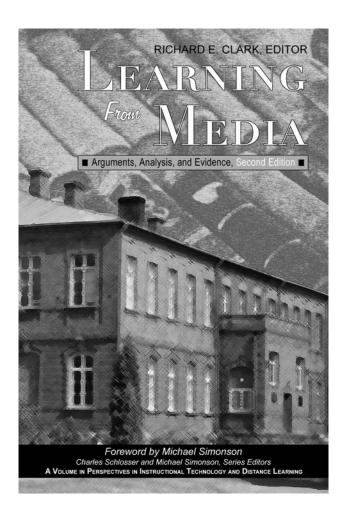
800-888-UMUC umuc.edu/**elearning**  edition shows the maturity of the field of distance education.

The third edition is a true handbook with guidance that can be directly applied to the practice of the field. What has improved are the underpinnings for the many recommendations and guidelines that are proposed in the 44 chapters of this 700+ page book. The science of distance education emerges from the pages of the new edition. It is now possible to find, in one place, best practices based not one someone's opinion, but on the rigorous study of the field, both in the laboratory and in the classroom. The *Handbook of Distance Education*, *3rd edition* is must reading for any serious educator either involved in or considering the practice of distance learning, virtual schooling, online teaching, or e-learning.

And finally, as Hippocrates said almost 2,500 years ago, "There are in fact two things, science and opinion: the former begets knowledge, the latter ignorance."

#### REFERENCE

Moore, M. (Ed.). (2013). *Handbook of distance education* (3rd ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.



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### And Finally ...

# Let's Get Practical!

### **Michael Simonson**

here is one characteristic of distance education that is both a strength and a weakness—it is the practical nature of the field. Distance educators are "can-do" people, and are used to solving immediate problems, such as getting a class online for next semester, or setting up a virtual school. Distance educators are good at developing effective plans and are even better at creating instructional approaches.

Our strength, then, is the ability and willingness to implement change, to make



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things happen, and to get the job done. Ok, then what is our weakness? Often, the sound logic behind our decisions is lacking, or skimpy at best. Distance educators like to figure things out, but are not very good at documenting why activities are effective. Practitioners in the field do not use theory and research to support decisions, even though there is science to support the practice of distance education. Often, this science is not applied. Some even "pooh-pooh" those who advocate a scientific approach to decision-making in the field.

In fact, the literature of distance education is comprehensive. There are theories available to practitioners in distance education; Moore's transactional distance theory and Simonson's equivalency theory are two readily applied examples. And, there is a growing body of research that builds a foundation for best practices. Finally, there are true scientists who are studying models and techniques that provide "touchstones" for decision makers. The literature of the field is robust.

Now we have one of the most comprehensive guides to the science of the field of distance education; the third edition of Michael Moore's *Handbook of Distance Education* has been released and it is outstanding. The first two editions of this "must have" handbook were good, but the third

... continues on page 67

ISSN: 1547-4712 Distance Learning IAP-Information Age Publishing P.O. Box 79049 Charlotte, NC 28271-7047 www.infoagepub.com