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Chesebro, J. L. (1999). *Teacher clarity: A definition, review, and a profile of the clear teacher*. Paper presented at the meeting of the National Communication Association, Chicago, IL.

Teacher Clarity: A Definition, Review, and a Profile of The Clear Teacher

Joseph L. Chesebro

The State University of New York at Brockport

Joseph L. Chesebro (Ed.D., West Virginia University, 1999) is an Assistant Professor in the department of Communication at the State University of New York at Brockport, Brockport, NY 14420, jchesebr@brockport.edu.

Abstract

This review examines research related to teacher clarity. Although clarity is an important aspect of effective teaching, research on clarity often has been segmented and has yet to provide a coherent definition of the construct. This review examines a variety of concepts conceptually related to clarity. A definition of clarity is provided, and each dimension of clarity is explained and supported with relevant research. Based on the review, a profile of The Clear Teacher is identified and discussed. The profile is offered to elucidate the construct of clarity and to identify possible directions for future research on teacher clarity.

Teacher Clarity: A Definition, Review, and a Profile of The Clear Teacher

Processes related to clear teaching, consistently have been related to positive instructional outcomes. These processes have been studied as various constructs with a variety of labels. This theoretical review examines the various constructs related to clear teaching and discusses the ways in which they comprise the construct of teacher clarity. For the purposes of this review teacher clarity is defined as a variable which represents the process by which an instructor is able to effectively stimulate the teacher's desired meaning of course content in the minds of students through the use of appropriately-structured verbal and nonverbal messages. To be a clear teacher, one must take information and present it in a way which students are able to comprehend it. The body of literature related to clear teaching supports this definition as it includes the study of verbal messages, nonverbal messages, and the structure of messages. This review argues that each of these dimensions of behavior make a significant contribution to the process by which teachers are able to teach clearly.

As defined here, teacher clarity is considered a relational variable (Civikly, 1992; Kendrick & Darling, 1990). Although the teacher initiates the behavior of sending messages to students, the students play a valuable role in assuring that they comprehend the material. They may provide feedback by asking questions or signaling a lack of understanding through their facial expressions. The extent to which a teacher is clear will be enhanced if that teacher involves students in the instructional process. The importance of student participation is evident in this review of the various aspects of clarity.

Research related to teacher clarity has not been conducted to study a specific variable labeled “teacher clarity.” Instead, a number of researchers have examined variables related to clear teaching, including lesson vagueness (Land, 1979), discontinuity (Smith & Cotten, 1980), mazes (Land, 1979), instructor expressiveness (Perry, Abrami, & Leventhal, 1979), instructor enthusiasm (Solomon, 1966), instructor immediacy (Mehrabian, 1981), explicit teaching (Rosenshine, 1987; Rosenshine & Stevens, 1986), advance organizers (Ausbel, 1963; Mayer, 1979), notetaking facilitation (Kiewra, 1985), and organization (Feldman, 1989; Kallison, 1986; & Murray, 1991). Though diverse, the various approaches in this body of research can be organized into a small number of instructional processes which comprise the provided definition of teacher clarity. Research can be grouped into verbal messages (vagueness and mazes, use of examples and questions). Nonverbal messages also are relevant to the process of clear teaching (enthusiasm, expressiveness, and immediacy). A final important element of clear teaching is structure (organization, advance organizers, explicit teaching, direct instruction, discontinuity, and notetaking facilitation). The following review of literature related to each of these categories of teacher clarity supports the definition of teacher clarity as including the components of nonverbal and verbal messages, and structure.

Nonverbal Messages and Clarity

Nonverbal messages related to teacher clarity include instructor enthusiasm, expressiveness, and immediacy. Each of these terms is related to effective nonverbal classroom behaviors such as movement, gesturing, eye contact, vocal variety, energy, and smiling. Although these variables are related to positive instructional outcomes

(Murray, 1991; McCroskey & Richmond, 1992; & Schonwetter, 1993), they have not been discussed as a component of teacher clarity. However, their role in instruction is to enable the impact of clear teaching by gaining students' attention during lectures. Unless teachers are able to gain students' attention, the extent to which they teach clearly is relatively unimportant. The nonverbal behaviors listed above help facilitate selective attention to the teacher's message (Schonwetter) which enables other teacher messages to be processed by students. For clear messages to have utility, students must attend to them.

