

Examining the Importance of Teaching Clarity: Findings  
from the Faculty Survey of Student Engagement

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Extensive research has been conducted exploring which teaching practices are effective in promoting undergraduate student engagement and learning (see Pascarella & Terranzini, 1991, 2005). As a result, there are varying ideas on what constitutes effective teaching; however, one characteristic often referenced is teaching clarity (Feldman, 1989; Hativa, 1998; Hativa, Barak, & Simhi, 2001). Teaching clarity can be thought of as a teaching method where faculty demonstrate a level of transparency in their approach to instruction and goal setting in an effort to help students better understand expectations and comprehend subject matter (Ginsberg, 2007). This includes, but is not limited to, such behaviors as explaining course goals and reviewing and summarizing course material (Chesebro & McCroskey, 2001; Myers & Knox, 2001).

Scholars have defined teaching clarity as “a cluster of teaching behaviors that result in learners’ gaining knowledge or understanding of a topic” (Cruickshank & Kennedy, 1986, p. 43) and as “the ability of the teacher to provide instruction, expository or otherwise, which helps students come to a clear understanding of material” (Metcalf, 1992, p. 275). Research has highlighted the positive effect teaching clarity has on important outcomes of a college education (see Chesebro & McCroskey, 2001; Myers & Knox, 2001; Pascarella, Edison, Nora, Hagedorn, & Braxton, 1996).

Undergraduates who perceive higher levels of teaching clarity tend to exhibit more growth in various student outcomes, such as leadership, openness to diversity, moral reasoning and positive attitudes toward literacy (Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education, n.d.). Additionally, teaching clarity has been found to have a positive relationship with student comprehension of material (Chesebro & McCroskey, 2001; Myers & Knox, 2001), cognitive

growth (Pascarella, Edison, Nora, Hagedorn, & Braxton, 1996), student satisfaction (Hativa, 1998), and student motivation (Ginsberg, 2007). Pascarella (2006) explored student achievement, concluding that student perceptions of teaching clarity had moderate correlations with final examination performance and grades.

Teaching clarity was recently explored in conjunction with the 2010 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). Approximately 20,000 first-year and senior students from 38 four-year colleges and universities responded to items on NSSE and an additional item set on teaching clarity, which was adapted from the Wabash National Study (see, Pascarella, Salisbury, & Blaich, 2009). This item set asked students to identify the extent to which their current instructors engaged in specific practices, such as giving clear explanations of assignments, reviewing and summarizing course material effectively, and coming to class well-prepared. In the NSSE study, BrckaLorenz, Cole, Kinzie, and Ribera (2011) found a significant, positive relationship between teaching clarity and four measures of student engagement: Level of Academic Challenge, Active and Collaborative Learning, Student-Faculty Interaction, and Supportive Campus Environment. They also found significant, positive relationships between teaching clarity and all sub-scales of deep approaches to learning and student self-reported gains.

### Purpose

The literature about teaching clarity and student learning further positions teaching clarity as an effective educational practice for promoting student engagement. Yet, the bulk of information about teaching clarity comes from the student perspective. Very little is empirically known about teaching clarity from a faculty perspective. The purpose of our study is to begin the examination of teaching clarity using information from faculty members by exploring the importance faculty place on teaching clarity behaviors and the relationships between that level of

importance and other effective educational practices used by faculty members (i.e., active and collaborative learning). This paper additionally looks at how faculty characteristics (e.g., gender and rank) relate to the importance placed on teaching clarity behaviors. Previous research on faculty use of and emphasis on effective educational practices suggests such differences likely exist (e.g., Kuh, Nelson Laird, & Umbach, 2004). As with other practices, differences in teaching clarity would suggest the need for faculty development and consideration of faculty characteristics and teaching practices in, for example, hiring and promotion processes, if student learning is important to their institutions. This study is intended as a catalyst for further studies of faculty perceptions and experiences with teaching clarity behaviors.

Relying on data from the 2011 Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE), our study was guided by the following questions:

1. What teaching clarity behaviors do faculty find most and least important?
2. What characterizes faculty with moderate, high, and very high perceptions of the importance of teaching clarity?
3. How does the perception of teaching clarity relate to other forms of effective educational practice?

