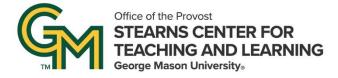
Purpose, Task, and Criteria:

Designing Transparent & Effective Assignments

E. Shelley Reid

Stearns Center for Teaching and Learning





By the end of this presentation, you should be able to

- Explain what transparent assignment design is
- Explain how it benefits faculty and students (including saving time!)
- Identify steps you can take to clarify your assignment instructions
- Consider questions or challenges you might face in adapting an assignment
- Identify strategies for assessing the impact of your revised assignment(s)

WHAT is Transparent Assignment Design?

"Transparent Assignment Design" is an approach developed by the Transparency in Learning and Teaching (TILT) research collective, headed by Mary-Ann Winkelmes.

The **purpose of TILT** is to help faculty create assignment instructions that promote student engagement and success by

- Lessening the "hidden curriculum" of college courses and assignments
- Contextualizing learning so that students relate it to their broader values and goals
- Focusing instructors' and students' attention on the most important learning priorities

WHY is
Transparent
Assignment
Design
important?

The TILT collective found that assignments using their structure improved student experience and retention, even when students had as few as two TILTed tasks total in a college term.



WHY is this important to students?

Students who experience better assignments

- work with more confidence
- complete assignments more accurately
- are retained in the course, the major, and university at higher rates

WHY is this important to faculty?

Faculty who design better assignments

- build stronger relationships with students
- increase their ability to identify the most meaningful learning they want from students
- improve their communication with students about crucial elements of their field or discipline
- are more efficient and effective in grading, because more student responses are on track

HOW do we know any of this?

Research Study #1

- 7 minority-serving institutions, 1800 students, 35 faculty
- Faculty used a TILT approach for two assignments in one course
- TILT boosted student learning in 3 ways (student survey results)
 - Academic confidence increased
 - · Sense of **belonging** increased
 - Metacognitive awareness of skill development increased

Research Study #2

- · 800+ students
- TILT boosted student retention: Those enrolled in courses with 2 TILTed assignments were 15% more likely to be retained into the 2nd & 3rd year
- Retention gains for underrepresented students even higher

Study 1: Winkelmes et al., Peer Review Spring 2016

Study 2: Unpublished university data available at this link

HOW do I use the TILT approach?

The TILT Assignment Template

(Full copy included at the end of this slide deck)

Specify the assignment purpose

- Identify the **skills** students will practice
- Identify the **knowledge** they will gain
- Identify the relevance of this learning

Specify the tasks/steps

- Explain exactly what students will do
- Explain how students will do it (steps to follow, avoid)

Specify criteria for success & provide a model

- Provide a checklist or rubric in advance so students can self-evaluate
- Provide examples of what excellence looks like (annotated examples that exhibit strong performance)

WAIT, do I have to do ALL that?
What's left for students to do?

Faculty who are just starting to work with TILT assignment design often raise questions such as

- Doesn't this make work too easy for college students?
- What if I want my students to explore or struggle to find their own way?
- Won't giving examples or models push students toward just *replicating* a model rather than thinking and creating?
- Isn't this overly complicated for just a regular assignment?

HOW DO I BALANCE support and challenge?

These are great questions. The TILT team has some helpful extended <u>answers here</u>.

Generally, it's important to remember that

- Faculty are experts who can forget how difficult the tasks are that we assign novices
- Students who want to succeed are often afraid to ask questions and seem stupid
- Providing more context and careful guidelines helps all students start off strong, so you can ask for higher-order thinking
- Even with more explicit framing, your assignment will still be hard!



HOW DO I IMPROVE LEARNING by taking on this work?

Faculty we've worked with tell us

- It's straightforward once they get started
- They have "aha!" moments about places where they're cramming too much into one assignment and overwhelming students
- They like showing students why the work of the field is important

In addition, increased assignment clarity helps faculty

- align assignments to support key outcomes
- design relevant practice exercises or activities for students
- engage students in the actual problem not just the instructions

HOW DO I SAVE TIME by taking on this work?

