The Unwritten Rules: Decode Your Assignments and Decipher What's Expected of You

Breaking News

The Transparency in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education Project at UNLV demonstrated in a national study that transparency around academic assignments enhances students' success -- especially that of first-generation, low-income and underrepresented college students -- at statistically significant levels (with a medium-to-large sized magnitude of effect for underserved students). When faculty make the purpose, tasks and criteria of an academic assignment clear before students begin to work on it, students are more likely to experience greater academic success with that assignment, developing the knowledge, disposition, and skills necessary to succeed both at school and in life (in comparison to when faculty do not make these things clear for students). For UNLV students, benefits also included a significantly higher rate of returning to college the following year (Winkelmes et al., Peer Review 2016; Gianoutsos and Winkelmes, PADE Proceedings 2016).

Background

An inclusive learning environment benefits all students and offers more equitable learning opportunities for underserved students. Research on student learning links college students' academic confidence and sense of belonging with higher GPAs, persistence and retention rates (Walton and Cohen 2011). In addition, college students increased their test scores when supported by a system that advocated the belief that intelligence is not fixed but rather malleable. A year later, these students were 80% less likely to drop out of college (Aronson et al 2002).

WHAT STUDENTS CAN DO:

Before you begin working on an assignment or class activity, ask the instructor to help you understand the following. (Bring this document to help frame the conversation.)

Purpose

- Skills you'll practice by doing this assignment
- Content knowledge you'll gain from doing this assignment
- How you can use these in your life beyond the context of this course, in and beyond college

Task

- What to do
- How to do it (Are there recommended steps? What roadblocks/mistakes should you avoid?)

Criteria

- Checklist (Are you on the right track? How to know you're doing what's expected?)
- Annotated examples of successful work (What's good about these examples? Use the checklist to identify the successful parts.)

Transparent Assignment Template

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This template can be used as a guide for developing, explaining, and discussing class activities and out-of-class assignments. Making these aspects of each course activity or assignment explicitly clear to students has demonstrably enhanced students’ learning in a national study.1

Assignment Name
Due date:

Purpose: Define the learning objectives, in language and terms that help students recognize how this assignment will benefit their learning. Indicate how these are connected with institutional learning outcomes, and how the specific knowledge and skills involved in this assignment will be important in students’ lives beyond the contexts of this assignment, this course, and this college.

Skills: The purpose of this assignment is to help you practice the following skills that are essential to your success in this course / in school / in this field / in professional life beyond school:
Terms from Bloom’s Taxonomy of Educational Objectives may help you explain these skills in language students will understand. Listed from cognitively simple to most complex, these skills are:
- understanding basic disciplinary knowledge and methods/tools
- applying basic disciplinary knowledge/tools to problem-solving in a similar but unfamiliar context
- analyzing
- synthesizing
- judging/evaluating and selecting best solutions
- creating/inventing a new interpretation, product, theory

Knowledge: This assignment will also help you to become familiar with the following important content knowledge in this discipline:
1. 
2.

Task: Define what activities the student should do/perform. “Question cues” from this chart might be helpful: http://www.asainstitute.org/conference2013/handouts/20-Bloom-Question-Cues-Chart.pdf. List any steps or guidelines, or a recommended sequence for the students’ efforts. Specify any extraneous mistakes to be avoided.

Criteria for Success:
Define the characteristics of the finished product. Provide multiple, annotated examples of what these characteristics look like in practice, to encourage students’ creativity and reduce their incentive to copy any one example too closely. With students, collaboratively analyze examples of work before the students begin working. Explain how excellent work differs from adequate work. It is often useful to provide or compile with students a checklist of characteristics of successful work. This enables students to evaluate the quality of their own efforts while they are working, and to judge the success of their completed work. Students can also use the checklist to provide feedback on peers’ coursework. Indicate whether this task/product will be graded and/or how it factors into the student’s overall grade for the course. Later, asking students to reflect and comment on their completed, graded work allows them to focus on changes to their learning strategies that might improve their future work.

The author developed and earlier version of this template at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.

1 Winkelmes, Mary-Ann. “Transparency in Teaching: Faculty Share Data and Improve Students’ Learning.” Liberal Education 99,2 (Spring 2013);
Recent Findings: Transparency in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education

A 2015 study (Winkelmes, et al., Peer Review, Winter 2016) identified transparent teaching about problem-centered learning as an easily replicable teaching method that produces learning benefits already linked with students’ success. This simple, replicable teaching intervention demonstrably enhanced the success of first-generation, low-income and underrepresented college students in multiple ways at statistically significant levels, with a medium-to-large sized magnitude of effect. The results offer implications for how faculty and educational developers can help their institutions to right the inequities in college students' educational experiences across the country by contributing to efforts to increase underserved students’ success, especially in their first year of college (when the greatest numbers drop out).

In 2014-2015 a group of 7 Minority Serving Institutions launched a pilot project that included 1180 students and 35 faculty. Tia McNair and Ashley Finley at the Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U) led the project in partnership with Mary-Ann Winkelmes at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas’ Transparency in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education Project (TILT Higher Ed), with funding from TG Philanthropy. The main research goal was to study how faculty transparency about the design and problem-centered nature of student assignments would affect students’ learning experiences and the quality of students’ work. Faculty received training on how to make two take-home assignments in a course more transparent (accessible) and problem-centered (relevant) for students, and each instructor taught a control group and an intervention group of the same course in the same term. Results were measured via online surveys about students’ learning experiences before and after each course, and direct assessment of students’ work. Students who received more transparency reported gains in three areas that are important predictors of students’ success: academic confidence, sense of belonging, and mastery of the skills that employers value most when hiring. While the benefits for all students in the aggregate who received more transparency were statistically significant, the benefits for first-generation, low-income and underrepresented students were greater, with a medium-to-large sized magnitude of effect. Important studies have already connected academic confidence and sense of belonging with students’ greater persistence and higher grades (Walton and Cohen 2011, Aronson et al 2002, Paunesku et al 2015), and recent national surveys identify the skills that employers value most when hiring new employees (Hart 2015 and 2013).