## Methods

### *Data Source and Sample*

The data for this study came from the 2011 FSSE administration. FSSE measures faculty perceptions and expectations of undergraduate student engagement in educationally purposeful activities as well as the extent to which faculty promote student learning and development in their courses and interactions with students (Kuh, Nelson Laird & Umbach, 2004). FSSE offers a course-based survey, which asks faculty to answer questions regarding a specific course they

teach, and a typical student survey, which asks faculty to respond to items with the typical student they interact with in mind. For this study, items on teaching clarity were asked at the end of both versions of the FSSE survey (Table 1). This additional item set was adapted from the items used in NSSE study (BrckaLorenz, Cole, Kinzie, & Ribera, 2011) which was originally administered in the Wabash National Study (see, Pascarella, Salisbury, & Blaich, 2009).

After deleting cases for missing data, the sample for this study consisted of nearly 4,400 faculty members from 40 different colleges and universities. Faculty were from a variety of institutions, with 18% classified as doctorate granting, 40% as master's granting, and 42% baccalaureate granting. Two-thirds of the faculty came from private institutions, a third from large institutions, and a third from medium-sized institutions. Most faculty members came from non- or less-competitive institutions (41%) or competitive institutions (39%).

Among the sample, 74% of respondents identified as White, 55% identified as male, 95% identified as native U.S. citizens, and 41% were 55 years old or older. Additionally, 64% had a doctorate degree, 46% had at least 15 years of experience teaching, and the average course load taught for the year was six courses. Looking at disciplinary fields, 26% were in Arts and Humanities, 5% were in Biological Sciences, 12% were in Business, 7% were in Education, 4% were in Engineering, 11% were in Physical Sciences, 11% were in Professional Studies, and 12% were in Social Sciences. The faculty members in this sample represent a wide cross-section of academic ranks with 26% identifying as full Professors, 23% as Associate Professors, 26% as Assistant Professors, 11% as full-time instructors/lecturers, and 14% as part-time instructors/lecturers. Variance is seen when looking at tenure status as well. Among the sample, 15% respondents are at an institution with no tenure system, 28% are not on the tenure track

despite a tenure system being in place at their institution, 19% report being on the tenure track but not tenured, while 39% are tenured.

### *Variables*

Several scales were used as variables in this study as well as a variety of faculty- and institution-level demographic items. Although the item set about teaching clarity contained nine items, this study focuses on the six items that combined to make the Faculty Teaching Clarity (FTC) scale. These items asked faculty members how important it was to them that they do such things in their courses as clarifying that material is understood before moving on, providing standards for satisfactory completion of assignments, and describing practical applications of course material. The remaining three items were seen to be very important by nearly all faculty members. Frequency distributions are given for these three items and discussed, but the items are not used in the additional analyses.

Other scales used in this study were created using items from the core FSSE survey which measure student gains, deep approaches to learning, and three other measures of engagement. For faculty taking the course-based option of FSSE, other forms of faculty engagement were measured with scales about faculty members' emphasis on intellectual skills, practical skills, personal and social responsibility, reflective learning, integrative learning, and higher-order thinking. For faculty taking the typical-student option of FSSE, other forms of faculty engagement were measured with scales about faculty's perceptions of students' gains in intellectual skills, practical skills, and personal and social responsibility as well as students' uses of reflective learning, integrative learning, and higher-order thinking. For information on component items see [fsse.iub.edu](http://fsse.iub.edu).

Various student-level and institution-level characteristics were used as demographics and as controls in the regression analyses in this study. The faculty-level characteristics included disciplinary field, academic rank, years of teaching experience, receipt of a doctorate degree, course load, age, gender, citizenship status, and race or ethnicity. Institution-level characteristics include private/public control and Carnegie classification.

### *Analysis*

To answer the first research question, frequencies for the teaching clarity individual items were used to identify which behaviors faculty found to be most important or least important in their courses. To answer the second research question, faculty scores on the FTC scale were divided into three different groups to differentiate between faculty use of moderate, high, or very high importance placed on these teaching clarity behaviors. The demographic characteristics of each of these groups will be analyzed to explore the characteristics of faculty placing different amounts of importance on teaching clarity behaviors. To answer the third research question, evidence was gathered using several multivariate OLS regressions to determine the relationship between faculty scores on the FTC scale and the dependent measures of deep approaches to learning, student gains, and three other measures of student engagement. Models in this paper include all previously mentioned faculty-level and institution-level characteristics. All continuous independent and dependent variables were standardized before being entered into the regression analyses so that the unstandardized coefficients can be interpreted as effect sizes.

