**Faculty
Development
for
Transparent
Learning
& Teaching**

Faculty Development for Transparent Learning & Teaching: Perspectives from Teacher-Scholars

By Russell Carpenter, Shirley O'Brien, Travis Martin, Heather Fox, Clint Pinion, Susan Skees Hermes, Camille Skubik-Peplaski, and Casey Humphrey

Introduction

TRANSPARENT ASSIGNMENT DESIGN is shown to increase students' potential to succeed while reducing inequities in the learning process (Winkelmes et al., 2016). Higher education institutions have used transparent assignment design techniques to enhance learning and student engagement in the classroom. Building on the work of Winkelmes, faculty developers have found innovative ways to design and implement initiatives focused on transparent assignment design on their own campuses. While all uniquely focused on the needs of their campus, faculty, and students, these initiatives support faculty in developing assignments that allow students to learn how to be successful and why the instructor is asking them to complete them.

The move to flexible instruction alternatives will prevail, with a concerted focus on the transparent foundations on the purpose of teaching and learning. Faculty are learning how to embrace technology within learning options and assignments. Within higher education institutions across the country, definitions of delivery modes have expanded, adding clarity and consistency for both faculty and learners. On our own campus, communication and consistency emerged as key elements, which COVID-19 brought to the forefront in transition planning. Virtual delivery models require faculty to reconsider how they communicate with students, to intentionally convey intent (Darby & Lang, 2019). The calls nationally and at Eastern Kentucky University (EKU) were for more thoughtfully streamlined delivery approaches, prioritizing learning. The focus on clarity, modular organization of content rose to the top, with a focus on developing depth in learning versus presenting more content. By doing so, course organization focused on students, building upon foundational learning, along with the support needed to promote learning. Motivating students to do more, to think metacognitively through the organization and preparation of courses was reinforced across the country, within the higher education landscape. Thus, the need is presented for faculty development designs shaped upon opportunities for transparent learning.

Transparent Foundations

Winkelmes established foundations of transparent teaching in several important ways, including the importance of explaining to students why we, as faculty, are having them do particular activities, such as homework, projects, and exams, revealing to students why activities were chosen and how they intentionally and carefully cultivate learning. To that end, the transparency framework designed by Winkelmes also acknowledges that many students do not see or realize that instructors carefully develop and choose course activities to increase learning. The transparency framework motivates students to do more than the minimum work necessary, while also creating circumstances in which students "learn how to learn," which is a valuable skill in a variety of academic situations, and many assignments are not successful at encouraging students how to learn. By inviting students into the learning process and demystifying tasks unassociated with actual learning, transparent approaches also empower student voices, perspectives, and experiences. Importantly, Winkelmes et al. (2016) found that more transparent assignments had a positive impact on student performance in the course:

In courses where students perceived more transparency as a result of receiving the transparently designed, problem-centered take-home assignments, they experienced significantly greater learning benefits compared with their classmates who perceived less transparency around assignments in a course. (n.p)

In addition, they found promising results in retention and retention rates: "Students' short-term retention rates in the more transparent courses were slightly higher than those of students in the less transparent courses" (Winkelmes et al., 2016, n.p.). Incorporating transparency into the course itself, though, an adjustment to teaching (in addition to assignment design), Fisher et al. (2016) also reported that, "transparency works best when it is incorporated into the content of a class, when transparency itself becomes the object of study, or, perhaps, when the process of assignment design is shared with students" (n.p.). This process takes careful attention in planning and teaching. To this end, faculty development programs focused on teaching enhancement have integrated variations of the transparency framework into their annual programming calendars, often under the name of "evidence-based" or "student-centered" practices. Stand-alone workshops attract faculty interested in continuing to develop teaching that allows for transferable and metacognitive learning among students and, for their own development, more intentional pedagogy.

