Clarity in the Classroom: Understanding Faculty Perceptions of Teaching Clarity

Purpose
The literature on teaching clarity and student learning 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 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. This study additionally looks at how faculty characteristics (e.g., gender and rank) relate to the importance place on teaching clarity behaviors. This study is intended as a catalyst for further studies of faculty perceptions and experiences with teaching clarity behaviors.

Research Questions
1. What characterizes faculty with moderate, high, and very high perceptions of the importance of teaching clarity?
2. How does the perception of teaching clarity relate to other forms of effective educational practice?

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 (FTC) Scale Items:

- How important is it that you [faculty] do the following in your courses?
  - Very little, Some, Quite a bit, Very much

   A) Use a variety of teaching techniques to accommodate diversity in student learning styles
   B) Clarify that material is understood before moving on
   C) Provide standards for satisfactory completion of assignments
   D) Provide frequent written or oral feedback on students’ academic progress
   E) Provide prompt written or oral feedback on students’ academic progress
   F) Describe the practical application of course material

Sample Faculty Characteristics:
- 74% White
- 55% Male
- 95% US citizen
- 41% 55 years old or older
- 64% earned doctorate degree
- 46% at least 15 years of experience teaching

In the examination of teaching clarity and student learning skills, the examination of faculty teaching behaviors is often described as the opposite or otherwise, which helps students come to a clear understanding of material (Metzler, 1992, p. 275). Research has highlighted the positive effect teaching clarity has on important outcomes of a college education (see Chesnæo & McCoskey, 2001; Myers & Knox, 2001; Pasacreta, Edison, Nona, 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 (Walsh National Study of Liberal Arts Education, nd). Additionally, teaching clarity has been found to have a positive relationship with student comprehension of material (Chesnæo & McCoskey, 2001; Myers & Knox, 2001), cognitive growth (Pasacreta, Edison, Nona, Hagedorn, & Braxton, 1996), student satisfaction (Hativa, 1998), and student motivation (Ginsberg, 2007). Pasacreta (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 Walsh National Study (see Pasacreta, 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, Braxton, Lorme, Cole, Kinzie, and Rivers (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.

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.

Results
Research Question 1: Characteristics of faculty with varying perceptions of the importance of teaching clarity
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 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 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 this group, while male faculty members and a full professors were underrepresented.

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 and faculty who placed moderate level of importance on clarity group, which also had an underrepresentation of Black or African American, part-time instructors, faculty without a doctorate, and female faculty.

Research Question 2: Relationships between the Teaching Clarity and FSSE measures of engagement
OLS regressions were used to determine the relationship between faculty scores on the FTC scale and the dependent measures of deep approaches to learning, student gains, and 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.

There are significant, positive relationships between the FTC scale and all FSSE measures of engagement. 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 classes and argue that their students participate in other important forms of student engagement.

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