

Student Perceptions of Teaching Transparency

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Abstract

The authors discuss the relationship between teaching transparency and active learning through the perspectives of their students. Active learning directly engages students in the learning process while transparency involves the instructor's divulgence of logic regarding course organization and activity choices. After utilizing these teaching techniques, four instructors collected feedback regarding students' positive and negative perceptions of both the activity and the transparency. The responses were overwhelmingly positive and indicate that students found that transparency gave them a better sense of purpose, motivation, clarity and connection to course objectives. In conclusion, we discuss ways in which the student feedback is essential for instructors' reflection on teaching.

Keywords: Teaching transparency, active learning, sociology.

Active learning is a broad concept that is used to describe teaching techniques that directly engage students in the learning process. It represents a shift from teacher-centered to student-centered learning techniques. Students are encouraged to learn through reading, writing, discussion, and reflection. The teaching literature provides numerous examples of active learning techniques (Holtzman, 2005; Levy & Merenstein, 2005; McKeachie, 2011; Pedersen, 2010; Wills, Brewster & Fulkerson, 2005). While students often enjoy these activities, they may not necessarily understand the intent or purpose of the activity within the course context. One way of avoiding this problem is to be a more transparent teacher.

By transparency, we are referring to a teaching style that (1) clarifies to students the instructor's choices for lesson plans and (2) specifies how those choices relate to course goals. This conceptualization leads us to ask how we can improve active learning techniques by being more transparent in our teaching. In this effort to employ reflective teaching, we connect teaching transparency to four different active learning activities and provide suggestions for improvements based on student perceptions and our perceptions as the instructors. This critical reflection helps instructors connect student learning outcomes to teaching techniques.

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Conceptualizing Transparency

Transparency in higher education is not a new idea. It has commonly been used in the context of institutional reform following public criticisms in the 1980s calling for more accountability of colleges and universities (McCormick, 2010). The assessment movement was a reaction to these criticisms, and transparency was integrated as a way to keep the public informed about decision-making processes in regards to the uses of taxpayer money in public institutions (McCormick, 2010). While debates about the virtues of assessment continue today, it is not hard to see that it is fully integrated at both the institutional and classroom levels. At the classroom level, transparency is part of course organization and teaching practices (Cuevas, Matveev, & Miller, 2010; Hativa, 1998). Lave and Wagner (1991:105) broadly refer to transparency as “a way of organizing activities that makes their meaning visible” and suggests that students need explicit knowledge and resources to move from legitimate peripheral participation to full participation in the learning process.

One key element of transparency at the classroom level is student learning outcomes. Course goals and objectives are the general competencies we hope students accomplish and demonstrate while student learning outcomes are a less abstract way to conceptualize the course objectives. Goals and student learning outcomes provide a clear framework for the course and is one way we communicate the fundamental disciplinary knowledge, skills, and abilities that students are expected to obtain (Goldsmid, 1981; Grauerholz & Gibson, 2006). Kean, Mitchell, and Wilson (2008) argue that to be transparent we have to be intentional, and student learning outcomes are a part of this process. They suggest that we clarify to students why they are being asked to learn certain outcomes. One way of achieving this level of transparency would be by explaining how student learning outcomes reflect fundamental disciplinary knowledge and skills.

Student learning outcomes are also measurable and can be evaluated through in-class activities and course assignments. Further, the choice of any teaching technique should reflect learning goals and outcomes. Cuevas et al. (2010) extend the notion of intentionality and transparency to include the deliberate alignment of course-level outcomes and instructional and learning activities. This could be accomplished by discussing the chosen teaching techniques with students, acknowledging that we have taken into consideration that students have different learning styles, and developing class activities and assessments with this in mind (Vesely, 2011). The use of student learning outcomes is consistent with Lave and Wagner’s (1991) notion of transparency where meanings are visible and student have explicit knowledge and resources pertaining to the course. However, Adler (1999) cautions against using too much transparency as it may potentially hinder student learning by not reflecting actual disciplinary practices.

Methods

We focus on whether or not students perceive transparency as effective in order to create more meaningful learning experiences and improve student learning. We argue that, at the classroom level, transparency provides students with a framework for the course

(McKinney, 1988), and gives students a better understanding of why particular class materials and activities are used. In other words, it is a way to help students “understand *how* and *why* they are learning course content in particular ways” (University of Illinois, 2011). In addition, it helps us to be more reflective as instructors in order to improve our teaching (Albers, 2008; Brookfield, 1995).

