

## Face Value

Craig Ullman

**T**oo many of us in distance learning (and I would put myself at the front of the line here) love to focus on the bells and whistles of our enabling technologies, rather than focus on the simpler and more difficult issues of cognitive psychology. I'll give you a for instance: what form of communication would you say has the most impact on the people communicating?

I think most of us would agree that a face-to-face discussion has the most impact on its participants. As pure information exchange, a

face-to-face is actually very inefficient: few people are well spoken, much less eloquent, and rarely does one take (or even have) the time to carefully organize one's thoughts before speaking. Typically, a verbal discussion is filled with elisions, redirections, repetitions, and just plain stalling ("that, you know ... the thing of it is...")

In that sense, a written communication would provide more information, more carefully presented. And yet, how often has something we have written been misconstrued or ignored? I'm sure we all know particular people who have habitually taken offense at e-mails, creatively reading in an intent of the message that was not actually there.

The piece we are missing is, of course, the emotion associated with the statement. If you believe that an emotion associated with a statement is merely a sidecar, an encumbrance that can only slow down your motorcycle of thought, then you are making the until very recently widely accepted mistake of Cartesian duality. Descartes believed that emotions and logic were separate, often opposed, entities. However, the cognitive research that has been done in the last couple of decades indicates quite the opposite: emotion is not only concomitant to everything

we think or say, it is a necessary, built-in process that we cannot—nor would even wish to—avoid.

Emotion's value is to give weight to facts and help us come to decisions more quickly. If, for instance, you hear someone say "A lion!" and did not receive or could not interpret the emotion intertwined with the fact, you might spend a considerable period of time deciding what the statement meant, any possible relationship of the statement to your own circumstances, and so on. While you stand there processing these issues, your leg could, of course, become a delightfully invigorating tartare for the lion.

So, the play of emotions between speakers is the missing piece that makes a face-to-face discussion so powerful. The emotive content is revealed (and sometimes betrayed) by the voice, facial expressions, and body language of the other speaker: An arched eyebrow, a pregnant pause, a rising tone, all serve to expand the meaning of what the speaker says—and how the speaker is reacting to what you say. Voice, facial expression, and body language create a powerful feedback loop for any communication.

Every step we take away from face-to-face communication narrows the amount of information



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and feedback we receive from the speaker, making miscommunication or weak communication that much more likely.

So what implication does the importance of emotion have in distance learning? In most instances, we cannot effectively or efficiently use technology to create a face-to-face discussion between teacher and

student, or between students. However, we can use technology to bottle and distribute some of that emotion through the use of video. Even though the teacher or student might be seen in a box in a corner of the screen, if the audio and video of the person can be clearly understood, than the emotive content of the speaker can be understood as well.

It is not an ideal solution, and thousands of hours of online learning have been built consciously avoiding or minimizing the use of the human face. It is now time we embrace the importance of emotion in distance learning and take greater advantage of it.

### **WHAT IS A DISTANCE LEARNING LEADER?**

A LEADER IS A VISIONARY CAPABLE OF ACTION WHO GUIDES AN ORGANIZATION'S FUTURE, ITS VISION, MISSION, GOALS, AND OBJECTIVES. THE LEADER GUIDES THE ORGANIZATION AND ITS PEOPLE WHO HAVE FAITH IN THE LEADER, AND HAVE A CLEAR UNDERSTANDING AND ACCEPTANCE OF THE ORGANIZATION'S WORTHWHILE AND SHARED VISION AND GOALS. A DISTANCE LEARNING LEADER HAS COMPETENCE IN KNOWING, DESIGNING, MANAGING, LEADING AND VISIONING DISTANCE EDUCATION.

—SIMONSON (2004)