More concretely: Assignments that disclose their purpose and context, specify key steps, and focus attention on key criteria for success can save faculty time:

- Faculty may save class time because students have fewer questions
- Faculty may save time in grading because more students will produce acceptable work that is easier to comment on
- Faculty may save time in grading because having clear criteria will focus everyone's attention, and reduce misunderstandings or even grade complaints
- Faculty report that they enjoy reviewing student work more when students understand the assignment better

WHAT does a transparent assignment even look like?

Faculty who are just starting to explore this assignment-design process often wonder

- What kind of assignments can I use this for?
- Will this work for assignments in my field?
- Won't this just make my assignment descriptions extra long and unreadable?

It can be helpful to look at some models, which are <u>available online</u>. We suggest you

- Look at one assignment not in your field, considering your "novice" response to pre/post: Did the changes help you?
- Look at an assignment close to your field, and identify strategies you can use.

HOW will I know if my assignments are working?

Any of these events might signal that your efforts are having positive impact:

- You realize some important elements of your assignment that you want to focus more on
- More students complete the assignment the way you had imagined
- More students seem to see
 how assignments connect to larger
 principles

And if you want, you can always **ask your students**, directly or via a survey:
Were they confident doing the task? Do
they know how they will be evaluated?
Do they see its relevance?

Final QUIZ:
What are
the key
elements of
transparent
assignment
design?

Before you go, take a moment to recap:

What is the purpose/value of using a TILT approach?

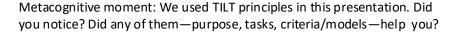
- Can you identify how transparent assignments are relevant/helpful for faculty and/or students?
- Can you recall any skills or knowledge you could gain by using this approach?

What are the tasks/steps in designing an assignment?

- What are the three parts of the framework? (ahem!)
- What might be some of your next steps?

What are the criteria for success with TILT?

- Where can you find some models to look at?
- How could you evaluate whether your assignment changes are helping?



Additional Resources

In the following pages, you can find

- The full assignment template
- One pre/post example of an assignment
- A bibliography of research supporting this approach

For more information/practice, keep an eye out for Stearns Center workshops on "Transforming Assignments for Student Success"



Transparent Assignment Template

© 2013 Mary-Ann Winkelmes

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
- o applying basic disciplinary knowledge/tools to problem-solving in a similar but unfamiliar context
- analyzing
- synthesizing
- judging/evaluating and selecting best solutions
- o 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:

0 ...

Task: Define what activities the student should do/perfom. "Question cues" from this chart might be helpful:

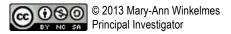
http://www.asainstitute.org/conference2013/handouts/20-Bloom-Question-Cues-Chart.pdf. List any steps or guidelines, or a recommended sequence for the students' efforts. Specify any extraneous mistakes to be avoided. If there are sound pedagogical reasons for withholding information about how to do the assignment, protect students' confidence and sense of belonging in college with a purpose statement something like this: "The purpose of this assignment is for you to struggle and feel confused while you invent and test your own approach for addressing the problem..."

Criteria for Success:

Define the characteristics of the finished product. Provide multiple examples of what these characteristics look like in real-world practice, to encourage students' creativity and reduce their incentive to copy any one example too closely. Engage students in analyzing multiple examples of real-world work before the students begin their own work on the assignment. Discuss how excellent work differs from adequate 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. It is often useful to provide or compile with students a checklist of characteristics of successful 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 an 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); Winkelmes et al, "A Teaching Intervention that Increases Underserved College Students' Success." *Peer Review* 18,1/2 (Winter/Spring 2016).



(LESS TRANSPARENT)

PSYCHOLOGY 101, David Copeland

PAPER INSTRUCTIONS

Your task is to explore a psychological topic in relation to your life, in a 3-4 page paper. Papers should be (a) double-spaced, (b) 12 pt Times New Roman font, (c) include your name in the header, and (d) a title at the top of the first page. Papers will be graded on the following criteria: (a) addressing the question / topic, (b) writing quality, (c) integrating outside sources (at least one quality source; if you are not sure whether something is a good source, ask me), and (d) following instructions.

