Making Our Teaching Transparent

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As we begin thinking about our fall courses (sorry!), we may again find ourselves facing unfamiliar teaching contexts; some of us may be teaching courses that are online or hybrid or "HyFlex" (*insert brain-exploding emoji here*) for the first time; some of us may be trying to make in-person classes work, under the totally compromised conditions of social distancing; some of us may be anticipating a pivot, yet again, as we watch the Covid caseloads rise in our states. Now, more than ever, it is important for us to be "transparent" in our teaching. Transparency will help students learning online for the first time, students for whom the college experience is one big "hidden curriculum" anyway, students at some remove from their instructors and peers, students in generally uncertain times.

The concept of "transparency" in learning and teaching in higher education emerged out of the work of Mary-Ann Winkelmes, now at Brandeis University. This *Faculty Focus* article also offers a helpful synopsis, but, essentially, when designing assignments, it's important for us to be clear, explicit, and direct about the "purpose" (i.e., why have students do the assignment), "task" (i.e., what students are being asked to do and how), and "criteria" (i.e., how their work will be assessed). One thing I love about this transparent teaching intervention is that, while it benefits all students, it has been shown to especially help students from underserved populations succeed.

It's not always easy to be transparent, so some reflection and excavation may be needed here. There are a lot of differences between experts and novices, but one distinction is that so much for experts is tacit, intuitive, hidden, seamless, "natural." I recently picked up bike-riding again, for the first time in 25 years, and it has been astounding to discover how many difficult, intricate, and *unexpected* steps are involved in what seem to be the simplest of actions: braking entails figuring out which foot to put on the ground when I stop, and not toppling over as I do so; signaling entails being able to take one hand off the handlebars and still maintain balance (while not toppling over as I do so); riding the mile and a half to work entails being able to make it up previously unappreciated hills with a complex arrangement of gear switching and leg burning (and not toppling over as I do so . . . are you noticing a theme?). Yet my cyclist friends make this all look easy! So, when I lead workshops on transparency, I encourage all of my expert colleagues to think about the following questions in order to unearth their assignments:

Purpose (the skills practiced, the knowledge gained):

1. What are the learning objectives for the assignment?
2. Do these objectives align with any of your overall course objectives or goals?
3. Why is the assignment important for students to do?
4. How might this assignment have importance or relevance beyond the course?
5. What would be an "authentic" assignment for this subject matter, field, or associated profession?

Task (what to do and how to do it)

1. Does the kind of assignment make sense, given its purpose?
2. What is the genre or type of assignment?
3. Who is the audience and what role(s), if any, should students take on?
4. Is there a sequence or "scaffolded" series of steps that students should follow?
5. Are there any pitfalls to avoid along the way?

Criteria (what excellence looks like, with criteria in advance to help students to self-evaluate):

1. By what standards will the assignment be graded?
2. Is there a rubric or checklist that students can be given, at the outset, to guide their work?
3. What opportunities will students have had to practice before the final deadline?
4. Who will give formative feedback besides you?
5. Are there any excellent examples (especially annotated ones) for students to learn from?

I began to incorporate transparency into my own assignments several years ago. Check out this "movie review" assignment, from my Religion & Film course, to see how I tried to clarify purpose, task, and criteria. What might this look like in your classes? Going further, some colleagues at the University of Virginia and I developed an assignment rubric to help faculty gauge the transparency of their assignments. We wanted to be as transparent as possible

about transparency! Good luck.

https://wabash.center/2020/08/making-our-teaching-transparent/