

Handout  
Dr TJ Larkin's Presentation  
Research Foundation Luncheon  
IABC International Conference - Washington D.C.  
Tuesday, June 28, 11:30 am to 1:00 pm

# What Each Channel Does Best:

Web  
Paper  
Face to Face

Dr TJ Larkin & Sandar Larkin

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On the one hand professional communicators have messages to communicate, on the other hand, a choice of channels.

The question is: Do different messages belong on different channels?

The answer is yes.

Web is best for short, quick, information retrieval.

Paper is best for learning new, long, and complicated ideas.

Face to face is best for overcoming resistance to change.

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# Web

## Best for Short, Quick, Information Retrieval

Not everything belongs on the Web.

Messages that are new, long, and complicated belong on paper, not on Web pages.

Understanding is higher when a new, long, complicated message is read from paper.

The Web's strength is "search" not "comprehension." The Web is at its best when employees are locating small pieces of data buried in big data sets, for example:

- finding the temperature for a welding operation
- locating a mailing address
- checking the accumulated value in a 401k

The Web's use of links is the reason for its lower comprehension. Links focus the mind on "navigating" squeezing out the mental energy left for "comprehending."

Links are underlined words on Web pages sending the users to different places. Click here and you may go to a definition of the underlined word; click here and you may go to a picture; click here and a video commentary begins; click here and an email page opens inviting your comments. Where to go next is the dominant mental activity—not understanding the content.

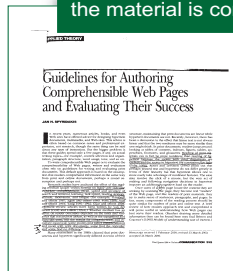
The Web user is a hunter: leaning forward, senses pricked, visually aware, searching and eventually tracking down the targeted information. This is a great mental state for searching but a much poorer one for comprehending.

Engineering students using Web pages with links missed 33% more test questions than students using the same Web pages without links.



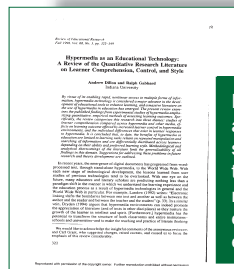
source: Hailey, University of Utah

The additional mental task of navigating links on the Web steals mental resources away from comprehension, explaining the users need for print when the material is complex.



source: Spyridakis, University of Washington

Hypermedia (Web page with links) affords the most advantage for users in specific tasks that require rapid searching through lengthy or multiple information resources. Outside of this context, existing media are better than or as effective as the new technology.



source: Dillon, Indiana University

# Paper

## Best for Learning New, Long, Complicated Ideas

A paper-less office only makes sense if you have nothing new, long, and complicated to communicate.

Think “paper” when communicating a:

- major change to your benefit plans
- big strategic change in your business direction
- new software system

Paper’s strength is comprehension. People use the Web—they read paper.

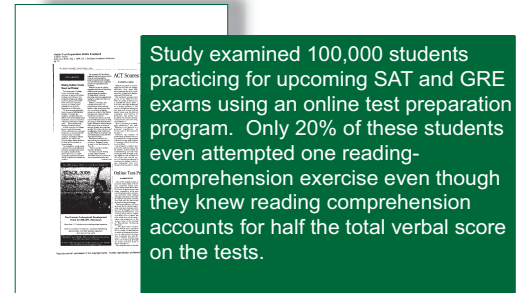
When reading from paper, employees can devote all their mental resources to understanding. On paper, the author controls the navigation: you turn the page, you read, you turn another page.

Age has nothing to do with it. It is wrong to say “younger people can comprehend directly from Web pages while older people need paper.” The cause of the Web’s lower comprehension is navigation not age.

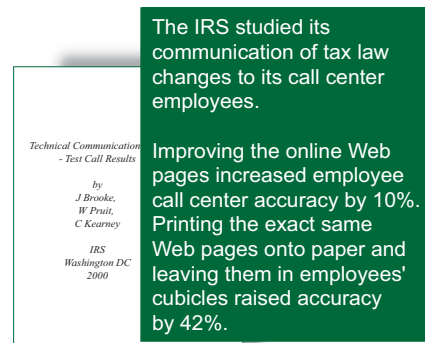
Research with students as young as ten by Wendy Sutherland-Smith, Monash University, Australia, shows the frenetic approach *everyone* brings to the Web. One subject, Jake (age 11) says, “On the Internet, you have to be really quick and can go lots of places to find out heaps of stuff, but with books, you need to go slower.” Another student, Sue (age 10) says, “You need time to look at the book, but, like, you need to be real fast at typing and clicking to find the stuff you want on the Net.”

