

Translating Research into Instructional Practice:

Instructor Clarity

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Introduction

During the 1960s and 1970s, researchers in education and allied fields conducted multiple studies attempting to identify various ways in which teaching behaviors promote student learning. Although generally inconsistent findings plagued this program of research, Rosenshine and Furst (1971) observed that there were 11 general categories of behaviors that showed some connection to learning, of which teacher clarity was the strongest. Of course, anyone who has been in a classroom as a student or instructor would support this finding: Clear teaching is a prerequisite for student learning. Despite the intuitive appeal of clear teaching, much effort has been centered on trying to understand exactly what instructor clarity is, how it helps students learn, and how to best enact clear teaching behaviors.

Instructor Clarity

On the surface, instructor clarity appears to be straightforward--teaching in a clear manner. As the circular nature of that definition suggests, additional explanation is warranted, and unfortunately, additional explanation has tended to make a relatively intuitive concept become somewhat opaque. Before turning to various conclusions drawn from the literature on how instructor clarity influences classroom outcomes, we

first need to explore how this concept has been defined.

Research defining instructor clarity has emerged in two separate fields: education and communication studies. In the late 1970s, subsequent to Rosenshine and Furst's conclusion that clarity was the most promising instructor effect variable, a group of education researchers at Ohio State University conducted a series of studies attempting to empirically define what instructor clarity is. Andrew Bush and his colleagues (Bush, Kennedy, & Cruickshank, 1977) surveyed over 1000 students in the Columbus, Ohio Public Schools and asked them to identify five behaviors exhibited by their clearest instructors. Their survey yielded a list of behaviors that were used to create a fixed response survey where respondents could rate how often each behavior was used. This fixed response survey then was administered to over 1,500 junior high school students in Cleveland, Ohio and the results obtained from this sample were cross validated in a broader sample of students from Ohio, Tennessee, and Australia (Kennedy, Cruickshank, Bush, & Myers, 1978).

The results of the Ohio State studies revealed that instructor clarity may be divided into four dimensions (Kennedy et al., 1978): *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"). These results demonstrate that instructor clarity is a

multidimensional construct comprised of multiple reinforcing behaviors. That is, the clearest of instructors tend to display many of these behaviors simultaneously whereas unclear instructors may display only a few behaviors, or none at all.

During a similar timeframe in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Michael Land and Lyle Smith conducted a series of studies exploring the negative effects of poor clarity. Unlike the Ohio State Studies, Land and Smith isolated the use of unclear language (i.e., vague terminology, uncertain wording that lacks specificity, confusing terms, and unclear language choices) to determine how those behaviors affect student learning. Smith and Land's (1981) research found that poor language choices used by instructors can have strong negative effects on student learning outcomes as measured by the examinations taken by students. Their results substantiated the specific findings obtained by the Ohio State researchers, but added an important causal link between instructor clarity behaviors and student learning; namely, students tend to perform better when their instructors are clear.

Researchers in communication studies began to address the instructor clarity issue starting in the early 1990s. After several initial studies by communication researchers, Robert Sidelinger and James 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). It since has been used in multiple studies that have successfully identified significant

relationships between instructor clarity behaviors and student learning outcomes (Chesebro, 2003; Chesebro & McCroskey, 2001). Generally, when instructors are clear, students tend to appreciate and remember the content at higher levels.

Using approaches similar in design to Smith and Land, I conducted a series of studies testing the effects of how an instructor clarity behavior--use of organizational cues--impacts students' note taking and performance on tests (Titsworth, 2001, 2004; Titsworth & Kiewra, 2004). Organizational lecture cues involve use of *internal previews* (e.g., "I will discuss three topics today"), *transitions* (e.g., "now that you have learned about the causes of poor communication, let's turn to the effects"), *signposts* (e.g., "now I will turn to my third and final point") and *summaries* (e.g., "today we discussed three topics"). In these studies, I found that students record more details and perform better on exams when the instructor's lecture included these organizational cues.

Some researchers, however, caution that instructor clarity cannot be thought of as a simple accumulation of tools to be wielded during class. Jean Civikly (1992) and Cheri Simonds (1997) established that clarity is a perception created in-and-through communication between the instructor and the student. Rather than viewing clarity as an end state determined largely by the number of clarity behaviors used by an instructor during a 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 more clear. In their view, the actual behaviors of

instructor clarity are less important than the processes through which those behaviors are selected, implemented, and perceived within the classroom.