A simultaneous study of 1,143 University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV) students’ retention rates indicated that increases to academic confidence, sense of belonging and perceived mastery of employer-valued skills were indeed followed by greater persistence: 90.2% of UNLV undergraduates in more transparent introductory-level courses returned to complete the fall term of the subsequent academic year, in contrast to the average retention rate of 74.1% for first-time, full-time, first-year students.

TILT Higher Ed and the AAC&U continue to promote transparency and problem-centered learning. TILT Higher Ed participants include more than 25,000 students in hundreds of courses at 40 higher education institutions in the U.S. and five other countries.

End of Term: Skills, Confidence, and Belonging - Less vs. More Transparent Courses, First Generation Students

![Graph showing comparison of skills, confidence, and belonging between less and more transparent courses for first generation students.]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Amount of Transparency</th>
<th>Employer-valued Skills*</th>
<th>Academic Confidence</th>
<th>Sense of Belonging</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>More Transparent: N=188</td>
<td>More Transparent: N=188</td>
<td>More Transparent: N=188</td>
<td>More Transparent: N=188</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Effect sizes of 0.25 standard deviations or larger are “substantively important.” (US Dept of Ed, What Works Clearinghouse Procedures and Standards Handbook version 3.0, Web. March, 2014, p. 23.)

Publications and information about the Transparency in Learning and Teaching Project are at: www.unlv.edu/provost/teachingandlearning
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Select a professional in your prospective academic discipline.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Scenario interview with the professional.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Prepare 8-10 questions to ask the professional.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Conduct a 30-minute face-to-face interview.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Prepare agrid of the questions and answers using the knowledge you have gained.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Write a 400-500 word reflection paper in which you address the following items:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Submit the grid, transcript, and reflection paper to your instructor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>What questions you still have?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Major career decisions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>What this assignment helped you learn about your</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>What did you learn from here that is most interesting?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>Why you selected and why?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Examples:

**Sample A**

**Sample B**

Due Date: October 15, 2014

**Reference Material:**


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Criteria for success: Please see the attached rubric.

1. Evaluate the main idea and support provided by the evidence.
2. Identify explicit questions and/or evidence that supports the conclusion.
3. Understand the role of the conclusion and how well it supports the evidence.
4. Read the context and evidence to determine the reasoning.
5. Evaluate the sources of evidence and their reliability.
6. Analyze the evidence to support the conclusion.
7. Assess the quality and relevance of the evidence.
8. Synthesize the evidence to draw a logical conclusion.
9. Consider alternative explanations and their implications.

Examples: More Transparent

Used by permission of Alison Sloat.
DRAFT Checklist for Designing a Transparent Assignment

Thank you for helping to test this DRAFT checklist. Please send your suggestions and feedback to mary-ann.winkelmes@unlv.edu

PURPOSE:

Skills
- Does your purpose statement specify content knowledge that students will gain from doing this assignment?
- Does your purpose statement link that particular knowledge to the larger context of:
  - recent topics of class sessions?
  - this part of the course?
  - the whole course?
  - the major?
  - the discipline?
  - your institution’s main learning outcomes?
- Does your purpose statement indicate the relevance and/or usefulness of this knowledge to the students’ lives:
  - beyond the course? beyond the major? beyond college?

Knowledge
- Does your purpose statement specify a skill or skill set that students will practice while doing the assignment?
- Does your purpose statement link that particular skill/skill set to examples/contexts where this skill was important in the context of:
  - recent class sessions?
  - this part of the course?
  - the whole course?
  - the major?
  - the discipline?
  - your institution’s main learning outcomes?
- Does your statement indicate the relevance and/or usefulness of this knowledge to the students’ lives:
  - beyond the course? beyond the major? beyond college?

Would this assignment benefit from segmenting it into several assignments, each one focused on a discrete set of skills that should be mastered to insure students’ successful completion of the next assignment in the sequence?

TASK:
- Does your description of the task:
  - Identify the very first thing students should do when they begin working on the assignment?
  - The very next thing they should do?
  - The next, etc.
- Does your description of the task help students to avoid wasting their time on unnecessary steps, unproductive time expenditure?
- Does your description help students to focus their time efficiently on producing the highest quality work possible in the time given?
- Would students benefit from some practice exercises (in the form of a pre-task) in class to prepare them to perform the task outside of class on the graded assignment?

CRITERIA:
- Can students use the criteria while they are working on the assignment to determine whether they are completing the assignment efficiently and effectively?
- Do the criteria take the form of a checklist students can use to evaluate the quality of their efforts while they are working on the assignment?
- Does the checklist specify characteristics of high quality work for this assignment?
- Can you help students apply the checklist to evaluating some sample work in class, so they understand how each criterion would look in practice?
- With your guidance, can the students collaboratively annotate several examples of work to indicate where/how the work satisfies the criteria? (These annotated examples may then be shared as a reference for students to use while they work on their own assignments.)
- Would a rubric (AAC&U VALUE examples) be helpful to students for this assignment?
- Does the rubric provide an amount of information that helps students at this phase in their learning?
- Does the rubric provide an overwhelming or counterproductive amount of information for students at this phase in their learning?
- Did you provide examples of good work, annotated to identify exactly where and how this work satisfies your criteria?
- Can you provide students with examples in class so they and you can test out your criteria checklist or rubric to be sure students know how to apply the criteria to multiple examples of work, and eventually their own work?