

Examining Effective Faculty Practice: Teaching Clarity and Student Engagement

Allison BrekaLorenz
Research Analyst
abrckalo@indiana.edu

Jillian Kinzie
Associate Director,
NSSE Institute
jkinzie@indiana.edu

Eddie R. Cole
FSSE Project Associate
coleer@indiana.edu

Tony Ribera
NSSE Inst. Project Associate
aribera@indiana.edu

Abstract

At the core of any agenda to improve undergraduate education is an emphasis on effective teaching practices. Although clarity of instruction is generally promoted as an effective teaching practice, we know little about how widely students are exposed to this practice in undergraduate education. In addition, little research has been done to link teaching clarity to other forms of effective educational practice such as student-faculty interaction or active and collaborative learning. This study seeks to explore the teaching clarity behaviors students are exposed to and the extent to which these behaviors relate to student engagement, deep learning, and self-reported gains in college. Findings indicate that while significant proportions of first-year students and seniors report that their instructors came to class well-prepared and explained course goals clearly, far fewer students experienced teaching clarity behaviors associated with higher levels of cognitive processing including reviewing course material and making abstract theories understandable. Additionally, students who perceive their faculty exhibit clear teaching behaviors have consistently higher student engagement and desired educational gains.

Literature

- Specific aspects of classroom instruction, namely students' perceptions of instructor behaviors, such as use of class time, course organization and preparation, and explanation of course goals and assignments, have been positively associated with general measures of cognitive growth in the first year of college (Pascarella, Edison, Nora, Hagedorn, & Braxton, 1996).
- Student perceptions of instructional practice, such as instructional clarity, teacher expressiveness, and feedback to students, had moderate correlations with various measures of course learning including grades and final examination performance (Pascarella, 2006)
- Clear faculty exhibit a level of transparency in regards to their approaches to and goals for student learning, which helps students better understand teaching methods and expectations for the course as well as better identify with the instructor (Ginsberg, 2007b).
- Teaching clarity includes providing examples and summarizing key points of lectures (Chesebro & McCroskey, 2001; Myers & Knox, 2001).
- Level of caring and reflection is also linked to teaching clarity (Ginsberg, 2007a; 2007b).
- Various definitions of teaching clarity center around the behaviors' vague ability to improve student learning such as:
 - Teaching clarity as "a cluster of teaching behaviors that result in learners' gaining knowledge or understanding of a topic" (Cruikshank & Kennedy, 1986, p. 43),
 - "The ability of the teaching to provide instruction, expository or otherwise, which helps students come to a clear understanding of material" (Metcalf, 1992, p. 275), or
 - "Teacher behaviors which relate to and facilitate the communication to students of the subject matter of instruction in such a manner as to make this content intelligible to them thus enabling student learning (understanding and synthesis) of that subject matter" (Hines et al, 1981, pp. 16-17).
- Studies have identified a relationship between teaching clarity and student comprehension of material (e.g., Chesebro & McCroskey, 2001; Myers & Knox, 2001), greater satisfaction and achievement (Hativa, 1998), and motivation (Ginsberg, 2007b).
- Students struggled to comprehend material and expressed dissatisfaction with the course when the instructor lacked clarity (Hativa, 1998).
- Many of the studies were conducted at the course level; however, there has been a growing number of studies at the program and institution level which support these findings (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).
- Teaching clarity, however, may be expressed differently by faculty across disciplines as well as appear more or less clear by different types of students.
 - For example, hard sciences are typically specific and concrete in course explanations and expectations while the majority of concepts in social science courses are abstract in nature (Lattuca & Stark, 2009).
- Students across various disciplines prefer an instructor who is clear and organized (Hativa & Birenbaum, 2000).

Research Questions

1. What teaching-clarity behaviors are students exposed to most and least frequently?
2. How does teaching clarity relate to student engagement?
3. How does teaching clarity relate to deep learning and students' reports of gains in college?

Data Source and Sample

- The data come from the 2010 administration of the National Survey of Student Engagement
- The sample for this study consists of 8102 (41%) first-year students and 11,761 (59%) seniors from 38 baccalaureate granting institutions.
- The teaching clarity items used in this study were adapted from the Wabash National Study

Teaching Clarity scale items:

In your experience during the current school year, about how often did your instructors do each of the following?