### Results

Most faculty report that they find all of these teaching clarity behaviors to be important in their courses. The three most important behaviors were clearly explaining course goals and requirements, teaching course sessions in an organized way, and using examples or illustrations

to explain difficult points. More than 80% of faculty reported finding these behaviors to be ‘very much’ important in their classrooms. For the remaining teaching clarity behaviors (the focus of this paper), around 60% of faculty reported finding these behaviors to be very important in their classrooms. These behaviors include providing prompt and written feedback, describing the practical application of course material, providing standards for satisfactory completion of assignments, clarifying that material is understood before moving on, and using a variety of teaching techniques to accommodate diversity in student learning styles. What might be considered the least important behavior was using a variety of teaching techniques to accommodate different learning styles with 13% of faculty rating this as very little or somewhat important. For more details on the level of importance faculty place on various teaching clarity behaviors, see Table 2.

Dividing faculty scores on the FTC scale resulted in three categories that could be described as Moderate, High, and Very High perceptions of importance placed on teaching clarity behaviors. The FTC scale ranged in value between 1 (considered “very little” importance) to 4 (“very much” importance). Faculty in the Moderate group of importance on clarity had FTC scores ranging from 1 to 3.20 with an average score of 2.85 and a standard deviation of .32. Faculty in the High level of importance on clarity group had scores ranging from 3.33 to 3.83 with an average score of 3.60 and a standard deviation of .18. Faculty in the Very High level of importance on clarity group had scores of 4. All three of these groups had approximately 1,500 faculty members.

The characteristics of the faculty members in these three groups did vary by different demographics. Faculty from the field of Education were overrepresented and faculty from the fields of Biological Sciences, Engineering, and Physical Sciences were underrepresented in the

Very High level of importance on clarity group. Black or African American faculty were also overrepresented in that group, while male faculty members and a full professors were underrepresented. There was also a disproportionate number of faculty in this higher clarity group teaching in auxiliary locations or teaching from a distance suggesting that faculty who are teaching students at a distance may place more importance on clear teaching behaviors to offset potential difficulties faced in a non- traditional classroom setting. Faculty from the field of Business, Asian faculty, and US citizens were overrepresented among the High level of importance on clarity group. Faculty from the fields of Business, Education, or other Professional fields were underrepresented among the Moderate level of importance on clarity group, which also had an underrepresentation of Black or African American, part-time lecturers, faculty without a doctorate, and female faculty. For more details on the distribution of faculty characteristics by clarity grouping, see Table 3.

Controlling for a wide variety of faculty-level and institution-level characteristics, OLS regressions indicate that there are significant, positive relationships between the FTC scale and all FSSE scales. The strongest relationships were between FTC and emphasis on or student gains in Intellectual Skills, Practical Skills, and Higher-Order Thinking. These results indicate that faculty who place more importance on teaching clarity behaviors emphasize other important forms of student engagement in their classrooms and perceive that their students participate in other important forms of student engagement. Although other relationships were less strong, all relationships were of a small to medium magnitude (see Table 4).

### Discussion

Our study builds on the earlier work of BrckaLorenz, Cole, Kinzie, and Ribera (2011), who explored the relationship between teaching clarity and student engagement at the student

level using NSSE. The students in that study reported observing a high level of teaching clarity behaviors with the least observed behavior, making abstract ideas and theories understandable, still being observed often or very often by more than 75% of first-years and seniors. Similarly, most faculty in our study identified teaching clarity behaviors as important in their courses with the least important behavior to faculty, using a variety of teaching techniques to accommodate different learning styles, still being reported as quite or very important by more than 85% of the faculty in the sample. These findings are promising for higher education suggesting that most students observe a high-level of teaching clarity behaviors and the majority of faculty place a great level of importance on these behaviors.

Findings from this study also support earlier research on faculty characteristics and effective educational practices. Looking at the faculty who place a very high level of importance on teaching clarity, they were disproportionately Black or African American, female, and from the field of Education. This is similar to Nelson Laird and Ribera's (2012) study, which found that women, faculty of color, and Education faculty tend to engage in activities linked to the scholarship of teaching and learning more than other faculty. The differences found among faculty based on race and gender are consistent with earlier research showing that these populations engage in other effective educational practices more than their counterparts (e.g., Kuh, Nelson Laird, & Umbach, 2004; Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005).

