In the Classroom 127

Improving Assignments with Transparent Assignment Design

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Stan Skrabut: Well, thanks ever so much for taking time to listen to this podcast. It certainly means a lot. I know you could be doing other things, perhaps you are, but you're still hanging out with me. The day that I'm recording this it is the 4th of July. I hope you have a wonderful 4th of July wherever you are. In America. we're celebrating the birth of our nation. Today, I am going to go hang out with some friends, so I am looking forward to it. It has been a long time. COVID has kept me cooped up, so this will be a nice break, and I hope you're getting a break like this also. Over the last episode, I shared how I had an opportunity to see what instructors were sharing in their courses.

One observation that I made was around that of assignments, and assignments that instructors were creating. I feel that many of these assignments lack essential details that would help the student succeed. Over a couple decades working as an instructional technologist, I have developed my ideas on what a good assignment should cover. In preparation for this episode, I rediscovered the principles outlined by TILT, Transparency In Learning and Teaching. Since they happen to mirror my principles, and that they're already documented, I'm going to focus on transparent assignment design. Naturally, I'm going to share sites where you can learn more, and you can find those in my show notes.

The goal of this episode is to help you develop assignments that help students achieve your learning objectives. It is a waste of everyone's time to put forth assignments that are confusing, and when you get them in, it's a waste of your time to grade them because students didn't turn in what you were hoping that they would turn in. A lot of this is just down to pure communication. Students don't recognize or did not read your mind and see what you intended that you wanted the assignment to be. Naturally, they didn't turn in the work that you hoped they would turn in. Very often, students do not understand how all the pieces fit together in a course.

You spend a lot of time building your course, you know what you want to achieve, but the students weren't necessarily part of that conversation. They don't understand what you want, how the course is supposed to turn out, what they're supposed to get, how they're going to benefit in terms of knowledge and skills, and therefore, they may not see the value of an assignment or exercise that you put in front of them. They may not see the relevance. In our classrooms, we're seeing more and more adult learners. As I noted in episode ITC 44, as I discussed andragogy, learners want to know what's in it for me. They want to know why you chose an activity. They want to know why it's important to their learning.

In many assignments that I've observed, this is absent from most of those assignments. Let's make sure that we put this in, but also let's look at other elements that we can use to make the assignments better. Here are some key elements to transparent assignment design. Creating a transparent assignment is not difficult. It just needs more clarification to be effective. There are three main elements that you need to be concerned about, purpose, assignment details, and criteria for grading. These elements closely tie back to Universal Design for Learning, so let's dive in and check them out. First of all, we have the purpose. One of the things that you should do is begin with an informative title.

In many cases, I just see assignment one, assignment two, assignment three, that's not really informative. They don't really give a hint at what these assignments are about. As I have mentioned, students want to know why they're doing something, and how it ties back to their learning. In the purpose section of the assignment, take time to explain why this assignment is important to their learning of the material, and why it's relevant not only for this particular class but how it fits into the grand scheme of things. In this purpose section, you may also want to include the due dates if you have multiple things that students need to turn in in order to keep them on task.

In many of these episodes, I've stressed the importance of explaining why you're doing something. Why speaks to the heart or the emotion. Your brain first deals with emotion before it deals with logic. If you can speak to the emotional elements, you will get more buy-in into your assignment. In the world of copywriting, Ray Edwards outlines the strategy that helps to sell products, it's called PASTOR, P-A-S-T-O-R. A lot of this strategy closely relates to learning or this idea of building an assignment and selling that or getting buy-in. First of all, you have P, the person, the problem, and the pain.

This is really why it's important, so you should take time to note what the problem is, or why this is assignment is coming about. A is amplification and aspiration. At this point, you want to magnify the problem while also appealing to the future ideal state that he or she can achieve. From there you have S, the story, and solution. Here is where you paint a verbal picture that clearly demonstrates exactly how the problem can be solved. T is transformation. People don't want a feature list, they want to have their problem solved, so show how by doing this assignment they will be able to solve their problem.

O is the offer, this explains what the student will achieve by completing the assignment, and R is the response, this is the last piece of explaining what you want the student to do.

