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The R.I.S.E. Guide to Designing More Transparent Assignments

Introduction

There are many ways instructors can support the students in their courses. They can provide clear syllabi with detailed course schedules, organize their courses with the student user in mind, and teach students how to navigate course materials and resources. Another great way to support students is to design more transparent assignments.

You may be asking yourself –What exactly is a transparent assignment? Transparent assignments are assignments that have clear and explicit purpose and expectations, detailed criteria for success, and specific instructions for completion. Basically, this type of assignment will tell students exactly what they need to do to successfully complete it.

You may be saying to yourself –I don't want to tell students everything by giving them all the answers. They are in my class to learn after all, right? Of course, you are correct; however, making assignments more transparent actually helps students learn more in your classes. This is true for all students, including students that are not sufficiently prepared for college-level work. In fact, research has shown "that the adoption of transparent-oriented assignments improves the learning outcomes for underserved students at the introductory level and decreases the rate of attrition among the student population with the highest risk of dropping out." In addition, recent research has found that "transparent expectations combined with transparent assignments contribute to enhanced student engagement and academic achievement" (Howard, Winkelmes, & Shegog, 2020, p. 198-199).

As you can see, designing more transparent assignments is a great way to support all students and increase their chances of success in our courses.

For research on the impact of transparent assignments, see the following:

- [A Teaching Intervention that Increases Underserved College Students' Success](#)
- [Transparency teaching in the virtual classroom: Assessing the opportunities and challenges of integrating transparency teaching methods with online learning](#)

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Explanation

Many believe that creating transparent assignments is a huge undertaking and very time consuming. While it may take time, keep in mind that the benefits are worth the extra effort! Also, remember that you do not have to do everything all at once. Start small by trying to include just one of the items listed below in your assignments and adding an additional criterion each time you teach the course. Before you know it, your assignments will be more transparent and provide the necessary information your students need to be successful. When designing course assignments, try to include the following:

- Learning Objectives
  - Including learning objectives in your assignments helps both you and your students understand the purpose and intent of a given assignment. These objectives should be concise and not confused with learning outcomes. While a learning outcome "describes broad aspects of behavior which incorporate a wide range of knowledge and skill," a learning objective tends "to describe specific, discrete units of knowledge and skill that can be accomplished within a short timeframe" (Writing Course Goals/Learning Outcomes and Learning Objectives). When creating your learning objectives, ask yourself the following: What do I want students to accomplish and why? For some useful tips and ideas for creating learning objectives, consult the following resources:
    - Writing Course Goals/Learning Outcomes and Learning Objectives (Iowa State University)
    - Developing Learning Objectives (University of Connecticut)
- Clear Instructions
  - While including instructions in an assignment is something we all do, we often fail to make those instructions clear for our students. After reading instructions, how often have you heard a student say, "I don't understand. What am I supposed to do for this assignment?" To help alleviate student confusion and guide them on the right path, make sure your instructions provide enough information so that students know exactly what they need to do. For example, "write a short essay about X" can be somewhat confusing for students, while "write a two-page expository essay about X using MLA formatting" provides more specific details and gives students a better idea of your expectations. Assignment instructions should be clear, concise, and explicit and take the guess work out of understanding an instructor's expectations. They should be specific and provide guidelines, examples, and exact steps when appropriate. For some tips and ideas for writing clear instructions, see the following resources:
    - How to Write Effective Assignment Instructions (Ivy Tech Community College-Lafayette)
    - 4 Tips for Writing Good Online Assignment Instruction (Cengage)
    - A Guide to Giving Clear Instructions to Students (Western Governors University
- Detailed Grading Rubric
  - A final step in creating a more transparent assignment is to include a detailed grading rubric. "Rubrics clarify assignment details for students. They provide an operational answer to the frequently asked student question, "What do you want in this

assignment?" (Weimer, 2016). When creating an assignment, it is important to indicate what success and failure look like. What does an excellent response entail? How about an average one? If you can't articulate what a great response looks like, how are students supposed to know? Regardless of the type of rubric you choose to create, holistic or analytic, make sure your rubric explicitly describes your expectations and various performance levels (i.e., an excellent response, an average response, etc.) Check out the following resources for ideas and tips for creating effective rubrics for your assignments:

- Designing Grading Rubrics (Brown University)
- Best Practices for Designing Effective Rubrics (Arizona State University)
- Creating and Using Rubrics (Carnegie Mellon University)

Please know that this brief guide is just the beginning. If you have questions or wish to learn more ways to make your assignments more transparent, please contact your R.I.S.E. scholar or the Learning Academy.

Let's practice!

Using the questions below, take a few minutes to check the transparency of an existing assignment by answering YES or NO to each question.

1. Does the assignment have a stated purpose? Is the purpose clear and concise?
2. Does the assignment include learning objectives? Are the learning objectives easy to understand? Do the learning objectives tell students how the assignment will benefit them?
3. Does the assignment define the specific activities the student should do to complete the assignment?
4. Does the assignment include guidelines (or steps) that students need to follow to successfully complete the assignment? Are the steps detailed?
5. Does the assignment include an assessment rubric? Does the rubric provide specific language or examples of how a great response differs from an average response?

If you answered NO to any of the above questions, consider making your assignment more transparent by adding the items that are missing. Remember, the goal is to develop an assignment that has a clear purpose, explicit expectations, and detailed criteria for success. (For a more detailed checklist, please see the Transparent Assignment Checklist.)

We hope that the information on this teaching strategy encouraged you to design more transparent assignments as a way to support your students and improve student learning outcomes. If you have any questions or wish to receive feedback on your ideas for the practice activities, please contact your R.I.S.E. scholar or the Learning Academy.

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