TOPIC:

One of my goals in this course is to introduce students to ideas that can potentially change the way that they view the world. This can relate to any topic in psychology (e.g., how people learn, disorders of the brain, how memory functions, intelligence, what happens when we sleep, personality, how people interact with others, etc.), because psychological research is applicable to so many aspects of human life. Pick something that you have learned in this course that has changed the way you view the world. For example, imagine if on the first day of class I had asked you something like "how does short-term memory work?" and your answer then was very different than what you learned later in the semester from lecture/textbook. Think about the idea more deeply (especially in the context of your life), and apply it to your philosophy of life.

Once you have an idea, describe how you used to think about the topic, discuss the topic itself (i.e., what you learned about it), and then explain how your view has changed going forward. Please be as specific as possible when writing.

(MORE TRANSPARENT)

PSYCHOLOGY 101, David Copeland

CHANGING BELIEFS: IN-CLASS ACTIVITY (beginning of term)

PURPOSE: The purpose of this activity is to help you monitor how your beliefs change throughout the semester. To do this, you will do a metacognitive activity (thinking about your own thinking) by answering some questions to document your current beliefs. These questions relate to some of the important topics we will study in this class. Later in the semester, we will look again at your views on these same questions.

TASK: Your task is to answer the following questions based on what you truly think (do not look them up online or in your textbook). After you answer each question, please note, using a scale from 1 to 5, how confident you are in your answer (1 = not at all confident, 3 = somewhat confident, 5 = extremely confident).

- (1) What percent of the brain do people use?
- (2) When we look at an object, do we always see that object? If yes, why? If not, why not?
- (3) Why do we dream? What is happening in our minds / brains?
- (4) Do abilities such as extra-sensory perception (ESP), including reading people's minds or seeing the future, exist?
- (5) Briefly, how does memory work?
- (6) Is intelligence an easily measured construct that is stable throughout one's life?
- (7) Do most people use stereotypes? Do you?
- (8) Can humans and animals be trained using similar methods? Why or why not?
- (9) Are most people generally good or generally bad?
- (10) How can we measure a person's personality? Is it possible?

Your completed assignment should include two or three sentences in response to each question. Bring this write-up with you to the next class and you will pair up with a classmate. When paired up, you will swap papers and read through each other's answers to determine whether you can understand each other's views.

CRITERIA: You will be successful in this activity if you can: (a) Provide an answer to all of the questions with descriptions that are clear to another reader, and (b) Provide feedback to a classmate about how clearly you can understand their answers.

PSYCHOLOGY 101, David Copeland

CHANGING BELIEFS: TAKE-HOME ASSIGNMENT (end of term)

PURPOSE: One of my goals in this course is to introduce students to ideas that can potentially change the way that they view the world. This can relate to any major topic area in psychology (e.g., how the brain functions, how we perceive, how people learn, sleep and dreams, how memory functions, intelligence, personality, how people interact with others socially, or disorders). The purpose is to identify a topic for which your prior view of it has changed as a result of what you learned in this course. You should be able to compare and analyze how your thinking / beliefs are different now than before.

TASK: Your task is to: (1) Select a topic that you have learned about in this course that has changed the way you view the world. You are encouraged to refer back to your answers to the questions in the Changing Beliefs Activity from the beginning of the semester. (2) Once you have an idea, describe in a paragraph or two how you used to think about the topic. (Refer back to your

responses to the Changing Beliefs activity from the beginning of term.) (3) Then, discuss the topic itself (i.e., what you learned about it). Please use the library to find an outside source – a peer reviewed psychology research article – to help you write a more thorough description of the selected concept. (4) Finally, explain how your view has changed going forward. Please be as specific as possible and please apply this to your own life and way of thinking (i.e., please do not generalize or write about how most people think).

Your completed assignment should be between 3 to 4 pages (typed, double-spaced). Include your name and a title in the header. Include a reference for your outside source at the end, using APA style formatting rules.

CRITERIA: Your assignment will be graded based on the following criteria: (a) Did you select a topic discussed in this course? (b) Can I clearly understand your prior way of thinking about that concept? (c) Do you provide a clear description of the topic that demonstrates that you can summarize the important aspects of it? Is information from the outside source nicely integrated into this description? (d) Can I clearly understand your current way of thinking about that concept? Did you contrast this to your prior view? (e) Finally, following instructions and quality of writing will be evaluated as well (e.g., proper grammar, spelling, etc.).





