From the Editor

“It seems like a sink or swim situation” I was told at a recent distance learning conference. “ITV instructors either thrive or fail, is that correct?” A technology professional was asking me questions about effective DL teaching, and I was clearly having an issue communicating my point.

“No. That’s not correct. All DL teachers swim” I responded

“Why?”

I felt like simply saying “We all swim because ITV teachers are awesome! OK?!” But instead I mumbled something less confrontational about stepping up to challenges, which in my head was an acceptable answer, but not good enough to represent ITV teachers as a whole.

I began perseverating on his last question “Why?” because I considered my answer insufficient.

To quiet my internal dialogue, I decided to take some time and develop an answer to the “Why do all ITV teachers swim?” question.

The answer came in an unlikely place: a dictionary.

Contribute to the Distance Learning Monthly Newsletter and receive recognition. See the last page of this issue for details.

Distance Learning Monthly Newsletter  Issue: 3, May 2015
Have you ever wondered about the true meaning of the “sink or swim” phrase? It actually not only means to succeed or fail, but succeeding or failing **when left to one’s own devices**. You swim and succeed because of what you do and fail because of what you do not do.

This realization was painful. ITV teaching is no longer a sink or swim question because we are not alone and left to our own devices to succeed. We have support.

Our administrators support us because we are their TV teacher movie stars. Our colleagues support us because they can’t even begin to fathom teaching on TV. Our students support us because we teach them relevant content. NERIC supports us by giving us the professional freedom to teach. College administrators support us because we extend their influence. Our community of ITV teachers supports each other because we relate to the ups and downs of TV teaching. Lastly, the Distance Learning Monthly Newsletter supports us because we believe in the power of ITV instruction.

You’re not alone and you’re not sinking. You’re not left to your own devices to succeed. In fact, not only are you swimming, you are synchronized swimming with every other teacher instructing on TV.

My new answer to the sink or swim question is this: "**ITV teaching is not analogous to swimming or sinking because we are not alone in our initiative. We have support and a community of ITV teachers looking out for one another- we wouldn’t let one of us fail.**"

(I actually emailed my new answer to the gentlemen from the conference- his response was short and simple: "**Fantastic perspective, thank you for sharing.**")

Smile because every block of every day, teachers wander onto the screen and teach remote students with the same stroke.

Thanks for reading.

Chris

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*Mobile units are used in DL courses where this a hands-on laboratory component. Here, remote learners are receiving laboratory instruction from the teacher at the host school.*
5 small changes in DL lesson structure to decrease transactional distance

Lesson structure refers to the degree that a DL lesson is flexible and able to address specific student needs, inquiries, and interests. A lesson that is highly structured does not allow for any personalized inquiries and therefore increases Transactional Distance. **A lesson that is low in structure can be responsive to the learners in your classroom.**

Low structure is not synonymous with poorly planned. DLMN is not advocating the practice of "winging" a DL lesson. Low structure allows for high flexibility and the opportunity to address individual students. Highly structured lessons are those that allow for little deviation and very little interaction occurs. **Students internalize content when they easily relate to it.** Flexible and engaging lessons encourage this process.

1. **Increase opportunities for meaningful interaction**

To encourage constructive dialog prioritize communications media that allow for synchronous teacher-student interaction. This is a no-brainer and is an extension of our discussion regarding dialog. **ITV allows the instructor to be personally responsive in real time.**

2. **Create opportunities to participate**

The concept of flexibility refers to the fact that the instructor doesn’t always have to be instructing. **Incorporating the student’s actions into the lesson takes the control from your hands and places it in theirs.** Act as a facilitator and observe the students help each other. Sharing can take many forms: daily article presentation and think-pair-share are two that DLMN has seen work!

Credit for graphic given to Alan Stover

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3. **Get the wheels spinning by varying presentation methods**

Layer content by exposing the learners to the same concept in a variety of different ways. Their brain will make connections and the students will inevitably recognize gaps. **Gaps in understanding can be a good thing in the sense that to fill the gaps, the learner will ask questions!**

4. **Use scenarios to make them feel right**

Personalize the lesson by using scenarios and themed questions. When supported with evidence, opinions are never wrong. A student will feel that their opinion is correct and connect themselves to content being taught. Flexibility is all about making the learner feel individualized. **You can not get any more individualized than a learner leaving your class with an opinion that they formed from the content you taught.**

5. **Let them choose!**

Students internalize content when they exercise appropriate autonomy. By giving the students a small choice, you appeal to this. Choose a variety of relevant topics and take a quick poll the last 15 minutes of your DL lesson: What topic would the students like to address the last portion of the class? **Involving them in the learning process can be a powerful tool to decrease transactional distance.**

Structure, like dialog, is relative and qualitative. Further, different content areas lend themselves to lessons that are less structured and more flexible. Incorporate the ideas discussed above into your own DL instruction methods and find a balance that is appropriate for you and your content. Taken out of context, “low structure” can be confusing. Addressing your DL lessons and prioritizing opportunities for student individualization is what the DLMN advocates.

In summary:

- A lesson that is low in structure can be responsive to the learners in your classroom.

- ITV allows the instructor to be personally responsive in real time.

- Incorporating the student’s actions into the lesson takes the control from your hands and places it in theirs

- Gaps in understanding can be a good thing in the sense that to fill the gaps, the learner will ask questions!

- You can not get any more individualized than a learner leaving your class with an opinion that they formed from the content you taught.

- Involving them in the learning process can be a powerful tool to decrease transactional distance.
Tech Tips!

