

# TRANSITIONING TO AN ONLINE TEACHING ENVIRONMENT: FIRST STEPS

*There is so much out there to read about online teaching. I'm overwhelmed!*

The surging popularity of online learning has yielded a large body of research and guidelines for use. Keep in mind that this work occurred under normal circumstances, with ample preparation time and options. Let's start with two easy-to-apply principles that will require little effort, and have a big impact.

## MOORE'S THEORY OF TRANSACTIONAL DISTANCE<sup>1</sup>

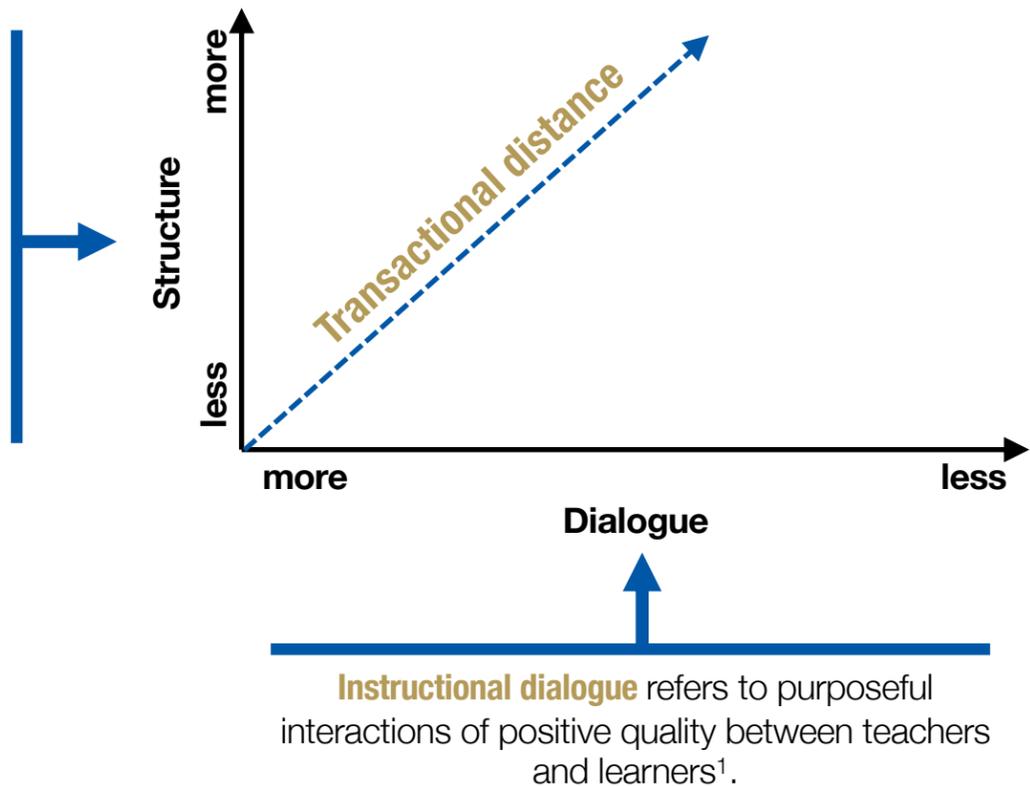
In distance learning environments, we are separated physically; however, we needn't be separated psychologically.

**Transactional distance** is a psychological space between the teacher and the learner in which there is potential for misunderstanding. To optimize our students' learning, we must decrease the transactional distance.

This is achieved by increasing **instructional dialogue** and decreasing **program structure**.

**Program structure** describes how the educational experience is designed for delivery through communication media.

Highly structured programs are those which employ inflexible instructional media that dictate the way the students use the media. There is no opportunity for deviation from the lesson to suit the needs of a particular learner<sup>1</sup>.



## APPLYING THE PRINCIPLES

*How can I increase instructional dialogue in my online course/clerkship?*

Communication should be bidirectional. You are communicating with students by posting lectures and other resources. Ensure that they can communicate back to you. This extends beyond their content-specific questions, and includes discussion of their learning and processing of the material presented to help you identify their learning needs.

- 1 "Take the temperature" of the class through a poll question ([Moodle choice](#)) or brief survey ([Moodle survey](#), [Qualtrics XM](#)). E.g., "What are your top 2 confusing topics from this week?"
- 2 Chat with students synchronously: E.g., Videoconferencing ([WebEx](#)), video call ([Google Hangouts Video Call](#)), live text chat ([Moodle chat](#))
- 3 Chat with students asynchronously. E.g., Discussion boards ([Moodle forum](#)), email
- 4 Increase the frequency and opportunity for communication

*I am being advised to have my materials posted to the students in advance. Isn't that counterproductive to decreasing program structure?*

If you are preparing content in advance, you can still decrease the program structure if you are attentive and responsive to students.

- 1 Use the techniques listed above to gather class feedback, and identify the needs of the class as they progress through the course
- 2 Create new resources to address problems or gaps in understanding and intersperse with the content. E.g., A short 10-minute video ([Panopto](#), [WebEx](#)) to address the most confusing content of the week

*How do I help students interact with the content itself?*

- 1 Use a multi-modal approach to distribute instructional content. Students may disengage from the content if delivered in the same, monotonous format. There are a variety of content-based resources curated here: [Resources for Online Teaching Library Guide](#). Consider adding 1-2 to your course/clerkship.
- 2 Keep in mind the cognitive load imposed by learning a new platform. Keep it simple and don't overwhelm students with too many different new tools.
- 3 Consider resources that are interactive and give the students immediate formative feedback. E.g., Practice quizzes ([Moodle quizzes](#)), module activities ([SoftChalk](#))
- 4 When selecting or building resources, favor low tech and mobile-friendly
- 5 During recorded sessions, show students how you'd like them to use the resources
- 6 Make sure students have a designated contact for technical troubleshooting of any resources you recommend or require
- 7 Invite ideas from students. What resources have they found that they think are helpful?

<sup>1</sup>Moore MG. 1993. Theory of transactional distance. In: Keegan D (Editor). Theoretical principles of distance education. New York, NY: Routledge. p. 22-38.