Faculty development programs have incorporated transparent teaching methods into their initiatives in a variety of ways. While many programs have designed sustained, ongoing programs, others have focused on assignment revision or single stand-alone programs. Designs are often established based on intended outcomes. Several models include:

- intensive workshops focused on theories of transparent assignment design;
- multi-day assignment redesign institutes; and
- semester-long cohorts of faculty working together established from across departments.

Before beginning this special section, faculty from EKU, a regional comprehensive institution located in Richmond, KY, offer their perspectives on transparent teaching.

Transparent Teaching Roundup: Reflections from Teacher-Scholars

Gooblar (2019) argued, "When we treat teaching with the seriousness it deserves, we'll see that it is an essential part of scholarship, not a distraction from it. We'll recommit ourselves to an inspiring model of higher education: as we explore new frontiers of knowledge, we will take our students with us" (p. 13). This article consists of a series of reflections by teacher-scholars, all of whom have recently participated in faculty development focused on transparent approaches. Reflection can serve as a powerful tool in the continued enhancement of teaching as scholarly practice. Consistent with the transparency framework itself, reflection encourages intentional practice, student-focused learning outcomes, enhanced student performance on assignments as well as our courses, and increased metacognition (learning about learning) practices, a skill students can transfer to future courses and academic experiences.

Higher education as an entity has been presented with an unique opportunity as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic to reflect on and adapt best practices for teaching and learning. The typical stalemates and challenges have been pushed aside, allowing for innovations to surface. Many of these options were present prior to the pandemic; however, faculty adoption was slow in the uptake, holding onto long-standing assumptions about traditional teaching and learning methods. The virtual online delivery accelerated faculty and students in the adoption and adaptation of technologies that could maintain a sense of community and continuity of instruction. Moreover, instructional techniques focused on student learning were foregrounded. The calls nationally (and at EKU) were not for more complex, complicated modes of delivery but for thoughtfully designed approaches that

- prioritize learning;
- provide clear approaches that encourage students to identify the purpose of an assignment (and how it connects to other aspects of the course);
- create consistent channels for communication;
- establish clear expectations for performance and success; and
- focus on the tasks required in assignments that are most important.

From reflective practitioner perspectives (see Regan, 2012), these faculty offer a cross-disciplinary look at the many ways in which they have applied transparent frameworks to enhance their teaching. As Regan (2012) argued, "To avoid the loss of enthusiasm or static practice, teachers need to focus on their own professional development" (n.p.). Building on the transparency framework established by Winkelmes in the Transparency in Learning and Teaching (TILT) initiative, the faculty in this article offer reflections on ways in which they have adjusted strategies in their own teaching after participating in recent professional learning communities (PLCs) coordinated through EKU's Faculty Center for Teaching & Learning (FCT&L).

Travis Martin—First-Year Courses / Veterans Studies

In 2017, I joined a PLC at EKU that piloted the TILT framework. My goal was to improve two courses: Foundations of Learning, a freshman seminar required of students with an academic readiness need; and Introduction to Veterans Studies, a course that fulfills a General Education requirement in diversity. The common thread? They're *required* courses.

Winkelmes (2016) describes TILT as a "framework," yet I have come to look at it as more of a "guiding philosophy." Transparent course design is a testament to the instructor's commitment to student success. It undermines power imbalances between learners, instructors, and institutions. It makes knowledge accessible to underprivileged students through intentional pedagogy that reduces disciplinary jargon and the brand of gatekeeping that (ironically) educated today's college educators.

I first "TILTed" a scaffolded "Science of Learning Project" that focuses on learning strategies championed by Brown and Roediger (2014). For example, students experiment with retrieval practice in their Math class and interleaving in their History class over the span of a few weeks. They create pre-assessments and post-assessments, measuring their retention of knowledge before and after the project. The assignment is a force multiplier. The work they do for my Foundations of Learning course consistently improves their grades in others; they learn skills that help them persist to graduation. However, the first iteration of the project did not explain its *overarching purpose*, a key component of TILT.

