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, and even less is known about to which different instructional emphases clarity in their teaching. 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 explores how 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 using data from the National Survey of Student Engagement. Using complementary data from the Faculty Survey of Student Engagement, this study further explores TC by examining faculty perceptions of the importance of TC as well as the relationship between TC and faculty use of other effective educational practices.

Student 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 3176 (59%) seniors from 38 baccalaureate granting institutions.

The teaching clarity items used in this study were adapted from the Wabash National Study.

Student Teaching Clarity Items

In your experience during the current school year, how often did your instructors do the following in your courses?

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

Faculty Data Source and Sample

The data come from the 2011 administration of the Faculty Survey of Student Engagement. The sample for this study consists of nearly 4,400 faculty members from 40 different colleges and universities (two institutions were Canadian) .

Faculty Teaching Clarity Items

Which faculty do you think have the following important behaviors for faculty, the least frequently observed behavior for students was making abstract ideas and theories understandable.

Faculty Clarity Items

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
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Student Results

Research Question 1: What TC behaviors are students exposed to most and least frequently?

Percent of Frequency ("Very Often" or "Often") Observed TC Behaviors:

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

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 included reviewing and summarizing course material effectively and instructors making abstract ideas and theories understandable.

Research Question 2: How does TC relate to deep learning and students’ reports of gains in college?

Pearson’s 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 findings that students exposed to TC behaviors are learnable when compared to students who are not exposed to these behaviors.

Research Question 3: How does TC relate to deep learning and students’ reports of gains in college?

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 on our website.

Facility Results

Research Question 1: What TC behaviors do faculty find most and least important?

Percent of Frequency of TC Importance!

- Clearly explain course goals and requirements
- Teach course sessions in an organized way
- Use examples or illustrations to explain difficult points
- Clarify that material is understood beforehand
- Provide standards for satisfactory completion
- Provide frequent written or oral feedback on assignments
- Prompt provide written or oral feedback on assignments

Describe the practical application of these findings.

Frequencies of teaching clarity items were used to identify which behaviors were “very much” or “quite a bit” important to faculty. Clearly explaining course goals and requirements behaviors were more frequently observed for faculty and among the most frequently observed behaviors for students. With 13% of faculty finding the use of a variety of teaching techniques to accommodate different learning styles to be “very high” or “important”, this could be considered as the least important TC behavior. Generally, however, all behaviors were found to be important to faculty. Although using examples and illustrations to explain difficult points was one of the most important behaviors for faculty, the least frequently observed behavior for students was making abstract ideas and theories understandable. This could point to a disconnect between students and faculty—faculty may find these behaviors important, but students may not still be understood. This understanding is the importance of formative assessment as a part of the teaching and learning process.

Research Question 2: Which faculty have moderate, high, and very high perceptions of the importance of TC?

Faculty scores on the FTC scale (items D through H) were divided into three different groups to differentiate between faculty who rated teaching clarity as “important” (average score of 80 or less on a 4-point scale), “moderate” (on average “somewhat” or “moderate” important), and “very high” (on average “very high” or “important” placed on these teaching clarity behaviors. Representation was as follows:

- Very High: More Education, Black/African American, and Men
- High: Less Biological Science, Engineering, and Physical Science; more professors
- Moderate: More Business, Education, other Professional Fields; Black/African American, part-time lecturers, faculty without a doctorate, female, teaching in auxiliary locations or teaching from a distance