There is a solid body of evidence demonstrating the effectiveness of instructor enthusiasm, expressiveness, and immediacy. Furthermore, there is considerable conceptual overlap between enthusiasm, expressiveness, and immediacy. In a review of research related to teacher enthusiasm, Krawchuk and Walls (1997) identified a number of behaviors used by enthusiastic teachers: vocal variety, eye contact, gesturing, body movement, facial expression, and overall energy. Because of the conceptual overlap among these three terms, for the remainder of this review they will be discussed using the term immediacy, which includes those behaviors which increase perceptions of physical and psychological closeness. A number of studies have manipulated immediacy behaviors experimentally. With a few exceptions, these studies indicate that immediacy has a greater impact on student ratings of instructors than on student achievement. A meta-analysis by Abrami, Leventhal, and Perry (1982) indicated that immediacy has a strong impact on student ratings (average variance accounted for = 28.5%) but that its impact on student retention of content is small (average variance accounted for = 4.6%).

The observed impact on student ratings has been supported by a large body of correlational research on immediacy and instructional outcomes such as motivation, affect towards the instructor, subject, and course, and estimations of the amount learned in a given class. Students who report being in classes are much more likely to report that they are motivated to learn, that they have more positive affect towards the instructor and course, that they learn more (Chesebro & McCroskey, 1998a; Christophel, 1990; Frymier, 1994; and Richmond, 1990), and that they are less likely to experience anxiety when trying to learn the material being presented (Chesebro & McCroskey, 1998b). Clearly immediacy behaviors are an important aspect of instruction that should not be overlooked. They enable instructors to gain students' attention, and they significantly contribute to a positive learning experience in terms of student motivation and affect. However, experimental findings suggest that immediacy alone is not enough to improve student achievement. They should be considered to be the set of behaviors which provides the foundation upon which other teaching behaviors such as clarity can be more effective in increasing student achievement. In addition to being immediate, teachers need to exhibit behaviors which enable them to take advantage of the attention gained by the immediate behaviors. The meta-analysis by Abrami et al. (1982) revealed that unlike immediacy, information coverage was strongly related to student achievement (mean variance accounted for = 15.8%) and not as strongly related to student ratings (mean variance accounted for = 4.6%). This finding demonstrates the way in which clear teaching behaviors can add to the impact of immediacy and together how the two can improve both achievement and student ratings.

Verbal Messages and Clarity

Much research related to teacher clarity has focused on the clarity of verbal messages (vagueness, fluency, mazes). One area of research on the clarity of oral messages involves experiments in which the vagueness, fluency, and/or number of mazes in presentations were manipulated as indicators of a lack of clarity. Vagueness terms are “words or phrases indicating approximation, unclarity, or lack of assurance” (Land, 1979, p.795). An example of a statement with the vagueness terms highlighted is “This mathematics lesson *might* enable you to understand a *little more* about some things we *usually* call number patterns” (Land & Smith, 1979, p.56). Disfluencies such as “uh,” “ah,” and “um” also have been investigated as indicators of a lack of clarity (Hiller, Fisher, & Kaess, 1969). Mazes are false starts or abrupt halts in speech, redundantly stated words, and tangles of words (Smith, 1977). An example of a maze with the relevant parts highlighted is “This mathematics lesson *will enab . . .* will get you to understand *number, uh, number patterns*” (Land & Smith, 1979, p. 56). In a review of ten studies in which vagueness terms were manipulated, Smith and Land (1981) indicated that the presence of vagueness terms reduced student achievement in every study. Mazes reduced achievement in three of four studies. In the one study which manipulated specific fluency behaviors such as “uh,” the relationship between fluency and achievement was negative but non-significant (Smith, 1977).