The literature on transparency provides us with a broad conceptualization of transparency at the institutional level (Lazerson, Wagener, & Shumanis, 2000). However, we are interested in how transparency unfolds in a classroom setting, particularly the ways in which clarifying the instructors’ choices for lesson plans and course goals are received by students. To better understand how transparency is received in the classroom, we collected student feedback after four active learning activities in four separate sociology courses. In each class, we integrated transparency into a different active learning exercise by orally discussing the rationale and the goals of the activities at their onset. The courses were taught during the summer of 2011 at a large public university in North Carolina. The university has an approximate enrollment of 35,000 students.

In order to maintain autonomy, each instructor engaged in transparency in the way that she saw fit for their classroom objectives and contexts. Engaging in transparency in different ways also allowed us to evaluate the differences in the students’ perceptions of differing methods of teaching transparency. Although each instructor divulged their rationale or their learning objectives at their own discretion, none of the instructors defined or explained that their divulgence was an act of transparency. Instead, at the end of each class activity, we each collected data from our students voluntarily.² In each case, students filled out forms with open-ended questions concerning their likes and perceived strengths of our transparency and their dislikes and perceived weaknesses of our transparency.³ These forms were then placed in an envelope and sealed. As these were current students in our classes, no demographic data were collected in an effort to maintain the students’ anonymity. At the end of our data collection, each of the instructors completed a systematic analysis of the data and then reviewed the other instructors’ coding to ensure inter-coder reliability. Finally, the data were organized according to emergent themes.

Data were collected on two occasions in a Sociology of Family course following the use of transparency for two in-class activities, on three occasions in a Social Problems course where transparency was used in two in-class activities and at the end of the course as part of the course evaluation, on one occasion in a Principles of Sociology course following the use of transparency for an in-class activity, and on two occasions in a different Social Problems course following the use of transparency for one in-class activity and one group

² This study was approved by the IRB. Students granted their informed consent for participation in this study.

³ The exact questions posed to students were, “What did you like about my disclosing the logic behind the course layout? Or, what are the strengths of disclosing my logic behind the course layout?” and “What did you dislike about my disclosing the logic behind the course layout? Or, what are the weaknesses of disclosing my logic behind the course layout?”

project that spanned two weeks. The total sample size for this study was 90 students with a 71 percent overall average response rate.⁴

As part of our transparency, each instructor explained the value and logic behind using each activity. For example, one instructor used inquiry guided learning (IGL) because it is an inductive teaching practice where students are presented “a question to be answered, an observation or data set to be interpreted, or a hypothesis to be tested” (Prince & Felder, 2007:14). The instructor explained to students that with this type of active learning, the instructor is the “guide on the side” as students construct an understanding of disciplinary content, methods, and perspectives (Atkinson & Hunt, 2008). Another instructor chose a group peer teaching exercise because group work is well-documented as an effective means of active learning (Beckman, 1990; Caulfield & Persell, 2010; McKeachie, 2011). In addition, research shows that group peer teaching is a useful method for learning material as it promotes teamwork, planning abilities and confidence (McKeachie, 2011). An additional instructor used an atypical program (e.g. Wordle) that would make the class stand out as fun and interesting, especially since students can see what they and others have written (McNaught & Lam, 2010). The last instructor developed a content analysis project, similar to Taylor (2003) and Clark and Atkinson (2008), to help students recognize gender stereotypes in their respective contexts.

Analysis

The responses were overwhelmingly positive with most students indicating that transparency was a positive addition to the course. However, there were some students who had less than positive reactions and still others who seemed indifferent to the transparency revealed by their instructors. The students’ perceptions vary with the types and depth of transparency used by the course instructors.

Out of 73 responses, 50 were positive (68.5 percent), 7 were negative (9.6 percent), and 16 (21.9 percent) did not speak directly to teaching transparency (i.e. perspectives on the course, instructor or specific activity). Of the positive responses, respondents indicated that the transparency gave them a better sense of purpose, motivation, clarity and connection to other course material. Students with negative responses viewed transparency as a waste of time or an insult.

