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IDEA Item # 10: "Explained course material clearly and concisely"

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Background

Explaining course content so that students understand the material taught is critical to effective learning. Research bears this out. Studies on college classroom behaviors have coded more than 20 separate instructional dimensions important to student learning, suggesting the multi-dimensionality of teaching. Researchers agree, however, on the characteristics of teaching most strongly related to student achievement. Without fail, two dimensions stand out—teacher clarity and preparation/ organization. For example, an in-depth meta-analysis by Feldman (1) showed that of all instructional dimensions identified, teacher "clarity and understandableness" and "preparation and organization" had the highest correlations with student achievement.

Studies of students from different disciplines and backgrounds also highlight the importance of teacher clarity. From the point of view of students in the social sciences, organization and clarity was the single most important attribute of effective economics instructors (2). Research in communications studies on multicultural classrooms suggest that teacher clarity consistently maintained a positive and significant relationship with students' attitudes toward the class, likelihood of engaging in behaviors taught in the class, willingness to enroll in a course of similar content, and attitude toward the instructor (3). Further, a case study in the natural sciences proposed relationships between unclear teaching, reduced understanding, and less student satisfaction with instruction (4).

While there are different definitions of teacher clarity and different streams of research on the topic, taken together they point to the importance of communicating subject matter to students in a way that makes the content intelligible and thus enables their learning. Item #10 correlates strongly with Item #3 (scheduling course work to help students stay up-to-date), Item #6 (making clear how course topics fit together), Item #12 (gave tests, projects, etc. that covered the most important points of the course), and Item #17 (provided timely and frequent feedback on tests, reports, projects, etc. to help students improve). These relationships reinforce the importance and interconnectedness of teaching skills in planning, organizing, sequencing, clarifying, and assessing instruction.

Helpful Hints

Presenting and explaining course material clearly and concisely can encourage students to more effectively process and retain course content. Since this item focuses on teachers' explanations of material, the following hints are phrased in terms of teacher lectures. However, these hints can apply to other instructional formats such as managing group work, the publication of study guides or notes on course web pages, and AV-based presentations (particularly in distance learning).

Don't make assumptions about what students know. After preparing class notes, review them carefully and ask yourself what might students find hard to follow and what examples might make a concept clearer. You might highlight the parts of your presentation that students are likely to find difficult and make a special effort to make those points very clear.

Define what you want students to learn. Let students know in advance what you expect them to do with the information presented. Some faculty post PowerPoint slides that provide students with an outline or a list of questions or problems to be focused on during class.

Define new concepts and terms. You cannot assume that students will know or remember concepts and terms from prior courses. If you use a word for the first time, write it on the board or overhead and define

it. If a term is not defined or defined poorly in the textbook, look at three or four textbooks to find the clearest definition and give it to students. Handouts or slides also should include new terms, complex formulas, and the like.

Make only a few major points per class. A key to explaining clearly is to limit the amount of material covered in a single class meeting. Undergraduates, particularly lower-division students, do not need to be exposed to the subtleties and complexities of a discipline. This will only confuse them. Be selective. It is helpful to focus on three main points. Since repetition leads to learning, repeat major points several times in different words or with different examples.

Select suitable examples. Choice of examples is important; students tend to remember examples that connect to their prior knowledge and that are relevant to their interests and everyday life. Search for examples that clearly illustrate the concept at hand—from the popular press as well as professional journals. Since no single explanation will be clear to all students, provide several examples or illustrations and represent the same point in two or three different modes (e.g., verbal, graphical, visual). Finally, and perhaps most importantly, stop the class session every 10 or 15 minutes. Ask students to work with the concept or idea presented by solving a problem, analyzing a scenario, or generating questions or related examples.

Summarize key points. Summarize major points at the end of class or ask students to do so. Immediately after class, write comments on your class notes about what didn't seem clear to students. Use the notes as guides for revision the next time you offer the course.

Assessment Issues

Students can provide great help in determining the extent to which you've explained course material clearly. Erickson, et al. (5) offer several methods that allow students to assess their understanding of teacher explanations. One place to start is to guide students' note taking. You can pause several times during a class session and ask students to paraphrase what they have written in their notes in their own words, restating definitions, key points and examples. You might also prompt students to elaborate their notes by recalling similar problems and analogous examples. Such paraphrasing and elaborating help clarify material and make it meaningful. Another strategy for assessing clarity is to pose questions during class for students to answer. After explaining a concept, you can ask students to look at an example and tell you why it illustrates the concept. Or after solving a problem, you can ask students to try to work through a similar problem to make sure that they have mastered the concept before going on. When students try to answer questions on their own, they often discover that concepts are not as simple or obvious as they thought. At that point, they may be ready to ask you questions for clarification. As well, Angelo and Cross (6) provide several strategies for assessing course related knowledge and skills, including the widely used "minute paper" and "muddiest point." In both techniques, take five minutes at the end of a class to ask students to identify the most important concepts learned during the class, the important questions that remain unanswered, or the least clear or "muddiest point." Collect the responses, review them, and respond to students' questions or confusion during the next class meeting. When used several times during the semester, these processes encourage students to listen actively, insure that student's questions will be raised and answered in time to facilitate further learning, and help the instructor to diagnose in timely fashion what students are finding confusing, unclear, or difficult to learn.

References and Resources

(1) Feldman, K. A. (1989). The association between student ratings of specific instructional dimensions and student achievement. *Research in Higher Education*, 30(6), 583-645.

(2) Boex, L. F. (2000). Identifying the attributes of effective economics instructors: An analysis of student evaluations. *Journal of Economic Education*, 31(3), 211-27.

(3) Powell, R., & Harville, B. (1990). The effects of teacher immediacy and clarity on instructional outcomes: An intercultural assessment. *Communication Education*, 39(4), 369-79.

(4) Hativa, N. (1998). Lack of clarity in university teaching: A case study." *Higher Education*, 36(3), 353-381.

(5) Erickson, B.L., Peters, C.B., & Strommer, D.W. (2005). *Teaching first-year students*. (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

(6) Angelo, T.A., & Cross, K. P. (1993). *Classroom assessment techniques: A handbook for college teachers* (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. See pp.119-158.

IDEA Paper No. 14: Improving Lectures, Cashin

IDEA Paper No. 24: Improving Instructors' Speaking Skills, Goulden