(Never, Sometimes, Often, Very Often)

- A) Gave clear explanations of assignments
- B) Used examples or illustrations to explain difficult points
- C) Reviewed and summarized course material effectively
- D) Made abstract ideas and theories understandable
- E) Gave assignments that helped you learn the course material
- F) Presented course material in an organized way
- G) Came to class well-prepared
- H) Used class time effectively
- I) Explained course goals and requirements clearly

Scale reliability: FY $\alpha = .93$, SR $\alpha = .94$

Student Characteristics	First-Years (%)	Seniors (%)
Female	65	66
Transfer student	12	55
Full-time enrollment	91	73
Fraternity or Sorority member	7	11
Student-athlete	11	5
Living on campus	65	18
First generation	49	56
Traditional age	88	48
Race or ethnicity		
African American/Black	15	12
Asian/Pacific Islander	7	5
Caucasian/White	54	57
Hispanic/Latino	13	14
Other	7	6
Primary major field		
Arts & Humanities	12	11
Biological Sciences	9	5
Business	16	22
Education	9	10
Engineering	6	4
Physical Science	4	3
Professional	13	12
Social Science	12	13
Grades		
Mostly A's	39	51
Mostly B's	47	43
Mostly C's	13	6
Institution Characteristics		
Control	45	49
Carnegie		
Doctoral	19	17
Classification		
Master's	49	49

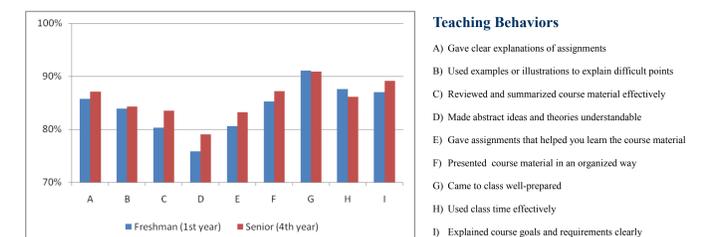
Discussion and Implications

This study adds to research demonstrating that faculty who are perceived by students to be well prepared for class and design assignments that students consider clear and meaningful have consistently positive effects on student engagement and desired educational gains. The strength of the relationship between teaching clarity and the four NSSE benchmarks for first-year students suggests the need to emphasize teaching clarity, particularly in first-year courses. It is important to recognize that teaching clarity practices are learnable, thus a possible priority for faculty development programs. In order to understand the extent to which faculty exhibit teaching clarity behaviors, their efforts in the classroom must be evaluated. Many (e.g., Lewis, 2001) encourage evaluations to also take place at midsemester when students have had time to engage in the material and the instructor still has time to make improvements if necessary. Small Group Instructional Diagnosis (SGID) is an example of a midsemester evaluation. This form of evaluation provides students with the opportunity to share their opinions as a group and provides faculty with the opportunity to respond to this feedback in class.

Our full paper can be found at
nsse.iub.edu/html/pubs.cfm

Results

Research Question 1: Percent of Frequently ("Very Often" or "Often") Observed Teaching Behaviors



Frequencies of teaching clarity items were used to identify which behaviors were "frequently" ("very often" or "often") observed. More frequently observed behaviors were instructors coming to class well-prepared and instructors explaining course goals and requirements clearly. Less frequently observed behaviors include instructors reviewing and summarizing course material effectively and instructors making abstract ideas and theories understandable. Frequencies by disciplinary major fields can be found in our full paper.

Research Question 2: Correlations between the Teaching Clarity Scale and the NSSE Benchmarks of Effective Educational Practice

Pearson's r correlations were used to relate the Teaching Clarity Scale to individual NSSE engagement survey items and NSSE Benchmarks of Effective Educational Practice. For both first-years and seniors the items with the highest correlations with the Teaching Clarity scale were about students' ratings of their relationships with faculty members, of their institution's emphasis on providing the support they need to succeed academically, and of their entire educational experience at their institution. Correlations between the Teaching Clarity Scale and NSSE Benchmarks can be found below ($p < .001$). Information about the NSSE Benchmarks can be found in our full paper.

NSSE Benchmarks of Effective Educational Practice	First-Years	Seniors
Level of Academic Challenge	.397	.364
Active and Collaborative Learning	.276	.200
Student-Faculty Interaction	.301	.287
Supportive Campus Environment	.537	.553

Research Question 3:

Relationships between the Teaching Clarity and NSSE Deep Learning and Gains Subscales

Multivariate OLS regressions were used to measure the relationship between the Teaching Clarity scale and measures of deep learning and student-reported gains. The unstandardized coefficients represented below can be interpreted as effect sizes. For both first-years and seniors, the strongest relationships occur between the Teaching Clarity scale and student self-reported gains in college. More information about the scales used in this analysis as well as regression results by major disciplinary field can be found in our full paper.

	Integrative Learning	Higher Order Thinking	Reflective Learning	Gains in Practical Competence	Gains in Personal and Social Development	Gains in General Education
First-Years	++	++	+	+++	+++	+++
Seniors	++	++	+	++++	+++	+++

OLS regression models controlled for gender, transfer status, enrollment status, fraternity or sorority membership, athletic participation, race or ethnicity, primary major field, grades, first-generation status, age, institutional control, and institutional Carnegie classification. All variables standardized before entered into models.

Key: $p < .001$; + unstandardized $B > .2$, ++ unstandardized $B > .3$, +++ unstandardized $B > .4$, ++++ unstandardized $B > .5$.