

FIELD STUDY

Benefits (some unexpected) of Transparently Designed Assignments

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Editor's Note: We wrote about the Transparency Project in the February issue of NTLF V24N2 and readers can find out more about it and how to participate at <http://www.unlv.edu/provost/transparency-signup>. Participation—just reworking a few assignments to make their purpose clearer to students, especially historically underserved students—can be a transformative experience for faculty. A group at UNLV who participated got together to talk about their experience. Here's a report on what they had to say.

College students in large, introductory courses often struggle to succeed. Only 67.6% of college freshmen return for the sophomore year.¹ Some of students arrive at college already familiar with typical course work, expectations, and grading practices. Others do not, and these students face an immediate and unnecessary barrier to their progress. Expectations aren't transparent to this group. At the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV), a group of faculty and instructors teaching large, introductory courses resolved to remove this obstacle. They agreed to redesign two graded assignments and two ungraded class activities to make them more transparent to students. They discussed and explored the (a) purpose, (b) task, and (c) criteria for each of these assignments and activities with their students. Using the Transparency in Teaching and Learning Project's framework² for designing assignments, they explicated the knowledge students would gain, the skills they would practice, the steps they would follow, and the criteria by which their work would be judged—all before students began to work. Why? The Transparency Project has found significant benefits to students' learning—especially the learning among underserved students in intro-level courses that include transparently designed assignments.³ And so to help, faculty also provided students annotated examples of successfully completed past assignments. The UNLV cohort's observations here shed light on specific aspects of what those benefits look like in practice with their students.

¹ ACT. "Retention Trends 1983–2014." Retention/Completion Summary Tables, 2014.

http://www.act.org/research/policymakers/pdf/14retain_trends.pdf

² The Transparency in Teaching and Learning in Higher Education Project began at the University of Chicago and the University of Illinois and is now housed at UNLV. A sample of the transparent assignment design framework can be viewed at:

http://www.unlv.edu/sites/default/files/page_files/164/Transparent%20Assignment%20Template.pdf

³ Winkelmes, M.-A. 2013, Spring. "Transparency in Teaching: Faculty Share Data and Improve Students' Learning," *Liberal Education* 99 (2). <http://www.aacu.org/publications-research/periodicals/transparency-teaching-faculty-share-data-and-improve-students>

Some Approaches

The UNLV group hoped that transparently designed assignments would resolve a variety of challenges to students' success. Many of their students are venturing into an academic discipline for the first time, where both the content and the processes of thinking about it seem unfamiliar. Anna Smedley, from Sociology, wanted to help students apply new tools to thinking about the social world: "I did not want unclear processes or instructions to stand in the way of their sociological imagination." Her extensive revision to a SOC 101 paper assignment, "Understanding Cultural Diversity," now crystallizes the purpose, task, and criteria for success, and then offers students a set of background sources. An earlier version of the assignment had described the students' entire task in chronological order, presenting them with the background material first. This had seemed the more logical approach to a team of instructors who were inventing this new course, but it had confused students.⁴

Alison Sloat, who teaches an introductory Science 101 course, explains, "I wanted to help all of my students, particularly those who perform poorly, despite attending class and completing assignments." Her revised assignment maintains the original sequence of questions, and appends an introductory statement about the assignment's learning goals and a concluding set of grading criteria. Even these relatively minor changes have resulted in higher quality work from the students responding to this version of the assignment.⁵

A Boost to Motivation

Instructors in the group also saw new opportunities to motivate students' efforts in their introductory courses. "Computer Science can be a daunting discipline for beginning students; not fully comprehending the purpose and expectations for difficult assignments can be demotivating for many of them," explains Ed Jorgensen. "But these students are driven and engaged when they find meaning in their coursework; considering why and how they are learning the content can help them discover a meaning that resonates," says Katharine Johnson of her students in an introductory course for exploring Liberal Arts majors.

Expected Benefits

Some of the positive outcomes for students in these instructors' courses seem evident and expected. For example, resistance from students who viewed assignments as "pointless" has virtually disappeared. The quality of students' work submitted in response to the redesigned

⁴ Appendix A contains the original and revised (more transparent) versions of the SOC 101 assignment.
http://www.unlv.edu/sites/default/files/page_files/164/Example%20A.pdf

⁵ Appendix B contains the original and revised (more transparent) versions of the SCI 101 assignment.
http://www.unlv.edu/sites/default/files/page_files/164/Example%20B.pdf

assignments has improved. The number of questions (especially frantic, last-minute ones) about assignments has decreased, and those that remain are usually thoughtful questions that lead to useful conversations.