I assumed that students would just "take my word for it" and realize the awesomeness of the opportunity given to them. I did what I thought was my due diligence, breaking down the project into stages and detailing my expectations. But that was the problem. I thought copious amounts of detail would alleviate student fear. But my emphasis—my expectations—were *rules* to be followed. They were not *opportunities* to be seized. Nowhere in my assignment design had I given students the chance to consider their personal motivations.

When making the assignment more transparent, I first reduced the length. I incorporated Winkelmes's "purpose, task, criteria" design. I added opportunities for students to direct their own learning and language about why the assignment was important. Once I learned that *purpose* mattered, it was easy to help students connect assignments to intrinsic motivations such as gaining study skills and improving classroom performance. TILTing assignments moved the emphasis away from extrinsic motivators like grades and *my* authority. What student doesn't want to persist to graduation? Why can't self-directed learners be their own authority?

I used to tell students, "Go through the rubric column that gives you the highest score. Make a checklist and do everything on it. That's how you get you an A." It worked for me as a student. Except this method doesn't guide them along the path to *earning* an A. It dictates the hoops they need to jump through to be *given* an A. What disciplinary knowledge is gained by forcing students to navigate artificial power structures? What transferable skills do my students gain by wading through the idiosyncrasies of my rubric designs? Why not provide a simple set of directions to free up their energy to focus on actual learning? *I wanted my students to learn*. Instead, they invested a great deal of time and experienced a great deal of frustration "figuring out what the professor wants." TILT removes that barrier. The focus of every assignment is on the student, not the instructor.

TILT democratizes the classroom, which for me, involves removing the ceiling of what students are capable of achieving by permitting them to customize their learning experiences. As a guide, I help them focus on the threshold concepts they

need to master in order to achieve higher levels of knowledge (Middendorf & Shopkow, 2018). Today, my entire courses are informed by the TILT "philosophy." What do they look like practically? Course policies, information, and grading criteria are accessible in plainspoken language and within three clicks. In the first week, students complete an assignment that asks them to reflect on past experiences and explain how course content connects to future goals. The skills and knowledge gained are stated on the outside of the folder leading to each module. Once inside, under the assignments folder, students find a section entitled, "How do I know if I am doing a good job?" Every assignment has hyperlinks to examples, submission instructions, even the necessary software.

My Veterans Studies students have "Student Learning Outcome Assignments," major projects in which they choose a learning outcome from the course syllabus, decide what they want to learn about the topic, and devise their own method of gaining that knowledge. For example, a student may choose to learn about "examples of resilience and posttraumatic growth in the veteran population" by interviewing a war veteran and recording their story. I serve in the capacity of mentor, providing information and resources, but ultimately staying out of their way as they tailor the course to suit their personal interests and professional needs.

The next natural step was to remove extrinsic motivators altogether, *especially* grades. Kohn (2012) found that evaluative feedback and growth are stunted by graded approaches. In fact, students disregard evaluative feedback altogether when provided alongside a grade. In place of grades, I developed an elaborate "Grade Proposal" system based on the work of Blum (2017). Students rate their levels of engagement throughout the semester: engagement plan in week one, midterm grade proposal at week seven, and a final grade proposal at the end. They provide examples from their work—evidence of growth—to make a case for their proposed grades. Through metacognitive strategies, students leave the course able to articulate what they knew at the beginning of the semester and what they know at the end. Naturally, assessment is a lot simpler when every student explains in detail and with examples how they met each learning objective.

Following Dweck's (2008) concept of growth mindset, TILT and trust have turned my required courses into *opportunities*. My rubrics even have a column that reads, "Not Yet–Keep Trying!" and all of my courses are in a continual state of revision. If a student tells me something is "hard to understand" or "difficult to find," I will likely revise the course template the same day. I include anonymous feedback forms in each module and show students respect by embracing humility and valuing their opinions in earnest. The results have been astounding, ranging from increased creativity and performance to consistent reports of satisfaction with the courses in my evaluations.