Students liked knowing why the activities were chosen for several reasons. One wrote that transparency “made class work seem less menial when we know how it was meant to help us.” Students liked being assured they were not just assigned “busy work”: “It put us on an even playing field. I think it also holds the instructor more accountable because they explain what/why/etc. we are doing so we don’t end up doing busy work that seems elementary to college students.” This aversion to “busy work” has been observed in other studies (Lizzio, Wilson & Simons, 2002; Nijhuis, Segers & Gijsselaers, 2008) which

⁴ The total population was 90 students. Together, we collected a total of 73 responses for the four activities mentioned. We use responses as our unit of analysis.

found that when students perceive work to be meaningful and not just “busy work,” they approach it with a deeper level of learning.

One student responded, “I do think it is important to explain the reasoning behind an activity. Though I wasn't initially excited about it, hearing more details made me more open to the activity.” Here, the student is making a connection between teaching transparency and motivation to perform which was also observed by Allen, Witt, and Wheelless (2006). Disclosing the logic behind an activity provided this student with insights into the activity and the instructor's motives. Students who are provided an explanation of the value of the activity may be more likely to take the activity seriously and be motivated to participate.

Some students felt more confident knowing ahead of time what the instructor's learning goals were for them. Further, they expressed that knowing those goals allowed them to spend more time thinking critically about the content. One student wrote that s/he “could concentrate on [what I would get out of the activity] rather than wonder what the heck it was about” while another student believed that more transparency would “help [students] to start thinking critically before [the activity] instead of after.”

Students responded positively to connecting course goals to the activities. They learned to think critically and were able to recognize that critical thinking is necessary for learning. For example, students indicated that the IGL activity required “a greater level of cognitive development” and that they had to “do more analysis and interpretation”, and use “our sociological imaginations.” These responses show that students connect what they have done in class with the student learning outcomes and levels of learning which is consistent with preliminary findings from the Illinois Initiative on Transparency in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (2011).

The student responses spoke to how transparency helped both in understanding the general focus of the course as well as the purpose for particular assignments. For instance, students completing the course project reported: “I understand why we did this project because of what I have learned throughout the class,” and “In most classes, if we are assigned group projects, it feels like the teacher is just lazy and doesn't want to come up with a lesson plan for that week. Through transparency, I was able to see that this wasn't busy work or a waste of time, but that thought had been put into the planning.” Students also suggested that being transparent about the purpose of this project helped them approach it with explicit goals: “I think that the activity was done more efficiently because a connection was made to the course. I wanted to know what the project had to do with my education.”

Some students, however, noted that the transparency did not change the way that they approached and completed the course project assignment. One student responded that “While the information was appreciated, it didn't change how I attacked the project.” Still, 65 percent of students reported that the transparency allowed them to approach the activity with a positive outlook and with a better understanding of particular objectives. Thus, being transparent provided students with clearer objectives that they used to ap-

proach and complete projects and exposed purposeful teaching strategies that linked individual assignments and overall course goals.

Still four out of the 73 responses described transparency as an insult or manipulation. One student stated,

I am old enough and smart enough to figure out why a movie/article relates to what we are studying. If you have to talk about why you chose a movie/article - ask us why we think you chose it. That way it encourages us to tie the information into what we know. You telling us just seems rude.

Another wrote, "I feel like in college you shouldn't have to be told why you're doing something." These responses show a very different reaction to teaching transparency than those mentioned above. These students demonstrate that teaching transparency, in some cases, can seem to be condescending. Another student wrote, "Sometimes I would think less if I could already connect the end idea." This student addresses an environmental tension in college: on the one hand, students are expected to be ambitious learners, while on the other hand, the pressure that can accompany taking a full course load often leads students to take shortcuts with their learning, especially if the course is not required for their majors or is not a subject of interest to them. Instructors might find it beneficial to accomplish transparency by using a more inductive or inquiry guided learning approach: asking the students to speculate how an activity or reading is connected to learning goals or other course material. For example, instead of stating student learning outcomes at the onset, an instructor might frame these as questions throughout the course of the activity.

Discussion

Teaching and learning are interactive processes where instructors and students construct a meaning of the educational experience (Blumer, 1969). As instructors, we have the potential to change routinized education through our social interactions in the classroom (hooks, 1994). Instruction through active learning, coupled with teaching transparency, allows students to actively engage in their learning.