Now, I tried to speak to this about in terms of copywriting, and in copywriting it's certainly a formula of getting product sold, but what this does is that talks about trying to tap into the emotion, trying to tap into the relevance, why this assignment's important. If you can take anything away from this idea, copywriting, I hope that you can and I hope that it will work for you. While this comes from the business world of marketing, it helps to set the stage of what's to come.

When outlining the purpose of the assignment, explain how students will benefit in terms of their knowledge and skill. This is where you can weave in the course goals and objectives, why it fits in this course, and why it fits into the bigger picture, and how it will help them with their future career. Really this is about why, why, why, and really explaining this purpose upfront is a piece that's often missing. Very often assignments jump into the details, "I want you to do this and this and this," but as the research is finding out, this component of explaining why ahead of time will help you achieve better success in your assignments. When you look at your assignments, see if you have that component.

If not, that's something that you're going to want to add in. The second element is these assignment details. In the assignment details, you are explaining exactly what you want students to do, and how to do it. You're going to break the assignment into specific steps that you want the student to follow, and the steps should be from the very first step to when they submit the assignment. For complex tasks, you may actually want to break this down into multiple assignments and just focus on one assignment at a time. While you're doing this, do not make assumptions. Try to provide as much guidance as possible. It's also useful to provide links to appropriate resources.

If you want students to follow a specific template, then link to the template. Don't make them go search for it. If you want them to use something specific, provide it right in the assignment. This will create a better assignment. Also, provide tips and points of failure that are typical for that assignment, and you often create these tips, or you find these points of failure when you have given this assignment in previous classes, that students submit something and it's like, "Oh, no, that's not what I was asking for, but, if I was to ask him again, this is how I would clarify." Weave those right into this assignment that you're creating right now.

If there are things that you want students to avoid, make sure that you mention them in this particular section. Also, include format and submission requirements. If you're talking about a paper specifically, how do you want it formatted? APA formatting, what the letter font is. As many details as possible. For submission requirements, be specific. Do you want the title of the file that they're submitting to be a certain format? If so, let them know. If you wanted the document to be submitted in a certain format, a Word document, for example, make sure that you specify that. The last section is criteria. In this section, you're letting students know what a successful submission looks like.

At this point, you can provide annotated examples or models that they can follow. You should also support the criteria with rubrics, checklists, and other guides. That way students can use those rubrics and checklists for self-evaluation. If possible give students an opportunity to practice parts of the task in class, and solicit feedback that you can use to improve any of the rubrics or checklists that you're providing them. All of this is very much in line with Universal Design for Learning. A couple success tips, naturally, you want students to have the most success in creating their assignments, or the products that they're submitting for the assignments that you are asking them to do.

In some cases, students may think that you're doing too much, that you're giving them too much information and that you are watering it down or treating them unprofessional as you're doing this. What you can do is get ahead of this conversation by explaining why you're doing these things. What's the research say in terms of learning? Why are you using this assignment? Why are you providing a rubric? Why are you providing such detail? Why are you providing examples and checklists and everything else that you're doing? Why, why, why?

Just like you would do it in your assignment when you're talking about the purpose, you also want to get ahead of this for all your assignments and explain why you're doing the things that you're doing. The other tip is you don't have to redesign all your assignments at one time. If you have time to do so, yes, maybe that's a good idea but you can redesign it incrementally one assignment at a time and start with the assignments with the nearest due dates, things that are coming up soon, take a look at those particular assignments, and if you can make modifications to improve them, certainly do that.

Put your assignments in front of colleagues and have them read it and offer suggestions where you may have gaps that you're not seeing. This certainly can be a gradual process. I realize how busy faculty are, but you will save time in the end by taking these steps to make your assignments as clear as possible and as inviting as possible. Students will dive in, do the assignment because they know it has relevance to your course. As I'm getting ready for a course in the fall, I am certainly taking a look at my assignments. I use a lot of these principles but there's some new things that I've learned, and I'm certainly going to take a look at those as I get ready for my term.

Well, those are the three elements of transparent assignment design, having a good purpose, attention to the details, making sure that you provide as much attention as possible, and having good criteria so students know how they're going to be assessed and what the rubrics or the grading criteria are going to be. Those are the things that will help you make better assignments. Well, with that, I'm going to leave you with a quick plug for my book.