Based on the instructional communication research conducted to date, five general conclusions can be drawn about the role that instructor clarity plays in the classroom:

- First, instructor clarity cannot be isolated to a single set of behaviors. Multiple attempts at defining instructor clarity (see Titsworth & Mazer, 2011) lead to the same conclusion that the concept is multidimensional, including behaviors that span multiple modes of communication (i.e., written and oral) that have diverse intended outcomes (e.g., to provide examples, to provide structure, and to provide precision of explanation).
- Second, instructor clarity is an adaptive process through which instructors and students negotiate meanings attributed to information (Simonds, 1997). Rather than devising a set strategy for being clear, instructors are advised to assess students' understanding as a lesson is unfolding and adapt their behaviors as necessary to promote understanding.
- Third, instructor clarity can be improved. Embedded within the instructor clarity research were studies exploring whether instructors armed with information about clarity behaviors could improve their teaching by using those behaviors. The results from three studies (Gliessman, 1987; Metcalf & Cruickshank, 1991; Smith, 1982) indicated that instructors can be trained to present information more clearly

regardless of whether the training program focused on targeted behaviors (e.g., using precise language) or a broad array of behaviors.

- Fourth, instructor clarity improves students' affect toward learning. Affective learning is one of Bloom's three domains of learning and is focused on the extent to which students value and appreciate the process of learning new information. Chesebro (2003), as well as many others, observed strong positive relationships between instructors' use of clarity and students' affect for both the instructor and the course. Stated simply, students like clear teaching.
- Fifth, students perform better when their instructors are clear. Clear teaching results in more detailed lecture notes (Titsworth, 2001), better performance on assessments (Titsworth & Kiewra, 2004), and higher perceived learning (Chesebro & McCroskey, 2001).

Tips on Using Clarity in the Classroom

1. Although research on instructor clarity points to a potentially lengthy list of possible behaviors, instructors should recognize that no single behavior will likely result in being clear or unclear. Because clarity involves multiple behaviors that, when used together, tend to be associated with improved student learning, you should strive to accumulate as many clarity behaviors as possible and deploy those behaviors during class, reasoning that students will achieve at higher levels with each additional use of a clarity behavior. Table 1 contains several clarity behaviors you can use.

Table 1: Clarity Behaviors

1. Clarity behaviors to use before class

- Create specific behaviorally-based *learning objectives* to guide the lesson.
- Prepare *written organizational cues* like handouts, slides, or graphic organizers to help students follow your presentation and take notes.

2. When in class, avoid verbal behaviors that diminish clarity

- *Vagueness terms* are imprecise statements about what will be accomplished.
- *Word mazes* occur when vocal fillers confuse the meaning of your statements.
- *Utterances* are vocal fillers that can distract listeners.
- *Bluffing phrases* make uncertain things sound overly certain.
- *Uncertainty phrases* make precise things sound uncertain.
- Improper *pacing* occurs when you speak too quickly or do not allow sufficient time for students to process information.

3. When in class, use these verbal behaviors to increase clarity

- A *verbal advance organizer* is a precise preview of what will be covered in the lesson.
- Using *transition statements*, with numbered points, help students follow you from one key point to another.
- *Internal summaries* help students review points made during a lesson and also facilitate integration of a more holistic understanding of material.
- Use *semantic cues* to indicate when you are providing important information, or specific things like terminology, definitions, examples, connections, or relationships.
- A *written cue* can be found in a syllabus, assignment sheet, or even directions on a PowerPoint slide to indicate exactly what students are supposed to do.

4. Be prepared to adapt

- *Assess* your students' understanding of material to determine if they are meeting your lesson objectives.
 - *Alter* your behaviors as necessary to clarify concepts that students do not grasp.
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2. Start with a plan for helping students process information efficiently. Having a complete set of lecture notes is critical to students' success. The process of taking notes helps students both encode and store information that is required for later recall and application on an exam or learning task. As such, instructors should plan to help students take better notes. Written organizational cues like slides, graphics, or pictures are highly effective at cueing students to record information in their notes. Likewise,

spoken previews, transitions, signposts, and summaries of main ideas result in large increases in recorded information. By creating lesson plans that are focused on presenting clear points to be recorded by students, you set a foundation for clarity. Without this foundation, students are likely to be lost from the start.

3. Integrate information surrounding concepts. As demonstrated by the Ohio State studies on instructor clarity, instructors must present a variety of types of information in order to be clear. Concepts taught in a typical lesson tend to involve precise terminology, definitions of those 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 holes. When planning lessons, take care to guide students through a complete representation of concepts by systematically highlighting each concept.

4. Assess frequently. Because clarity is a perception stemming from ongoing communication between instructors and students, instructors must devise ways to solicit information from students as their lesson unfolds. The ability to determine how well students understand particular concepts is critical information that instructors need in order to adapt their behaviors as a lesson unfolds. Asking questions, using activities, and even deploying impromptu quizzes through student response technologies are all ways that instructors can assess whether students clearly understand key points in a lecture. Practically, 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. Adapt your presentation based on feedback. 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 offering additional examples or explanations. Through the give-and-take of explanations and examples, students have the opportunity to hear concepts discussed from multiple perspectives. Such presentation and re-presentation of ideas can help clarify their understanding of the concepts you hope to teach.

Conclusion

Instructor clarity is one of the most important skills we can develop in learning how to effectively guide our students to success. If successful, your students are likely to enjoy the learning process and be better equipped to remember and apply course content.

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