Transparent Teaching Framework
Designing Assignments with Clear Instructions and Expectations

Purpose: [Transparent Teaching](#) is a framework created at Harvard, which can be used to design clearer assignments and make learning processes explicit and accessible for all students. Transparent assignment design involves sharing three critical pieces of information with students including 1) purpose, 2) task, and 3) criteria for success.

1. **Purpose**

    a. Describe why students are completing an assignment and what knowledge and skills they will gain from this experience.

    b. Connect the assignment to any learning outcomes you have for the course.

    c. Explain how this knowledge and skill set are relevant and will help the students in the future.

2. **Task**

    a. List any steps or guidelines, or a recommended sequence for the students' efforts.

    b. Specify any mistakes to be avoided.

    c. If there are pedagogical reasons for withholding clear instructions, include a statement like this:

        i. "The purpose of this assignment is for you to struggle while you test your own approach to…"

3. **Criteria for Success**

    a. **Criteria:** Explain the criteria for success through a checklist or rubric or other clear statement.

    b. **Examples:** Show the students what successful submissions look like using real-world examples.

Sample Assignment

Unclear Assignment Prompt: Interview a HR manager. Using the concepts from our class, write a three page critical analysis of the interview.

Clear Assignment Aligned with Purpose and Task

1. **Purpose:** Connect course concepts to real-world HR practices.

2. **Tasks**

    a. **Interview**

        i.   Identify and contact HR manager

        ii. Schedule 45 minute interview

        iii. Prepare 6-10 questions that draw on course content

        iv. Take notes or record

    b. **Write the Paper**

        i.   Begin with a brief summary

        ii. Connect at least three concepts from the course to their experience

        iii. Critically reflect: How did their experiences confirm, challenge, or expand your understanding of HR concepts?

        iv. Use examples from the interview and citations from course readings

3. **Your Assignment will be Evaluated Based on:**

    a. **Depth of Analysis**: Are you making meaningful connections between course concepts and the interview?

    b. **Clarity and Organization**: Is the paper clearly structured and easy to follow?

    c. **Use of Evidence**: Are you incorporating examples from the interview and course materials?

d. **Critical Thinking**: Are you reflecting thoughtfully on the differences and similarities between theory and practice?

e. **Professionalism**: Was the interview conducted respectfully and ethically?

Instructor Planning Guide

1. **Identify the Goal of the Assignment**

   a. **Purpose Statement:** Begin with a clear statement of the assignment's purpose. Explain what students will learn or demonstrate by completing the assignment.

2. **List the Steps Necessary to Complete the Assignment**

   a. **Detailed Instructions:** Break down the assignment into step-by-step instructions. This helps students understand the process and the order in which they should proceed. This may feel obvious to you, but it is less obvious to your students, especially those who are first generation or who have been gone from academia for a long time.

   b. **Timeline and Milestones:** Provide a timeline with suggested milestones to help students manage their time effectively.

   c. **Scaffolding:** Break longer assignments down into smaller chunks, each of which can be its own assignment. This allows you to provide feedback and course-correct if necessary.

3. **Include the Criteria for Evaluation:**

   a. **Identify What Excellent Work Consists of:** What are the main criteria? Is it following a certain thought process, referencing the readings, clarity of argument, or...? How much do each of these matter? Some professors care greatly about grammar; some don't care at all. You might consider:

      i. **A Simple List:** of the criteria you will be evaluating

      ii. **Weighted Identification of Criteria** (eg. Argument 50%, references 40%, grammar 10%)

      iii. **Rubrics:** While many faculty resist rubrics, they are a powerful tool for communicating with students what excellent work looks like and

where they need to improve their skills. Our faculty development team can help you develop rubrics.

b. **Provide an Example of Strong Work:** Share a completed example or a model of what a successful submission looks like. You can do this verbally in class, identifying what makes the example strong, or provide it in text form along with annotations to explain key elements.

c. **Dos and Don'ts:** Offer examples with common pitfalls and exemplary work to guide students in the right direction. It can be a very effective classroom exercise to provide one strong and one weak example, and have students evaluate them in small groups.

d. **Feedback Loop**

   i. **Clarification Opportunities:** Encourage students to ask questions if any aspect of the assignment is unclear. Consider holding a Q&A session to address common queries.

   ii. **Iterative Feedback:** Allow a draft submission phase where students receive preliminary feedback before the final submission, if feasible.

Instructor Checklist

1. **Purpose**
   - ☐ I've explained the purpose of the assignment.
2. **Task**
   - ☐ I've listed clear, step-by-step instructions.
   - ☐ I've noted any common mistakes to avoid.
   - ☐ If I'm asking students to explore or struggle, I've explained why.
   - ☐ I've included a suggested timeline or milestones, if helpful.
   - ☐ I've broken larger assignments into smaller parts, when possible.
3. **Criteria for Success**
   - ☐ I've explained how I'll evaluate the work (rubric, checklist, or bullet points).
   - ☐ I've shared an example of a strong assignment.
   - ☐ I've highlighted what to do and what not to do.
   - ☐ I've offered opportunities for questions or draft feedback.

Resource: [Transparency in Learning and Teaching](#) (TILT Higher Ed)