A program of research originating from Ohio State University further depicts the verbal message component of teacher clarity (for a detailed review, refer to Cruickshank and Kennedy, 1986). Recognizing that early studies in support of teacher

clarity really were studying related variables and no specific construct called “clarity,” researchers conducted a series of studies in an attempt to identify specific clear teaching behaviors. In various studies, students were asked (a) to recall their most clear teacher and list five things the teacher did when teaching clearly (Cruickshank, Myers, & Moenjak (1975), cited in Cruickshank & Kennedy, 1986); (b) to identify their best teacher (half of subjects) or worst teacher (other half) and indicate clarity behaviors (generated from the Cruickshank et al. study) on a 5-point scale (Bush, Kennedy, & Cruickshank, 1977); and (c) to report on their most clear and unclear teacher (Kennedy, Cruickshank, Bush, & Myers, 1978). This series of studies enabled the identification of clear teaching behaviors and the discrimination between clear and unclear teaching behaviors. Discriminating behaviors related to verbal messages were: “explains things simply,” “gives explanations we understand,” “tries to find out if we don’t understand and repeats things,” “asks if we know what to do and how to do it,” “repeats things when we don’t understand,” and “explains something and then works an example” (Cruickshank & Kennedy, 1986, p.58). The list of behaviors also revealed important nonverbal message components: “teaches at a pace appropriate to the topic and students” and “stays with the topic until we understand.” These results indicate that verbal messages related to clear teaching include the ability to explain concepts, effectiveness at asking questions, appropriate repetition, and the effective use of relevant examples. Adding to the nonverbal dimension of clarity is the appropriate use of time to explain concepts.

A number of studies have studied the relationship between teacher clarity and student achievement and ratings of instruction. Hines, Cruickshank, and Kennedy

(1985) studied the relationship between the generated clarity behaviors and student achievement and satisfaction. As part of a peer teaching program, 32 pre-service teachers taught the same lesson to a small group of peers. The lessons were videotaped and coded for the extent to which previously identified clear teaching behaviors were exhibited. Analyses revealed that clarity behaviors accounted for 36 percent of the variance in instructional ratings and 52 percent of the variance in student achievement, suggesting the importance of the clear teaching behaviors. However, this finding runs counter to the tendency of clarity to relate more strongly with ratings of instruction than with achievement in experimental studies (Murray, 1991). Interestingly, student achievement correlates more highly with perceptions of teacher clarity than with actual clarity, which led Murray to suggest that student perceptions of teacher clarity mediate the relationship between actual clarity and student achievement. This may be the way in which nonverbal immediacy has its impact on clarity. It is possible that in experiments, students who had unclear teachers also had immediate teachers. This might lead to perceptions of clarity even though the teachers were in the unclear conditions. Thus, students would rate instruction high in clarity but not necessarily learn more. Future research could explore this possibility in greater detail by examining the combined impact of immediacy and clarity on affective and cognitive outcomes.

The research reviewed related to the clarity of verbal messages indicates that there is a verbal component to teacher clarity. Speaking without being vague, using examples, asking questions effectively, and explaining content effectively all directly involve the use of verbal messages and are related in some manner to student achievement and ratings and instruction. In addition to these verbal messages and the

nonverbal component of clarity, related research suggests that an additional component of clarity is related to the way in which presentations of course content are structured.

Structural Qualities and Clarity

Research related to structure and clarity has included investigations of advance organizers, organization, notetaking facilitation, discontinuity, internal connectors or transitions, and explicit teaching. Advance organizers (Ausubel, 1963) are concepts introduced before material is covered which are on a more general or abstract level than the material which is to be covered. The theory supporting the use of advance organizers is that they help create a general context into which more specific information can be integrated more effectively. Although research on the use of advance organizers primarily is related to their use with written material, they have been applied to the oral presentation of content (Alexander, Frankiewicz & Williams, 1979). Subjects received either advance or post organizers, a combination of both, or no organizer. Before presenting information about a specific culture, experimenters provided a general overview of culture and asked some very general questions about culture. This use of advance organizers was presented according to Ausubel's criteria. Although there were no significant differences between the groups with organizers, every group with at least one organizer had a significant advantage over the group with no organizer in terms of the amount of material learned. This evidence extends the research on advance organizers to include their use in oral messages and supports the notion that they are valuable to teachers and learners.

Related to advance organizers, skeletal outlines given to students prior to lectures also appear to be an effective component of structure which can contribute to

the clarity of the messages presented. Hartley (1976) indicated several advantages associated with the use of skeletal notes: students take fewer notes than those not provided outlines yet those given outlines recall significantly more; those given outlines with less information and more space will take more notes than those given more information and less space; when information on skeletal notes is equal but the amount of space is varied, the students with more space take more notes; and students with skeletal notes recall more than those who take personal notes and those given a complete set of the instructor's notes prior to the lecture (cited in Kiewra, 1985). In addition to other structural strengths, it is likely that skeletal notes help students learn information more effectively.