Heather Fox—English

Just prior to attending Mary-Ann Winkelmes's keynote at the 2019 Pedagogicon Conference, I read some disconcerting student evaluations. In ENG 303 (Advanced Composition for Teachers), K–12 pre-service educators wondered why they were completing certain assignments or how the class benefited their major. I thought my course vision was clear: to examine the intersections of our experiences as students, writers, and future teachers toward determining future approaches to writing instruction. The evaluations prompted me to examine the gaps between students' perceptions and my perceptions of assignments, and Winkelmes provided strategies for decreasing these gaps.

Among other supporting assignments, ENG 303 integrates three writing projects, designed to build on previous knowledge through reflection, research, and analysis. The *Writing Memory Project* (Project 1) invites students to recall and write about early writing experiences, before selecting and organizing portions of responses into a personal narrative. The *Writing Teaching Philosophy Project* (Project 2) uses Project 1 observations to conduct collaborative writing pedagogical research and to share it through teaching presentations. Then, each student designs an infographic to articulate their teaching writing philosophy. Finally, in the *Writing Awareness Project* (Project 3), co-authors select an EKU Special Collections & Archives artifact for teaching an English Language Arts (ELA) lesson. Students research the sociohistorical contexts related to the artifact, incorporate Project 2 findings, and assimilate insights in an English Education-structured article.

Previous project assignment sheets included a brief description, list of tasks, and evaluation method, but not a purpose. I began to *think like a student* to evaluate a project's transparency. Revised Project 1, for example, stated that "by recalling experiences as a writer and writing student through a sustained reading/writing practice, or regular schedule that composition and education scholars argue is foundational 'best practice' for teaching writing, your relationships with writing (and their potential to influence your future approaches to teaching writing) become visible." Project 2 explained that becoming familiar with how to read and use NCTE journals will support ELA instruction and that developing and communicating a research-based teaching writing philosophy demonstrates professional knowledge. Project 3 linked its purpose to the kinds of research, professional writing, and writing instruction tasks present in all stages of a teaching career, including, as Wilkemes suggests, explicit descriptions of how these practices are beneficial over time (the first years in the classroom, years 5–10, and post-decade). By participating in a course's community of teacher-scholars, pre-service teachers learn strategies for contributing to the field that extend beyond a semester's coursework.

Subsequent student evaluations rarely (if ever) mention the lack of purpose identified in those early evaluations, but more significant, TILT has become a critical lens for my engagements with pedagogy research. For example, reading Warner's *Why They Can't Write* (2018) with TILT in mind, prompted me to add a "problem," or question potentially solved by a writing task, and a statement to explicitly identify the intended audience to assignment sheets. And in the same way that Bartholomae's (1986) seminal essay argues that "when students say, '[they] don't know,' [they are] not saying, then, that [they have] nothing to say. [They are] saying that [they] are not in a position to carry on this discussion," it became clear that, when students do not understand why they are completing an assignment, it is because they cannot identify a relevant purpose (p. 8). Our impressions of how we communicate information can become clouded in disciplinary conventions, reliance on previous experiences, or assumptions about what we think students already know. Making assignments more transparent constitutes an evolving, not static, lens and practice, for conveying a transparent purpose for student investment.

Clint Pinion—Environmental Health Science

Backward design and TILT were used as a framework to revise an existing online, introductory course to environmental health science. Using the three stages of backward design (i.e. desired results, evidence, and learning plan), I noted an evident gap between compared course learning outcomes and current assignments and assessments. I created new learning outcomes to define the transferable concepts of importance and began designing instructional units and performance assessment tools. In addition, I designed lectures for each unit with meaning-making at the forefront of organization and delivery (i.e. What meanings should students make in order to arrive at important understandings?). I also designed assessment tools that moved students from a state of meaning-making (i.e. understanding) to content acquisition (i.e. application of knowledge and skills). Each assessment tool included purpose statements, a listing of tasks, assignment details (i.e. point value assigned to the assignment, submission due date, and location of submission portal), and criteria for success (e.g. rubrics). Finally, I created a lesson plan that detailed the three stages of backward design, which he used to create modules in an online learning management system. Prior student evaluations of the course noted a lack of transparency in course requirements. The lack of transparency was evident in the volume of questions via email that the instructor received each term regarding assignment details (e.g. due dates, submission portal location, etc.). Following the revamp of the course using a transparent approach, I received fewer questions from students regarding course details. Additionally, student evaluations of the course and instructor improved (e.g. One student remarked that the [course] materials were presented in a manner that made it easier to learn, understand, and retain).