Creating Equitable Learning Opportunities Through Transparent Assignment Design

Mary-Ann Winkelmes, Founder, TILT Higher Ed Executive Director, Center for Teaching and Learning, Brandeis University

The new incoming student population in U.S. higher education is increasingly diverse, multigenerational and non-traditional. Yet these are the same students colleges and universities often struggle to serve adequately. **Transparent instruction** is a technique that promotes student success on several dimensions and is easy to apply in both online and face-to-face settings. Studies have shown that using transparent assignments significantly enhances the performance, academic self-confidence, sense of belonging, and persistence of all students, with historically underserved students showing the greatest gains (Winkelmes et al., 2016; Gianoutsos & Winkelmes, 2016; Winkelmes et al., 2019).

Selected Bibliography:

- Aronson, J., Fried, C., & Good, C. "Reducing the effects of stereotype threat on African American college students by shaping theories of intelligence." *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 38 (2002): 113–125.
- Association of American Colleges and Universities, Liberal Education and America's Promise. "The Essential Learning Outcomes," "High Impact Practices," "Principles of Excellence," "VALUE Rubrics." Washington, DC.: AAC&U, 2008-2012.
- Colomb, G. and Williams, J. "Why What You Don't Know Won't Help You." Research in the Teaching of English 23, 3 (Oct, 1993): 252-264.
- Doyle, Terry. "Eight Reasons Students Resist Learner-Centered Teaching." In *Helping Students Learn in a Learner-Centered Environment*. Sterling, VA: Stylus, 2008.
- Dweck, Carol. Mindset: The New Psychology of Success. New York: Random House, 2006.
- Felder, Richard. "Hang in There! Dealing with Student Resistance to Learner-Centered Teaching." Chemical Engineering Education 43, 2 (Spring 2011):131-132.
- Felder, Richard and Rebecca Brent. "Want Your Students to Think Creatively and Critically? How about Teaching Them?" Chemical Engineering Education, 48, 2 (Spring 2014):113-114.
- Finley, Ashley and Tia McNair. "Assessing Underserved Students' Engagement in High-Impact Practices." Washington, D.C.: AAC&U, 2013. Gianoutsos, Daniel and Mary-Ann Winkelmes. "Navigating with Transparency: Enhancing Underserved Student Success through Transparent Learning and Teaching in the Classroom and Beyond." Proceedings of the Pennsylvania Association of Developmental Educators (Spring 2016). Hausmann, Leslie R. M., Feifei Ye, Janet Ward Schofield and Rochelle L Woods. "Sense of Belonging and Persistence in White and African
- American First-Year Students. Research in Higher Education (2009) 50, 7: 649-669.

 Miyake, A., Kost-Smith, L. E., Finkelstein, N. D., Pollock, S. J., Cohen, G. L., & Ito, A. "Reducing the gender achievement gap in college science: A
- classroom study of values affirmation." Science 330 (2010): 1234–1237.

 Schnabel, N. et al. Demystifying Values Affirmation Interventions: Writing about social belonging is a key to buffering against identity threat.
- Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 39 (2013).

 Spitzer, Brian and Aronson, J. "Minding and Mending the Gap: Social Psychological Interventions to Reduce Educational Disparities." British Journal of Educational Psychology 85/1 (March 2015).
- Steele, Claude M. "Stereotype Threat and the Intellectual Test Performance of African Americans." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 69, 5 (1995): 797-813.
- Watkins, Jessica, and Mazur, Erik. "Retaining Students in STEM Majors." Journal of College Science Teaching 42, 5 (2013).
 - Winkelmes, M.A. et al. (2019). Transparent Design in Higher Education Teaching and Leadership. Stylus.
- Winkelmes, Mary-Ann, Matthew Bernacki, Jeffrey Butler, Michelle Zochowski, Jennifer Golanics, Kati Harriss Weavil. "A Teaching Intervention that Increases Underserved College Students' Success." Peer Review (Winter/Spring 2016).
- Winkelmes, Mary-Ann. Transparency in Teaching: Faculty Share Data and Improve Students' Learning. Liberal Education 99, 2 (Spring 2013).