Results from this study also indicate that faculty who place greater importance on teaching clarity also emphasize higher levels of student engagement and deep approaches to learning. This builds on the earlier NSSE study, which identified a significant relationship between teaching clarity and student engagement, deep approaches to learning and self-reported gains on the student level. By using FSSE, our study contributes to the literature by providing a

better picture of the faculty members who likely engage in teaching clarity behaviors and supporting findings on teaching clarity from the student-level as well as previous research on effective educational practices in higher education.

#### Implications and Future Research

Teaching clarity behaviors are learnable behaviors. As a result, findings from this study will help faculty developers and centers for teaching and learning better target their initiatives regarding teaching clarity. Although the majority of faculty in our sample place a lot of importance on teaching clarity behaviors, differences did emerge when looking at specific faculty characteristics. Considering the very high level of importance placed on teaching clarity behaviors by Black or African American faculty, female faculty, and Education faculty, faculty developers and centers for teaching and learning are encouraged to explore what can be learned from their experiences and how that can be applied to assist other faculty and promote greater clarity in the college classroom. That said, given the relatively high importance placed on teaching clarity across fields, there are also likely good examples and practices within each field that faculty and faculty developers can document and promote.

When discussing teaching clarity, another area in need of emphasis and exploration is instructional technology. Reflecting on the findings of his study, Chesebro (2003) writes, “When considering the effect sizes for clarity, it should be noted that the relatively large effects may have been explained by the use of PowerPoint slides” (p.145). Instructional technology was not explored in our study; however, when used well, this is certainly a resource faculty can use to promote greater clarity. Faculty developers and centers for teaching and learning are encouraged to explore faculty use of instructional technology and how multi-media can be used in an effort

to promote greater clarity and, as a result, increased engagement, deep approaches to learning, and self-reported gains.

In addition to exploring faculty characteristics and instructional technology in relation to teaching clarity, there are other areas in need of attention. To better promote clarity, more information is needed about faculty preparation and institutional encouragement. Researchers are encouraged to explore disciplinary differences in graduate preparation and how graduate work in specific disciplines prepares future faculty to engage in teaching clarity behaviors. Also, more research is needed in regards to institutional encouragement, specifically looking at the extent to which promotion and tenure processes at institutions value teaching clarity behaviors. Understanding these areas will further highlight the state of teaching clarity in higher education and help to promote faculty engagement in this effective educational practice.

### Conclusion

As institutions of higher education continue to hold themselves accountable for student learning, it is important to better understand and promote the teaching practices that promote this learning. Previous research recognizes the role of teaching clarity behaviors in the student learning process. The findings from this study further support teaching clarity as an effective educational practice that many faculty engage in. However, differences are present when looking at gender, race, and field. More work is needed to better understand these differences in an effort to ensure all students at colleges and universities are exposed to this effective educational practice.

Table 1 FSSE 2011 Teaching Clarity Experimental Items

<b>FSSE 2011 Teaching Clarity Experimental Items<sup>1</sup></b>
<b><i>How important is it that you do the following in your courses: (Very little, Some, Quite a bit, Very much)</i></b>
Clearly explain course goals and requirements
Teach course sessions in an organized way
Use examples or illustrations to explain difficult points
Use a variety of teaching techniques to accommodate diversity in student learning styles
Clarify that material is understood before moving on
Provide standards for satisfactory completion of assignments (i.e. rubrics, detailed outlines, etc.)
Provide frequent written or oral feedback on students' academic progress
Provide prompt written or oral feedback on students' academic progress
Describe the practical application of course material

Table 2 Level of Importance Faculty Place on Teaching Clarity Items

<b>How important it is to faculty to do the following in their courses:</b>				
	<b>Very much</b>	<b>Quite a bit</b>	<b>Some</b>	<b>Very little</b>
<b>Clearly explain course goals and requirements</b>	87.0%	11.6%	1.2%	.1%
<b>Teach course sessions in an organized way</b>	83.0%	15.0%	1.7%	.2%
<b>Use examples or illustrations to explain difficult points</b>	87.4%	11.4%	1.0%	.1%
<b>Use a variety of teaching techniques to accommodate diversity in student learning styles</b>	59.6%	27.6%	11.4%	1.4%
<b>Clarify that material is understood before moving on</b>	59.3%	32.5%	7.7%	.6%
<b>Provide standards for satisfactory completion of assignments (i.e. rubrics, detailed outlines, etc.)</b>	59.2%	28.3%	10.5%	2.0%
<b>Provide frequent written or oral feedback on students' academic progress</b>	59.7%	30.4%	9.1%	.8%
<b>Provide prompt written or oral feedback on students' academic progress</b>	63.4%	28.9%	7.0%	.7%
<b>Describe the practical application of course material</b>	65.9%	24.1%	8.2%	1.7%

