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Subject: Teaching Toolbox: Transparency in the Classroom
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Transparency in the Classroom

by Michael S. Kirkpatrick

The Transparency in Learning and Teaching in Higher Ed project ([TILT](#)) strives to improve higher education by increasing the transparency of learning activities in the college classroom. Transparency, in this sense, includes providing students with more information about their learning activities and why they are doing them, as well as sharing resources among faculty. The intention behind increased transparency is to make learning activities more meaningful to students, leading to increased motivation and more successful learning outcomes.

A framework for transparent assignments

The TILT framework focuses on providing more explicit information about learning activities, such as assignments and project descriptions. This additional information consists of three areas:

- **Purpose:** What are the skills that students will practice and what knowledge will they gain from this activity? These details should be linked to specific course learning outcomes, and they should demonstrate relevance for the student over the long term (e.g., five years out).
- **Task:** What are the students expected to do, and how will they do it? The task corresponds with what we normally give to students as their assignment, but it can (and should) be expanded and revised to align with and support the purpose.
- **Criteria:** What does excellence or mastery look like for this activity? Ideally, this description could include annotated examples that specifically highlight indications of quality work. To allow students to evaluate their work in progress, this description should be given far in advance.

[Palmer, Gravett, and LaFleur \(2018\)](#) have created a rubric that is useful for evaluating how well an assignment aligns with the TILT framework.

The benefits of transparency

Transparency can be good for students in a variety of ways. One study introduced a transparency intervention (the TILT framework described below) and examined student self-reporting on multiple affective factors at the end of term ([Winklemes et al. 2015](#)). Students in the sections that incorporated the transparency intervention had higher ratings of academic confidence, sense of belonging, and employer-valued skills (such as learning on your own, judging strengths and weaknesses of ideas, and applying skills to different contexts). While these benefits were evident overall, the benefits for first-generation, underrepresented, and low-income students were even higher, suggesting that transparency is a way of increasing access and equity in the college classroom.

Instructors also benefit from increased transparency ([Winklemes 2015](#)), in ways that are both

expected and surprising. Instructors reported higher perceived motivation among students, less resistance against “pointless” assignments, and fewer last-minute frantic questions. Instructors also reported some unexpected benefits, such as easier grading (because more students’ work met expectations), improved explanations (because they planned their activities more carefully), and improved focus (because activities and learning outcomes were more aligned).

A (partial) example and critique

The TILT website includes several [examples](#) of before-and-after versions of assignments. As an example, consider [Example D: Communication](#), which is an assignment given to first-year students to learn about potential future professions they are considering.

In the original version, students are asked to “select a professional” considered to be an “expert” in their field of study. They should then “prepare 8-10 questions,” “conduct a 20-30 minute, face-to-face interview” with the identified professional, and “write a 400-500 word reflection paper.” Many of us can recognize the step-by-step style of giving assignments. The revised version specifies multiple due dates for the drafted questions, interview transcript, and reflection paper, offering an opportunity for feedback on each. The purpose describes how students will learn to “access and collect information” from multiple sources, “synthesize information,” and “become familiar” with “issues facing professionals in a field” and “scholarly research formats.” The task includes additional language about basing the questions on “credible sources,” but generally remains unchanged. The criteria provided consists of a multilevel rubric with general descriptions of what would be considered “Accomplished,” “Good,” or “Developing.”

While the revised assignment provides important additional details when compared with the original, it could be improved even further. First, some of the language in the purpose may be abstruse for first-year students; many students would struggle to guess what it means to “synthesize information.” It might be better to tell students to “bring together information” instead. Next, the criteria could be improved by including samples that illustrate each of the rating levels. Highlighted text and comments could include explanations of why that level was assigned for each.

Moreover, the revised version missed an opportunity to reconsider the alignment of the task with the stated goals. Several components (preparing questions, determining the credibility of sources, and conducting a face-to-face interview) are all complex skills that require instruction, practice, and support. Furthermore, it is not entirely clear that conducting an interview is even necessary to learn about a professional field. (It may be, but that connection goes unstated.) There is also no guarantee that the experiences of one professional are representative of the field as a whole.

Finally, this assignment highlights another benefit of increasing transparency. By identifying the skills and knowledge that make up the instructor’s desired learning outcomes, the instructor can reflect on how the task might affect less privileged students. For instance, this assignment assumes that all students have access to a professional network, that they have the time and transportation means to travel to the interview, and that they do not have any disabilities that would make this task a barrier to their learning. The increased transparency provides an opportunity for the instructor to reflect on whether the specific task is truly appropriate for all students to achieve the intended learning goals.

The TILT framework serves as a useful tool to increase the level of transparency in our assignments. By explicitly identifying each learning activity's purpose, task, and criteria, we can improve how we are communicating our expectations and motivations to all of our students. In doing so, we can better support our students' academic confidence, sense of belonging, and transferable skills that are valued outside of the classroom.

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