“Snatch-and-grab” is how Sutherland-Smith describes the behavior of her very young Web users. However when these same students are given a book, she describes how they become quieter, lean back, relax, and begin reading.

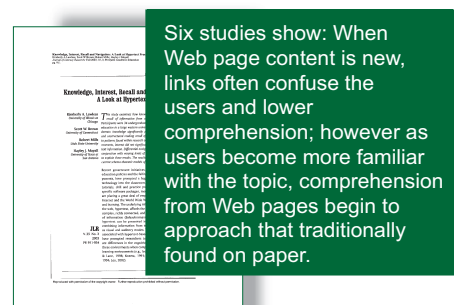
The calmness of paper, the lack of navigation, frees mental resources for the difficult task of comprehending.



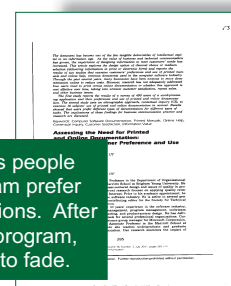
source: Trotter,  
Education Week



source: Brooke,  
U.S. Government Printing Office



source: Lawless,  
University of Illinois at Chicago



source: Smart,  
Brigham Young University

# Face to Face

## Not Essential for Learning

Analysis of 413 studies shows little or no difference between face to face and distance learning on the basis of performance (tests and grades).



source: Allen, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee

Professional communicators often assume face to face is essential when it isn't. Face to face is not absolutely necessary for learning.

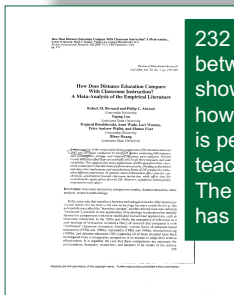
Thirty years of education research shows distance learners (students who never see a teacher) can learn as much or more than students in the traditional face-to-face classroom. It is possible to learn just as much relying solely on email, written correspondence, instant messaging, PDF files, virtual work spaces, and other non-face-to-face channels.

Cutting out face to face does have a downside. Students who never see the teacher are usually less satisfied with the education and usually have higher dropout rates. But if you restrict the study to just those students who finish, and you zero in on the amount of learning; students without face-to-face contact do not learn less.

The most important conclusion from this research is: what matters most is the quality of the teacher not his or her physical presence. Students learn when they have a good teacher who designs a good course. In terms of learning, it doesn't make any difference if the contact with this teacher is face to face or electronic.

For professional communicators, this means employees with the discipline or incentive to finish, can learn just as much from a well designed communication package sent, online or by mail, to their workplace as from attending face-to-face employee training sessions.

232 studies conducted between 1985 and 2002 show the best predictor of how much a student learns is pedagogy (the quality of teacher and teaching materials). The physical means of delivery has little or no effect.



source: Bernard, Concordia University

# Face to Face

## Not Essential for Team Building

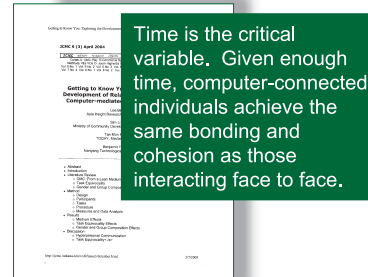
Common sense says face to face is essential for team building. Common sense is wrong.

Team members who never see each other (virtual teams) say teamwork is as high as or higher than face-to-face teams.

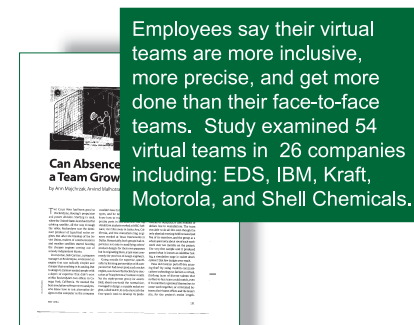
Virtual teams have several documented advantages:

- More people participate—not just men and higher-status individuals.
- More time is spent on problem solving and less time on socializing.
- Decisions are more data-driven and less influenced by social pressure.