<sup>1</sup> The final six items of this set were combined to create the Faculty Teaching Clarity (FTC) scale. The FTC scale has a Cronbach's  $\alpha$  = .797.

Table 3 Distribution of Faculty Demographics for Faculty with Varying Levels of Importance Placed on Teaching Clarity

	Moderate	High	Very High
<b>Arts &amp; Humanities</b>	33.4%	40.6%	26.0%
<b>Biological science</b>	37.4%	42.8%	19.8%
<b>Business</b>	21.3%	44.1%	34.6%
<b>Education</b>	16.0%	34.3%	49.6%
<b>Engineering</b>	42.3%	37.9%	19.8%
<b>Physical science</b>	40.7%	40.0%	19.3%
<b>Professional</b>	15.7%	41.0%	43.2%
<b>Social science</b>	35.0%	39.3%	25.7%
<b>Other</b>	28.6%	43.3%	28.2%
<b>Classroom instruction, on-campus</b>	34.8%	40.4%	24.9%
<b>Classroom instruction, at an auxiliary location</b>	18.2%	39.4%	42.4%
<b>Distance education</b>	16.5%	42.3%	41.1%
<b>Asian</b>	27.0%	45.4%	27.6%
<b>Black</b>	16.1%	33.1%	50.8%
<b>White</b>	31.0%	41.3%	27.7%
<b>Latino</b>	23.5%	34.1%	42.4%
<b>Other</b>	28.5%	38.4%	33.1%
<b>Part-time Lecturer</b>	18.1%	42.5%	39.4%
<b>Full-time Lecturer</b>	27.7%	38.3%	34.0%
<b>Assistant Professor</b>	28.4%	41.9%	29.8%
<b>Associate Professor</b>	34.4%	38.9%	26.7%
<b>Full Professor</b>	35.7%	41.1%	23.2%
<b>No doctorate degree</b>	22.2%	41.8%	36.0%
<b>Doctorate degree</b>	33.9%	39.8%	26.3%
<b>Less than 15 years teaching experience</b>	27.3%	41.3%	31.4%
<b>15 or more years teaching experience</b>	33.4%	39.9%	26.6%
<b>Younger than 55</b>	31.6%	40.9%	27.6%
<b>55 or older</b>	27.0%	40.5%	32.5%
<b>Male</b>	37.3%	40.6%	22.1%
<b>Female</b>	20.1%	40.6%	39.3%
<b>U.S. citizen</b>	29.6%	39.9%	30.5%
<b>International citizenship</b>	26.2%	45.0%	28.8%
<b>No tenure system at this institution</b>	24.3%	39.8%	35.9%
<b>Not on tenure track, although institution has tenure system</b>	23.3%	42.1%	34.6%
<b>On tenure track but not tenured</b>	28.0%	42.0%	30.0%
<b>Tenured</b>	37.4%	39.1%	23.5%

Table 4 Relationship between Faculty Teaching Clarity and FSSE Scales<sup>2</sup>

	Course-Based Unstd. B	Typical-Student Unstd. B
<b>Quality of Campus Relationships</b>		.185
<b>Campus Support</b>		.248
<b>Faculty-Student Interaction</b>	.218	.275
<b>Intellectual Skills</b>	.360	.314
<b>Practical Skills</b>	.375	.343
<b>Personal and Social Responsibility</b>	.263	.268
<b>Reflective Learning</b>	.209	.227
<b>Integrative Learning</b>	.273	.246
<b>Higher-Order Thinking</b>	.314	.318

<sup>2</sup> Models controlled for disciplinary field, rank, doctorate degree, years of experience teaching, course load, age, gender, citizenship, race, institutional control, and institutional Carnegie classification. All variables were standardized before entry into models.

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