Another component related to structure and clarity is organization. Organization can be said to include providing a preliminary overview of the lecture, putting an outline of the lecture on the board, using headings and subheadings, and signaling transitions to new topics. The preliminary overview is conceptually similar to the use of advance organizers, but may not be at a higher level of abstraction (merely a summary). Transitions are comments that indicate the end of discussion on a topic and the beginning of discussion of a new topic. Teaching behaviors related to the effective use of transitions were cited as important in a number of the Ohio State studies (Cruickshank & Kennedy, 1986). These include "teaching things in a related step-by-step manner" and "orienting and preparing students for what follows" (p. 56). Research related to internal transitions focuses on two types of discontinuity (Smith & Cotten, 1980). One type of discontinuity is when the flow of the lesson is interrupted with a comment irrelevant to the lesson ("Look at the figure involving the secant and tangent to

the circle. It looks like a bird with a long beak. Lets apply the theorem to solve for the length of the tangent” p. 671). The other type of discontinuity involves an interruption with relevant information but at an inappropriate time (“In solving for the length of the tangent, we apply the second theorem. When we get to the third theorem, we won’t have to deal with tangents to circles. Now, lets solve for the length of the tangent” p. 671). Smith and Cotten reported discontinuity to be negatively related to achievement but not to ratings of instruction. This body of research on transitions and discontinuity suggests that the use of internal connectors during presentations can be another means by which teachers can be more clear.

The most comprehensive program related to structure and clear teaching is explicit teaching (Rosenshine, 1987; Rosenshine & Stevens, 1986). Based on extensive observation of effective teachers (measured by student gain scores in reading) and experimental studies, a number of recommended teaching functions were identified. It should be noted that these behaviors are recommended for those teaching areas that are well structured and contain specific steps of progression. These behaviors may be less relevant for the teaching of more implicit concepts such as philosophy or problem solving. For those teaching these types of subjects, it is recommended by Rosenshine that their students learn a the body of content knowledge which informs more implicit processes and that those student are afforded the opportunity to have extensive and varied practice with the content. For those teaching more structured and explicit content, the recommended teaching behaviors are listed below (Rosenshine, 1987, p.76).

Begin a lesson with a short statement of goals.

Begin a lesson with a short review of previous, prerequisite learning.

Present new material in small steps, with student practice after each step.

Give clear and detailed instructions and explanations.

Provide a high level of active practice for all students.

Ask many questions, check for student understanding, and obtain responses from all students.

Guide students during initial practice.

Provide systematic feedback and corrections.

Provide explicit instruction and practice for seatwork exercises and, when necessary, monitor students during seatwork.

Continue practice until students are independent and confident.

Several of these recommended behaviors are related to structure and clarity specifically. Beginning a lesson with a short statement of goals is conceptually similar to providing an advance organizer and reviewing previous learning is similar to a post organizer. Teaching in small steps structures the information into small chunks which ideally will be connected with appropriate transitions. When done effectively, it also assures that students understand the current topic before moving on to the next. If structured appropriately, this approach also will help instructors avoid discontinuity.

Although the benefits of providing structure are clear, their relationship with teacher clarity is less apparent. The importance of structure to clarity becomes important when its absence is considered. Without structure, a teacher may be immediate and verbally clear so that individual points are comprehended, but a context in which to assimilate those points is likely to be missing. Without structure, a teacher

can stimulate much meaning in the minds of students, but that meaning quite likely may be fragmented, incomplete, or disorganized. Because this meaning is not completely likely to be the meaning the instructor desired to stimulate in students' minds, the instructor's teaching cannot be said to be clear.