Technology professionals take care of DL instructors behind the scenes. They see us at our best, and at our worst. “Tech Tips” is an area for DL technology professionals to share what they observe.

On how to fix problems:

“Restarting equipment is a last resort. It is key to learn how to operate your equipment and report problems accurately. If you don’t know the equipment and its functions you will not be able to accurately report problems to technician trying to help decrease your lost class time. Restarting the equipment may temporarily solve your problem but it’s like putting newspaper over spills—it only masks the problem.”

“While restarting the equipment may work, it doesn’t always work. It’s best if the instructor contacts the technical contact at their remote site. The technician might be able to rectify an issue immediately, or can walk the instructor through some troubleshooting. There are many pieces to the videoconferencing infrastructure that has to be considered, so as it may seem that there is an issue with a particular site, there could always be a bigger issue that is out of the instructor’s hands. Also, if technicians are not notified of a reoccurring problem, most likely the same issue will occur.”

On common errors:

“There is not enough interaction with remote site students. At times, I feel that the remote sites are left out of the conversation leading them to do other things that are not class related.”

“Instructors sometimes forget to switch from PPT back to self which leaves students at remote sites staring at PPT for 50 minutes.”
April: Tell us how you collect assignments from both your remote and host students:

“All of the students enrolled in my DL course are required to send me completed assignments electronically through email. Yes it takes more work on my part to organize electronic submissions, but this is the only FAIR way to collect assignments in the same manner from everyone."

“My students all submit material to me via email.”

“I have created Blackboard homework assignments for most of my units of instruction. This has been very successful as I can set them up in the "create test" section so they are completely or partially self-grading. As for other assignments, I encourage students to email their work. This encourages students to take responsibility for their assignments and verification that they did send it. They may also send it through digital dropbox in Blackboard and we usually practice this skill at the beginning of the year.”

FROM A DL STUDENT:

“DL teachers should use Google drive for work. Anyone with any type of computer or phone can use google drive. It’s much easier than what I have to do now in my DL classes.”

For June: Tell us how you: utilize the student camera

Send responses to dlmn.pd@gmail.com

To the Administrators!

DL is new for everybody and it is important that all parties stay on the same page!

On preparation time being slightly different:

From one DL instructor:

“As a seasoned DL instructor, my preparation can take 10 - 20 minutes before each class. This may include getting the document camera set up, iPad connected, locating necessary video clips for presentation in class, the agenda ready to be displayed, power points up and ready and ensuring that the materials for receive sites have been sent to the facilitators.”

On stopping by to watch a class:

“I love the fact that my administration is enthusiastic about my DL course and I appreciate their want to stop by and watch. Contrary to popular belief, I wish my administration did not tell me in advance about their plans to visit. I find that I get extra nervous because now I dwell on the fact that I have to teach on TV with my boss watching! I would recommend this to administration: ask your DL teacher what they prefer- would they like to know about the visit or not?!”

You responded by suggesting:

I can often hear myself as an echo at my remote site- how can I manipulate the technology to eliminate this?

“Tell your facilitator to turn down their out-going volume. What you are hearing is your voice being picked up by their microphones and sent back to you.”

“This problem does not seem to occur as often as it did five or ten years ago. Many times I found that there were problems with the audio levels at the remote sites. Address the remote sites and ask them to check the audio levels. Everyone should have their setting in the middle. No site should have to raise the volumes in an effort to compensate for sound problems. It is very important to explain to students the limitations of the microphones and the importance of projecting.”

“At times during our connection, we often hear quick, rounded beeps. What do we think causes this and how can we eliminate it?”

“The quick beeps are interruptions in the transmission. I hear them more often when teaching the mobile videoconferencing units. The can be caused by a variety of things and cell phones can create the issue. Emphasize that cell phone usage disrupts the flow of class and they have to be turned off!

A Reader sent this question to be addressed by the DL community:

Send your response to dlmn.pd@gmail.com

“How does everybody handle sick and personal days when you have to teach on T.V.? I feel that I often drag myself to school when not feeling well just because I’m nervous of what would happen if there was a substitute teaching my DL course.”
Distance Learning has deep academic roots. Click on the image or link below to spend some time learning about how classes were taught to students at a distance before interactive television!

Credit given to Brain Clark Howard:
http://voices.nationalgeographic.com/2012/02/23/300-years-of-distance-learning/
Contribute to the Distance Learning Monthly Newsletter and Be Recognized

Teaching DL is DIFFICULT and you deserve recognition. Contribute to the DLMN and be recognized.

The DLMN is a learning community where dl teachers share best practices.

Submissions are not limited to listed topics. Feel free to submit useful links, videos, or a picture of your DL class!

Though everything submitted will be read and considered, the editor has final discretion.

Quick Opportunities to contribute to DLMN:

Some features of the DLMN are interactive and require reader participation while other features ask for quick thoughts and experiences. Many of the topics are time sensitive, please adhere to the submission deadline shown below.

Share your views, thoughts, or experiences regarding each monthly topic!

Ask a question or respond to another reader’s question!

Respond to the poll with a 1-2 sentence description! Poll results are published the next month.

Do you have anything you wish that your administration knew or understood about DL?

Share something with the DL community that you are proud of! Encourage others to try something new!

The remote facilitator is one of the important pieces to the DL puzzle. Share your facilitator best practices!

There are a variety of unique topics that warrant discussion. Find one that you are passionate about, research your idea, and share it!

Anything and everything that does not fall into a specified category- any length discussing any content. Have fun and be creative!

Please send all material to dlmn.pd@gmail.com