



The TLT Group

## Evaluating Distance Learning: Primer and Q&A

**Stephen C. Ehrmann, Ph.D**  
<http://www.tltgroup.org/IAMSE.htm>

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Flashlight Program

## The TLT Group

- **Help institutions improve teaching and learning with technology**
- **Services/materials include:**
  - ✓ Assessment, evaluation, scholarship of teaching and learning (action research)...("Flashlight")
  - ✓ Course improvement strategies and professional development
  - ✓ Planning, governance, learning space design, ...
- **Tools, materials, online workshops, gatherings of subscribers, consulting...**



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## Thanks!

- **150+ institutional subscribers to TLT Group services**
- **Spin-off from Annenberg/CPB and the American Association for Higher Education**
- **Washington State Univ., U of Nebraska, Purdue, MIT, Johnson C. Smith University ...**
- **AAC&U, ACRL, EDUCAUSE, HBCU Faculty Development Network, League for Innovation, MERLOT, NISOD, POD, SCUP...**
- **TLT Group Founding Sponsors**
  - ✓ Blackboard, Compaq, Microsoft, SCT, WebCT



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## Outline

- I. An activity-based approach to formative evaluation**
- II. Applying the framework to elements of a distance learning program**



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## Survey Results

- Available on <http://www.tltgroup.org/IAMSE.htm>



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## How (not) to Evaluate DL

- Look at the literature to see if DL is better or worse, more expensive or cheaper, than campus learning
- Ask students and faculty to 'grade' different elements of the program
- Do a study without first asking how each bit of data will help someone make better decisions



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## Definitions

- “Technology” – the facilities people use
- “Distance Learning” – student is not on a main campus most of, or all of, the time
- “Assessment” – measuring learning
- “Evaluation” – information to make decisions about distance learning program
- Web page of confusors:  
<http://www.tltgroup.org/discussions/Confusors.htm>



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## Computers Aren't Magic; Distance isn't Poison



- No one has ever done a good study showing that distance makes outcomes better or worse
- No one ever will
- Ditto for computers
- Ditto for classrooms, electricity, and paper



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## I. Research on TLT Effectiveness

- **The technology works!**
  - ✓ Kulik

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### I. Research on TLT Effectiveness

- It's not the technology, stupid!
  - ✓ Kulik, and Clark

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graph LR
  IT[IT] --> ECA[Educationally Crucial Activities]
  ECA --> OC[Out comes]
  
```

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### I. Research on TLT Effectiveness

- It isn't the technology, yet it is...
  - ✓ Kulik, and Clark, and Kozma

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graph LR
  IT1[IT1] -.-> ECA[Educationally Crucial Activities]
  IT2[IT2] -.-> ECA
  ECA --> OC[Out comes]
  
```

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### I. Research on TLT Effectiveness

- It isn't the technology, yet it is...
  - ✓ Kulik, Clark, Kozma, TLT/Flashlight

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graph LR
  IT1[IT1] -.-> A1[Activity #1]
  IT1 -.-> A2[Activity #2]
  A1 --> OC1[Out come 1]
  A2 --> OC2[Out come 2]
  
```

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## Which Activities Are Most Important?

- In 1986, Arthur Chickering and Zelda Gamson were asked, "What do decades of educational research tell us about how to improve learning?"



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## 1987: "7 Principles"

Educationally Crucial Activities

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Out comes

- Faculty-student interaction
- Student-student collaboration
- Active Learning
- Prompt Feedback
- Time on Task
- Higher Expectations
- Value diverse ways of learning



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## 1992: What Works?

Computers, Other I.T.

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Educationally Crucial Activities

- Project-based active learning
- Collaborative learning
- Faculty-student interaction
- More flexible pace for learning
- Other activities attracting time on task
- Enhanced feedback
- Continual improvement of student work



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## 1993: Aha!!

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    graph LR
      A[Computers, Other I.T.] -.-> B[Educationally Crucial Activities]
      B --> C[Out comes]
  
```

1. Faculty-student interaction
2. Student-student collaboration
3. Active Learning
4. Prompt Feedback
5. Time on Task
6. Higher Expectations
7. Value diverse ways of learning

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## Applications of 7 Principles to Evaluation of Distance Learning

- If these activities increase, outcomes usually improve
- Enables comparison, pooling of data across dissimilar courses, programs (including on- and off-campus based study)

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## Types of Study

1. Tracking activities; benchmarking
2. How appropriate is the technology for this activity?
3. Diagnostic-removing barriers that have prevented 100% success
4. Course research techniques
5. Studying costs, stresses

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## Tracking and Benchmarking

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- **“The instructor was able to respond to the individual needs of learners in this course.”**
- **“I learned from comments made by the instructor on my assignments and/or examinations for this course.”**
- **“Studying with one or more other students is an effective way to learn in this course.”**
- **“When I don’t understand something, I can quickly get help.”**



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## Appropriate IT (Facilities)?

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- **“Because of the way this course uses threaded discussion, my comments are more thoughtful than they would be in a course that met in a classroom and had no online discussion.”**
- **“It’s easy to learn to use the technology in this program. You don’t waste time being confused about what to do.”**



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## Diagnosing Barriers

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- **Which of these issues make it difficult for you to participate fully in online discussion or online teamwork in this course?**
  - ✓ I don’t have a computer to use at the times when I need to be online in this course.
  - ✓ Students in this course don’t know me well enough to realize how much I could contribute.
  - ✓ It’s hard to discuss a web page or document because I can’t point to the part of the page that I’m talking about.
  - ✓ Some people in the course don’t do their share and there’s nothing I can do about that.



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## Course Research

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- **The “Dorbolo Design”**
  - ✓ List all the topics and tasks and ask which ones were interesting, and which ones were useful.
  - ✓ Any patterns in how students respond?



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## Cost Studies

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- **Same logic: activities drive costs**
- **Revenue theory of costs (Bowen’s Law): programs raise all the money they can, spend all they get, and spend in ways dictated mainly by local history of spending**
- **Goal of cost studies: reduce stress (especially burdensome uses of time, inappropriate budgets) while improving outcomes if possible.**



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## Flashlight Online

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- **Web-based survey system shared by 100 colleges and universities**
- **Designed and hosted for The TLT Group by Washington State University**
- **Any author can make a survey or item bank available for use or modification by any other author at any other institution**
- **<http://www.tltgroup.org>**



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## Questions? Suggestions?

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- **To reach me personally, send e-mail to [ehrmann@tltgroup.org](mailto:ehrmann@tltgroup.org)**
- **Thanks!**



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