It is important to note that liking transparency is not the same as developing deep learning. As this is an exploratory study, our goal is to assess the perceptions of the students broadly and hope that they found transparency helpful to their learning experiences. However, while our form asked students to disclose what they liked and the strengths of the transparency and/or what they did not like and weaknesses of the transparency, some of the responses spoke directly to deep learning. This is evidenced in the comments regarding the necessary use of critical thinking. We speculate, as argued by Lizzio et al. (2002) and Nijhuis et al. (2008), that our being transparent created an environment in which students were more invested in class activities and were better able to engage in a deeper level of learning.

In our classes, students responded positively when exposed to the details in course planning and the logic used in determining teaching strategies. Further, students appreciated the clear connection of course material to overall course goals and objectives. This gave students a “general sense of direction” (Goldsmid, 1981:263) by providing them with a framework for the course (Grauerholz & Gibson, 2006; McKinney, 1988; Persell, 2010; Wagenaar, 2004). However, not all of the students responded positively. Some students may not have perceived transparency as a productive use of class time because they are used to a teaching relationship in which instructors do not explain reasoning behind their lesson plans. To a student who is accustomed to learning in this manner, transparency might seem foreign, as if it has no legitimate place in classroom instruction.

Furthermore, students’ experiences and skill levels might make them feel as if a transparent instructor is not acknowledging their ability to discover the logic behind the lesson plan or the connection to learning outcomes. This could be viewed as an insult, as was the case with the student who responded that (s)he was annoyed that the instructor thought the class was too “dumb” to figure out why a movie or article was chosen for the course. Also, classes at the introductory level often include students who are majoring in the discipline and students who have enrolled in the course to fulfill a university’s general requirements. The students in these courses also vary in academic level. Therefore, the instructor must teach to students with various skill levels. Students who do not recognize the variance of skill levels of their classmates might feel that the instructor is being manipulative or belittling his or her students.

In an effort to minimize these negative reactions to teaching transparency, instructors might consider a few strategies. For students who might feel as if transparency is a waste of class time, transparency disclosures should be kept brief and discussed in conjunction with learning goals (Goldsmid, 1981; Grauerholz & Gibson, 2006). Our findings suggest that tying transparency to learning goals encourages connectivity to an end result. All of the students whose instructors connected the transparency to learning objectives provided positive responses regarding transparency. This is likely because connecting the transparency to goals helped the students understand that they were not given “busy work” or a “stand alone” assignment. Therefore, connecting transparency to goals may help some students situate the transparency into the course design more clearly (McKinney, 1988). Instructors with students at more advanced skill levels might also consider actively engaging students to discover the logic of activities and assignments and how they connect to other course material. This might be accomplished through class discussion, small group discussion, or individual reflection. These strategies might also help students feel as if they have agency in their learning rather than feeling as if they are being manipulated by instructors.

When considering incorporating active learning and teaching transparency in their classrooms, instructors might want to consider a few things when conceptualizing these techniques. Active learning, as a teaching strategy, is well-documented in the teaching literature. However, the lingering question that many instructors have after an active learning activity is whether or not their students got “the message” (Taylor, 2003:309). In response, we argue that transparency should be coupled with active learning (Arvidson &

Huston, 2008; Taylor, 2003). Transparency can be managed according to each instructor's preference. However, in our study, we found that instructors who connected their activities to overall learning outcomes and course goals during their transparency did not receive any of the negative responses previously discussed. Active learning combined with teaching transparency, then, is valuable and worthwhile for instructors to consider when conceptualizing their course strategies.

Future research would benefit from examining transparency in different institutional and classroom contexts. For example, would students at a small liberal arts university respond in the same way as our students at a large research university? Are there important demographic differences in how students respond to transparency? Our study was conducted in four classrooms of 29 students or less. Active learning activities and teaching transparency endeavors are likely to differ in larger, lecture-style classrooms. Would students in these larger classrooms respond to transparency in a similar way as our students? Future research also might want to consider approaching the study of transparency using the "sociology of the classroom" (Atkinson, Buck, & Hunt, 2009), and specifically examining how transparency shapes the interactive processes within the classroom and influences the learning relationship between instructors and students.

Finally, our study investigates students' perceptions of the effectiveness of teaching transparency, an important first step in this investigation. Most of the instructors did not measure student performance as the in-class activities were ungraded. However, the group project was evaluated with a grade, and students who shared their perspectives regarding the transparency for this assignment noted that the transparency helped them to "understand the purpose" which resulted in their motivation to "put in more effort" and work more "efficiently". Future research should investigate other measures of student learning for further examination into the relationships between teaching transparency and deep learning.

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