The Clear Teacher

Clarity as defined in this review is a variable which represents the process by which an instructor is able to effectively stimulate the desired meaning of course content in the minds of students through the use of appropriately-structured verbal and nonverbal messages. The review of the literature related to teacher clarity leads to the conclusion that a clear teacher is nonverbally immediate, presents structured learning experiences complete with reviews, previews, internal summaries, stays on task at an appropriate pace, speaks fluently, provides examples, and questions students effectively. Though this might seem like a "laundry list" of behaviors and too much to include under the realm of one single construct, it presents a synthesis of effective behaviors related to enhanced teaching clarity that previously were fragmented and discussed independently of each other. When presented in this manner, the profile of a clear teacher becomes more complete and gains precision. For example, those interested in becoming more clear in their teaching could look at this profile, assess their strengths and weaknesses, and proceed to improve certain aspects of their teaching with respect to clarity. For example, teachers could examine which clear teaching behaviors they practice and which their teaching lacks. Such information would enable teachers to strengthen their teaching by incorporating effective teaching behaviors that they may be lacking. The profile of the clear teacher is located in Figure 1.

Insert Figure 1 about here

The behaviors said to contribute to teacher clarity are based on a strong theoretical foundation. Nonverbal immediacy functions to gain students' attention, thereby "opening the door" for other teaching behaviors to function effectively. Once students are attending to messages, the use of reviews, and previews helps to activate students' schemata (Minsky, 1975) which facilitates the integration of new information in long-term memory structures and stimulates the recall of information that already has been learned. Providing transitions enables students to attach one concept to another within their continually developing schema for the topic. These efforts also are aided by teacher behaviors of staying on task and pacing the presentation appropriately. By using relevant examples, teachers can further enable course material to be integrated into students' schemata. If examples are relevant to student experiences, they also may be linked to autobiographical memories, which are considered to be the most lasting types of memory (Baddeley, 1990). By appropriately using questions, teachers are able to gain feedback on the extent to which their messages are clear. Furthermore, questions are likely to encourage students to process the course material at deeper levels of elaboration. This type of elaborative processing is linked to greater retention of material (Baddeley, 1990). Taken together, this collection of behaviors is said to be clear teaching behaviors because they all help instructors stimulate the desired meaning in the minds of students.

The profile of the clear teacher resulting from this review of literature is not necessarily exhaustive. Other variables also may relate to clear teaching directly.

However, the variables which have been demonstrated by research to be significantly related to clarity are included and integrated into the profile. Future research may lead to the identification of other important behaviors related to clear teaching. This review is not intended to provide a hierarchy of the most to least important behaviors. Again, systematic research may uncover those behaviors in the clear teacher profile which are most and least essential. Along these lines, relationships between many of the different clear teacher qualities have yet to be studied together. For example, until very recently (Chesebro & McCroskey, 1998a; 1998b) immediacy and clarity had not been studied together. Though they both contribute to student reports of affect and cognitive learning, they have not been systematically manipulated to test the assumption that immediacy is a necessary precursor for other clarity behaviors to be effective. Given the fact that immediacy is the most unique component of the definition of clarity presented in this review, research into its relationship with clarity is warranted.

This review has integrated an eclectic mix of research related to teacher clarity in a novel, theoretically-integrated manner. The result is a profile of the clear teacher which can serve as the basis for future research or as an index of behaviors which teachers desiring to be more clear in their teaching could consult. This profile represents the best teaching behaviors related to clarity that research has identified. This review also provides useful directions for future research. Most important, unlike previous reviews which have called for a stronger definition for clarity or a stronger theoretical base upon which clarity research can be conducted, this review provides a coherent definition of teacher clarity and a theoretical base to support both the definition and future research on teacher clarity.

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Figure 1.

The Clear Teacher

Immediate	Structured	Verbally Clear
Gestures while talking to the class	Previews the main ideas of the presentation before beginning.	Does not overuse terms such as "uh," "um," or "like."
Uses vocal variety when talking to the class.	Reviews the main ideas that have been discussed each day.	Explains material in a straightforward manner.
Looks at the class while talking.	Explicitly states the way the next topic to be discussed is related, linked, or relevant to the topic currently being discussed.	Does not frequently drift on tangents not related to the course material.
Smiles at the class while talking.	Frequently stops to summarize ideas after a number of them have been discussed.	Encourages and effectively answers student questions to achieve clarity.
Has a relaxed body position while talking to the class.	Explains the objectives of each unit.	Paces instruction such that students have time to comprehend each point or topic.
Moves around the classroom while talking.	Visually displays and adheres to an outline of course content on the board or through some type of instructional media.	
Is enthusiastic or full of energy while talking.	Provides skeletal outlines of course content with ample space to take notes and adheres to those outlines throughout the lecture.	