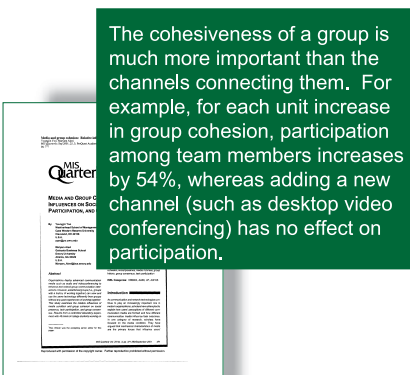
And, over enough time, virtual teams say they feel like a team—as much as or more than face-to-face teams. However, it takes virtual teams longer to reach the same level of teamwork.



source: Hian  
Asia Insight Research Consultants



source: Majchrzak  
Marshall School of Business, USC



source: Yoo  
Case Western Reserve University

For professional communicators this means:

- If the team has a long history of working together face to face—send them anywhere, connect them electronically, and you should see no loss of teamwork.
- If team members are strangers (no history of working together) and they need to work as a team immediately—begin them as a face-to-face team before connecting them electronically.
- If team members are strangers and team work is not required immediately—then go ahead and begin them as a virtual team—they will reach the same level of teamwork eventually.

How long is “eventually”? Variance is high: one study shows parity in three days; one study shows three weeks; another study shows one year.

# Face to Face

## Essential for Overcoming Employee Resistance to Change

Choose face to face when you need to overcome employee resistance.

More than 50 years of research into how words change behavior is clear: people change their behavior when someone in their group, whom they know and trust, adopts the new behavior and recommends it to the others.

Formal communication from a faraway source (town hall meetings, company newspaper, Web site, broadcast email) does not change employee behavior. The words that change employees occur in informal conversations.

Formal communication is still worth doing. More than that, formal communication is essential. Town hall meetings, company newspapers, Web site, and emails create awareness. Formal communication pushes the topic into the informal conversations. But formal communication does not do the heavy lifting—it does not change resisting employees.

This is critical knowledge for professional communicators. No matter how many messages are blasted out of HQ—it will never be enough. Face to face must be added to the communication mix. Professional communicators must equip managers to do their own face-to-face communication within their own teams.

But how do you know the local managers will support the change during the critical conversations? You don't. However, you increase the likelihood of managers' support by treating them as what they are: the most critically important link in the communication process.

Hay Group research found that communication from one's own manager creates 4 times more employee support than a senior manager town hall-type meeting; and 9 times more employee support than an article in the company newspaper.

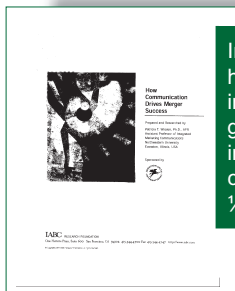


source: Hay Group, Key Driver Analysis©

Consumer behavior research shows a word of mouth recommendation is 13 times more powerful than print or television advertising when it comes to buying a product for the first time.



source: Sultan, Harvard University



In this study of mergers, formal communication had no direct effect on synergies. However, informal communication (face to face and small group) had a large effect. Every unit of informal communication added to the communication mix was associated with a ½ unit increase in merger synergies (beta = 0.53).

source: Whalen, IABC Research Foundation

This handout is a preview of Dr. TJ Larkin's presentation for the IABC Research Foundation:

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This handout is extracted from a larger report:  
*Communicating Big Change Using Small Communication.*

This handout and the full report can be downloaded, no charge, from Larkin's Web site: [www.larkin.biz](http://www.larkin.biz).

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The authors, TJ Larkin & Sandar Larkin, are partners in Larkin Communication Consulting. The Larkins help large companies communicate major change to employees.

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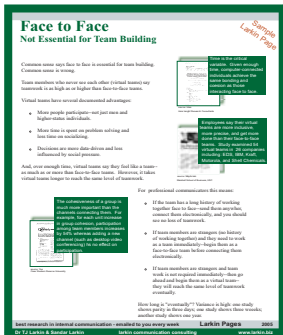
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