Susan Skees-Hermes— Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy

As a multi-decade healthcare practitioner, the TILT approach has been an invaluable tool for translating clinical best practice to effective

learning in higher education for students as future professionals. For my own learning needs, I prefer instructions that are clear and concise. TILT is a format that logically matches my own view of efficiency in healthcare practice and instrumental in transitioning my career expertise into best practices in teaching. From novice to content expert, I suggest faculty take the time to apply the TILT method to make sure their assignments meet the parameters for transparency across learners.

A fundamental component of TILT focuses on intentional and concise directions as the instructor and is a way to model this writing practice for students in their assignments. The TILT checklist is the first place for faculty to begin the process. Identify what portions of an approved assignment needs to be improved. Make the shift to non-jargon language in the purpose statement clearly connecting why assignments were established building student skills for learning in the course. It is work upfront as an educator, but helps to illuminate for students their intrinsic investment in their future critical reasoning competency by stating the meaningful outcomes for applying the fundamental knowledge, skills, and concepts. The TILT approach also allows for uniformity in formats so students are seeing meaningful and thorough information in written assignment descriptions. In the end it helps us all work smarter, not harder.

Casey Humphrey—Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy

During participation in the TILT PLC, I had the opportunity to revise an assignment for a master's level Occupational Therapy course. This assignment had previously been quickly created in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, so there was no formal description. I started the assignment description from scratch, which created an opportunity to incorporate the transparency framework, while being intentional about building the assignment. Importantly, the process helped me to clarify expectations for the assignment.

The biggest change from the initial assignment is that the students now have a formal assignment description to refer to for direction. I expect that this will be much more clear than my previous format which was giving directions verbally or through Blackboard announcements. In the past, students

have stated that they do not understand the need to participate in the seminar portion of their final internship and do not place value on the assignments. I am hopeful that using this format will provide a clearer purpose to this assignment and it will add value for the students as they engage in clinical application and learning.

The transparent assignment promotes a high-level of metacognition for students. As their last course in their master's program, the transparent framework allows students to pose questions to other students, provide constructive feedback to their peers, engage in intellectual discussion, and use me (the instructor) as a mentor/facilitator versus just a teacher. The transparency model of including the purpose, task, and criteria all in one location allows the student to see the "big picture" and promote more individual learning.

One of my biggest challenges was ensuring that I was clear about the tasks in this graduate class. It took a few tries to focus on what I wanted the students to do using action verbs. The criteria had to be directive enough to ensure students gave effort but open enough to allow for a variety of student styles.

Camille Skubik-Peplaski— Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy

This was my second PLC on transparency. Both times, I saw new possibilities to connect with students and improve my teaching. I had the opportunity to redesign an assignment for a graduate occupational therapy course focused on evidence-based practice to make it more transparent. Through the revision process, I made the purpose of the assignment clearer using higher level Bloom's taxonomy terminology, made each step of the task directions more specific, and matched the step of the task to the grading criteria on the rubric. The revised assignment acknowledges students learning in the course.

While revising the assignment to be more transparent, I realized my own frustration in determining where students might doubt themselves, leading to uncertainty and leading me to my own new learning that it may not be my directions that are unclear but students' fear of failure that paralyzes them. I realized that I may fail if the students are

afraid to trust me. By making assignments more transparent, I am able to empower the students to see their progression in the class, trust their learning with a growth mindset to become an evidence-based practice leader.

