# Teaching and Learning at a Distance

**by John Almarode**

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The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has been felt on college campuses across the globe. And, while the pandemic, or even talk about the pandemic, has exhausted faculty, staff, and students, the remnants of our abrupt transition to crisis teaching and learning are still with us. Data from the U.S. Department of Education suggest there is good reason for this jarring response. Although there are a growing number of fully online or distance-learning, degree-granting institutions, in Fall 2018, students enrolled in exclusively distance-education courses accounted for only 16.6% of the total enrollment at post-secondary institutions (NCES, 2019). Only 18.7% of students were enrolled in at least one distance education course (NCES, 2019). There is now an expectation that a greater percentage of the remaining students will learn from a distance. Ipso facto, we, as faculty, are going to be engaged in distance teaching at greater percentages too. This brings me to the purpose of this Teaching Toolbox. What works best when teaching and learning from a distance? While there are many lessons to be learned from the research on teaching and learning, a list that would far exceed the page limit of any book, in this Teaching Toolbox, I will focus on three powerful influences, influences within our control, on student learning: credibility, clarity, and charge.

## Credibility

Students make decisions about credibility based on their perceptions of the competence, trustworthiness, and perceived caring of their professors. "Is this professor someone I can turn to for feedback, help, knowledge, and depth of understanding?" "Am I prepared to invest in her or his assigned tasks to enhance my learning?" Drawing from 51 studies, encompassing 14,378 students, a meta-analysis by Fin et al. (2009) found that high teacher credibility has an average effect size of 1.09 (Visible Learning Meta[X], 2020). In other words, credibility has the potential to considerably accelerate learning. Therefore, one of our first priorities when teaching and learning at a distance is to ensure that we establish credibility with our learners in this new context.

Thankfully, there are specific actions that all of us can take to increase our credibility in the following four areas (Fisher, Frey, Almarode, & Hattie, 2020).

- **Trust:** To our students, send clear messages that we really care about them as individuals and have their best academic and social interests at heart. Students also want to know that their professors are true to their word and are reliable.
- **Competence:** In addition to trust, students want to know that their professors are active in their respective fields, experts in their content, and effectively engage with learners that are not yet experts. They expect expertise and accuracy from their professors. Further, students measure competence by the ability of the professor to deliver instruction that is coherent and organized.
- **Dynamism:** This dimension focuses on the passion that professors bring to the classroom and their content. It is about our ability to communicate enthusiasm for our discipline and our students. It's about developing spirited learning experiences that capture and maintain students' interest.
- **Immediacy:** This final construct of credibility focuses on accessibility and relatability as perceived by students. Professors who move around the room and are easy to interact with increase students' perception of immediacy. That's obviously hard to do in a virtual space. But have you considered visiting their breakout rooms? Have you considered using student names

during your live sessions and making sure as many students as possible hear their name during class? Professors need to be accessible and yet there needs to be a sense of urgency that signals to students that their learning is important to you.

**Clarity**

Alongside our intentional, purposeful, and deliberate efforts to establish credibility, we should also strive to provide clarity about the learning. Drawing from 88 studies, encompassing 73,281 students, a meta-analytic approach found that the average effect size for clarity about learning to be 0.76 (see Fendick, 1991). Clarity has the potential to double the rate of learning in our classrooms (Visible Learning Meta[X], 2020).

Fendick (1991) defined clarity as the compilation of organizing instruction, explaining content, providing examples, guided practice, and assessment of learning. Each of these components contributes to our students' learning. This is similar to the Transparency in Learning and Teaching Higher Education Project (Project TILT), described in further detail in this past Teaching Toolbox. Much like TILT, Hattie (2009) describes clarity as communicating the learning intentions or goals and success criteria for those learning intentions, so that students can identify where they are going in their learning, how they are progressing, and where they will go next, thus providing students enough clarity to own their learning.During any class meeting, face-to-face, synchronous, or asynchronous, how would our students respond to the following three questions (Almarode & Vandas, 2019)?

1. What am I learning?
2. Why am I learning it?
3. How will I know I have learned it?

If our students can answer these three questions, we have shared clarity in learning and well on our way to ramping up the learning.

(As an aside, when we are clear about what our students are learning, we can better select experiences, activities, or assignments that specifically target the desired learning. At a distance, we are likely more restricted with time and this targeted approach helps us to be more efficient and effective. When *we* know what success looks like, we can show our students what success looks like, design opportunities for students to make their own learning visible, give and receive feedback, and gather evidence about where to go next. These are critical components in establishing credibility and providing a clear charge, which is the third and final focus.)

**Charge**

Faculty across the globe have continued to teach and mentor their students as they pursue their program a study that will prepare them to graduate and enter the world after college. JMU is no exception. In fact, I would like to believe we have continued on in ways that set us apart from our peer institutions. In every course that we teach, we are still responsible for fostering, nurturing, and sustaining the interest and engagement of our students through distance learning as we prepare them to be educated and enlightened citizens—lifelong learners. Antonetti and Garver (2015) found that engaging tasks shared common characteristics:

1. They had clear learning intentions and criteria for success.
2. They provided emotional safety so that learners felt safe to take risks.
3. They allowed learners to integrate their own lived experiences or personal responses.

4. There were choices in how to approach the task.
5. There were opportunities for social interaction or academic dialogue around the task.
6. There was a sense of value—the task had value beyond earning a grade.
7. The task had an element of novelty or a unique way of approaching the task.
8. And, finally, the task was authentic, something that individuals in the field or discipline would actually do. Authentic assignments are essential to student learning.

From our home workspaces, we continued to motivate our students (mostly) to engage in thoughtful inquiry and discourse that continue to make the struggle of learning joyful. We have continued to provide feedback on problem-solving sets, papers, and capstone projects at the right time and in the right way to each student so as not to "do" the work for the students. We know where to go next and how to balance the breadth and depth of the content. We have re-purposed our know-how to invest in the "after class work" of grading, preparing for the next class meeting, developing resources, and still maintaining our scholarship and service requirements. We did this by being deliberate, intentional, and purposeful about establishing credibility, sharing clarity about learning, and owning our charge to provide rigorous and engaging learning experiences, even at a distance.

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