Unexpected Ones

The UNLV teachers have also noticed some welcome if unexpected benefits. “It’s easier to grade the students’ assignments because the expectations are clearer,” explains Katharine Johnson of students’ work for her introductory course for students who are exploring the social science major. Ed Jorgensen notes that his computer science students this term have “higher completion rates for all their assignments, even the most difficult ones.” He hopes this will lead to higher course completion rates.

Additional unexpected benefits have begun to accrue directly to the UNLV faculty themselves. Some say that designing more transparent activities and assignments affects how they teach in the classroom (online and onsite). “I explain assignments better, because my own clarity on their purposes, tasks and criteria is improved,” says Johnson.

The effects on teaching extend beyond the explication of assignments. For example, Sloat offers, “This has not only changed how I approach each assignment, but also each class meeting. Incorporating the purpose/task/criteria framework helps me focus on the main goals for each day, which helps students see the purpose of every class session.”

For most of the UNLV cohort, there’s an unexpected domino effect. They now see their commitment to revise only two take-home assignments and two in-class activities as “deceptively simple.” It has pushed most of them past a tipping point,⁶ towards making a whole course more transparent to students. “The purpose/task/criteria framework is an overarching way of viewing a course in its totality, not just the assignments,” contends Johnson. Peter Pizor explains,

“I thought, naïvely as it turned out, that this was an easy fix. The implementation turned out to be much more challenging. First, in order to bring transparency to an assignment, it is necessary to be absolutely clear why the assignment is needed and how it is integrated into the course. Answering those questions soon brought me back to the essence of andragogy. What exactly was my purpose in each assignment? How did those purposes fit into each step in my syllabus? Like many college instructors, my courses had evolved over a number of years with many small

⁶ Malcolm Gladwell explains the concept of a tipping point, which has origins in epidemiology. “The tipping point is that magic moment when an idea, trend, or social behavior crosses a threshold, tips, and spreads like wildfire.” <http://gladwell.com/the-tipping-point/>

changes. This process sent me back for a fundamental re-thinking of each week in the syllabus and what my specific learning goals were.”

Simple to Complex

Many of the UNLV instructors are now revising all the activities and assignments in their course (not just the two they started with), to create a set of class activities and take-home assignments that build students’ disciplinary skills in a sequence, from simplest skills at the beginning of the term to the most complex at the end. For example, Pizor divided one large course assignment for his online Political Science course into a series of smaller ones, each focused on helping students practice a discrete skill set. And Smedley’s redesigned Sociology assignments also target one set of skills at a time. David Copeland describes the more intentional way he now approaches his course assignments: “Thinking more deeply about the information and skills students should gain from doing an assignment has led me to reconstruct and refine all of my assignments, rather than relying on familiar ones that I have been using for years.” One of Copeland’s longstanding favorites, for example, asks students to write about how a topic from his psychology course changed their prior way of thinking about the world. “As I thought through the purpose, tasks, and criteria for this assignment, I realized that it was inconsistent with a psychological principle related to memory—that memory of the past can sometimes be inaccurate after learning some-thing new. Based on this realization, I added an in-class exercise and a new assignment at the beginning of the term. These prompt students to briefly note their beliefs about a number of psychology topics. The revised assignment at the end of term now asks students to refer back to those prior beliefs recorded in the new, earlier assignment.”⁷

For some members of the UNLV cohort, the domino effect of redesigning two assignments and two in-class exercises reached beyond the one course to additional courses, and even to a department’s whole curriculum. “I am now in the process of redesigning all my courses using the transparent purpose/task/criteria model,” claims Smedley. Pizor explains that his fundamental rethinking of each week’s learning goals amounted to a paradigm shift. “The biggest long-term benefit was my rethinking the course from a student perspective. As I looked at my other courses I realized that there was a lot of room for integration of these concepts. This takes time—first for the rethinking, and secondly, for the detailed deconstruction of much of the old course and a redesigned format based on the transparency model.”

⁷ Appendix C contains the original and revised (more transparent) versions of the PSY 101 assignment. http://www.unlv.edu/sites/default/files/page_files/164/Example%20C.pdf

From Whole Course to Whole Curriculum

Sharon Jalene applied the purpose/task/criteria framework to the entire Kinesiology curriculum with her departmental colleagues. They noticed that the tasks required of students in most courses focus on remembering and understanding. These students need more assignments that help them practice the skills of analysis and application before they take upper-level courses where the criteria focus on how students evaluate research data and create new hypotheses. Jalene and her colleagues are adjusting coursework and revamping the introductory and intermediate pieces of the department's curriculum, to build students' capacity for success at the advanced end.

What began as an effort to improve UNLV students' work on course assignments seems to have had benefits beyond the expected improvement of students' focus and performance on their assigned work—benefits to instructors' teaching and the way they design whole courses to promote students' success.

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