Recommendations for Faculty Development

Several recommendations emerge as faculty developers consider potential applications of this work. We offer these thoughts as faculty developers plan future programming to support transparent instruction:

- create communities around transparent teaching and assignment design;
- gather evidence at the course level (reinforcing SoTL practices);
- incorporate transparent teaching frameworks into onboarding processes; and
- showcase transparent teaching and learning as an opportunity for all faculty.

By bringing together faculty across the university with a focus on transparent teaching and assignment design, we were able to build a unified commitment to learning. With the application of small, intentional changes, we addressed enhanced learning through transparent teaching. Through the process of reflection, we hope faculty can see the value of designing transparent assignments as a method to further assess the impact of student learning and make plans to do so through their own scholarly teaching initiatives.

References

Bartholomae, D. (1986). Inventing the university. *Journal of Basic Writing*, *5*(1), pp. 4–23.

Blum, S. (2017). *"I Love Learning, I Hate School": An anthropology of college*. Cornell University Press.

Brown, P. C., & Roediger, H. L. (2014). *Make it stick: The science of successful learning*. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Darby, F. & Lang, J. M. (2019). *Small teaching online*. Jossey-Bass.

Dweck, C. S. (2008). *Mindset: The new psychology of success*. Ballantine Books.

Fisher, K., Kouyoumdjian, C., Roy, B., Talavera-Bustillos, V., & Willard, M. (2016). Building a culture of transparency. *Peer Review*, *18*(1–2).

Gooblar, D. (2019). *The missing course: Everything they never taught you about college teaching*. Harvard.

Kohn, A. (2012). The case against grades. *Education Digest*, *77*(5), 8–16.

Middendorf, J. K., & Shopkow, L. (2018). *Overcoming student learning bottlenecks: Decode the critical thinking of your discipline* (First edition.). Stylus Publishing.

Regan, M. (2012). Six steps to master teaching: Becoming a reflective practitioner: Growth is an ongoing responsibility. *Edutopia*. https://www.edutopia.org/blog/master-teaching-margaret-regan

Warner, J. (2018). *Why they can't write: Killing the five-paragraph essay and other necessities*. Johns Hopkins.

Winkelmes, M. (2019). *Transparent instruction promotes equitable opportunities for student success*. [Keynote workshop]. Pedagogicon Conference, Richmond, Kentucky.

Winkelmes, M., Bernacki, M., Butler, J., Zochowski, M., Golanics, J, & Weavil, K. H. (2016). A teaching intervention that increases underserved college students' success. *Peer Review*, *18*(1/2). https://www.aacu.org/peerreview/2016/winter-spring/Winkelmes

Winkelmes, M., Boye, A., & Tapp, S. (Eds.). (2019). *Transparent design in higher education teaching and leadership: A guide to implementing the transparency framework institution-wide to improve learning and retention*. Stylus.

Russell Carpenter, Ph.D., is Assistant Provost and Professor of English at Eastern Kentucky University.

Shirley O'Brien, Ph.D., is Foundation Professor and Co-Coordinator of the Faculty Innovator program at Eastern Kentucky University.

Travis Martin, Ph.D., is Administrator of First-Year Courses & Learning Communities and Director of the Kentucky Center for Veterans Studies at Eastern Kentucky University.

Heather Fox, Ph.D., is Assistant Professor of English at Eastern Kentucky University.

Clint Pinion, Dr.PH., is Director of the Master of Public Health Program and Associate Professor in the Department of Environmental Health Science at Eastern Kentucky University.

Susan Skees-Hermes, OTD, is Assistant Professor in the Department of Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy.

Camille Skubik-Peplaski, Ph.D., is Professor in the Department of Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy at Eastern Kentucky University.

Casey Humphrey, OTD, is Academic Fieldwork Coordinator and Assistant Professor in the Department of Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy at Eastern Kentucky University.