



## Effective Instructional Practice:

### Enhancing Instructor Clarity for Students

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Instructor clarity is a perception that emerges when instructors use one or more communication behaviors that make it easier for students to select, understand, remember, and use information. Clarity is considered to be a multidimensional construct (Kennedy, Cruickshank, Bush, & Myers, 1978) that includes behaviors such as *assesses student learning* (e.g., “tries to find out if we don’t understand and then repeats things”), *provides time to think* (e.g., “gives us a chance to think about what’s being taught”), *uses examples* (e.g., “works examples and explains them”), and *reviews and organizes* (e.g., “prepares us for what we will be doing next”). Researchers have also identified language precision as an element of clarity (see Smith & Land, 1981). Clear instructors tend to display many of these behaviors simultaneously whereas unclear instructors may display only a few behaviors, or none at all.

It also is believed to be both a behavior and a perception (Simonds, 1997). As an instructor, I can enact behaviors that are intended to promote clarity, such as the use of visual slides or other knowledge representations. However, those behaviors are only clear if perceived as such by students. For instance, my 60 slides for a 55-minute class period could create confusion rather than understanding. I may have intended to be clear, but likely was not perceived as such. However, some scholars argue that clarity is a process that cannot be easily reduced to a defined set of behaviors. Both Civikly (1992) and Simonds (1997) argued that clarity is a perception created in-and-through communication between instructors and their students. Rather than viewing clarity as an

end-state, determined largely by the number of clarity behaviors used by instructors during class, they argue that clarity is achieved through a process of dialogue. As instructors present information, they receive feedback from students and adapt their presentation to make the information clearer.

Enhancing instructor clarity in the classroom is important for three reasons. First, studies have documented that moderately strong relationships exist between instructor clarity and students' cognitive and affective learning in classroom situations. Cognitive learning is the ability to understand, recall, and use information whereas affective learning is the extent to which students like, value, and have positive emotions toward the classroom situation, teacher, or course material. Titsworth, Mazer, Goodboy, Bolkan, and Myers (2015) reported two meta-analyses with observed average correlations as high as .46 between instructor clarity and various estimates of cognitive learning. Recent research suggests that this relationship could be stronger when students have prior motivation to learn information in a lesson, but weaker when they have less motivation (Bolkan, Goodboy, & Kelsey, 2016). An even stronger correlation of .53 was observed between instructor clarity and affective learning in the meta-analyses conducted by Titsworth et al. (2015).

Second, instructor clarity has the potential to improve instructors-student relationships. A recent study observed that a negative relationship exists between instructor clarity and the likelihood that students will engage in out-of-class communication with that instructor (Sidelinger, Bolen, McMullen, & Nyste, 2015). Another recent study discovered that a significant negative relationship exists between instructor clarity and perceived threats to freedom or individual agency in the classroom

(Ball & Goodboy, 2014). That is, when instructors are more clear, students tend to report higher levels of perceived self-control of their situation. The resulting positive orientations toward the learning environment could potentially improve relationships between instructor and students, despite the possible diminished out-of-class communication.

Third, instructor clarity improves students' notes. Notetaking is strongly related to learning. In an experiment testing the effects of clarity on notetaking, Titsworth (2004) observed that in high clarity lectures, the quality and quantity of students notes were significantly higher. For instance, students in the high clarity condition recorded 23% more details in their notes than those in the low clarity condition.

### **Five Tips for Being Clear in the Classroom**

1. Recognize that clarity is a process. The available literature points to any number of behaviors that are typically perceived to improve instructor clarity: using clear signals for transitions among ideas, using careful and precise language, representing information visually while also explaining, providing examples, and pausing for questions, just to name a few. However, there is no single recipe for being clear. Instructors must monitor students and, through interaction, use various tactics to help clarify understanding.

2. Help students take good notes. Taking notes is critical to learning and instructors should plan to help students take better notes. Written organizational cues such as slides, graphics, or pictures are effective at cueing students to note information. Likewise, spoken previews, transitions, signposts, and summaries of main ideas result in large increases in recorded information. In short, make your organization obvious to

students. Such steps can improve the quantity and quality of students' notes (Titsworth, 2004).

3. Integrate and crystalize information. When teaching any particular concept, a variety of information must be presented including precise terminology, definitions of terms, explanations of how those terms fit together, and examples. Unclear instructors tend to skip one or more of those elements, leaving students with conceptual gaps in their understanding.

4. Assess learning frequently. Because instructor clarity is a perception stemming from ongoing communication between instructors and students, instructors must devise ways to solicit feedback from students as their lessons unfold. The ability to determine how well students understand particular concepts is critical information that instructors need in order to adapt their behaviors. Learning assessment must be constant and ongoing so that presentation of information can be adjusted as necessary; waiting until a midterm, final, or even an end-of-class quiz may prevent you from helping students make sense of particularly challenging concepts.

5. Close the assessment loop by improving subsequent presentations or classes. Lesson plans tend to look great on paper; few plans survive the test of the classroom. Based on ongoing assessment of learning, you should adapt your presentation to help students attain necessary information. Remember that the relative success of a particular lesson is not whether you have covered all of the points you planned, but rather, whether students actually learned the points that you did cover. If assessment shows that students are not grasping a particular concept, you may need to adapt the presentation by revising the clarity techniques you have used previously.

## Assessing Teacher Clarity

Because of its multidimensional nature, teacher clarity has been operationalized a number of ways, using both controlled manipulations (e.g., Titsworth, 2004) and surveys. Although several surveys have been developed, there exists some convergence around use of an instrument developed by communication researchers interested in the topic. Sidelinger and McCroskey (1997) developed a survey isolating written and oral aspects of teacher clarity; this survey later was revised and is known now as the Teacher Clarity Short Inventory (TCSI; Chesebro & McCroskey, 1998). Bolkan (2016) recently published the Clarity Indicators Scale that effectively taps into five dimensions of instructor clarity: disfluency, memory overload, interaction, coherence, and structure.

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