Teaching Tips: Clarity and Communication

Effective clarity and communication allow students to navigate the course successfully. These components help students to assimilate the course content, creating a successful learning environment, within the classroom for both instructor and student. When you demonstrate a level of transparency in your teaching approach (Ginsberg, 2007) it improves the outcome of student learning.

1. Clear Delivery
   - Find your voice by being authentic. Turning up the volume turns up people's attention. It also gives you room to vary your volume when appropriate.
   - Project your voice or use a microphone. Don’t just say, “Can you hear me at the back?” Ask someone in the back row a question or have a GSI sit in the back corner to monitor the clarity and volume of your lecture. When using a microphone, speak in a normal voice and do not lean into the microphone.
   - Vary pacing and voice as you change emphasis and content objectives.
   - Set an appropriate pace. Talk more slowly when students are taking notes and when you are explaining new material, abstract ideas and complex topics. You can pick up the pace when relating stories, summarizing previous points, or presenting examples.
   - Repeat a statement to emphasize the importance.
   - Connect directly with students using direct eye contact rather than just glancing around the room.
   - Keep eyes on your audience. This will make your presentations more effective, and will also give you a chance to monitor students’ faces for indicators of understanding, confusion, and/or boredom. When writing on the board, hold your speaking until you are facing the students again.
   - Maintain face-to-face contact with students at all times. You can do this by turning your body no more than ninety degrees from the front when writing on the board, regularly looking toward the class, and glancing around the classroom when a student is making a long discussion comment.
   - Speak extemporaneously. It is more effective than reading lecture notes. Change the pitch, intensity, and timbre of one’s voice to create interest.
   - Pause. The pause is one of the most powerful tools in public speaking. It is an important device for gaining attention. Pauses can be used as punctuation and also for emphasis. Planned pauses also give you and your audience a short rest and let thoughts and ideas imbed.
   - Monitor your movement. Don’t be too static: leave the lectern and close the space between you and the students if possible. At the same time, do not appear frantic by pacing. Move with a purpose.

2. Organization
   - Start with an introduction, outline, agenda or visual representation of the lecture. These mechanisms let students know what it is you will be covering in the next hour, how the material for the day connects to previous and future material, and why it’s worth their time to engage with and understand the content. They can also provide the students with an organizing framework they can use to process the flow of information in all its detail.
   - Organize the material well and it will enable you to eliminate irrelevant material, so that you may cover important points more thoroughly.
Clarify your thoughts in your own mind because if it’s not clear to you, it will not be clear to your students. Based on your topic, you may find it most effective to present a simple outline or key points for each class on the board.

Develop a strategy, which helps to organize your thinking on a specific lecture topic and tie it to the overall learnings for the course.

Make explicit transitions between topics with mini summaries. By linking new material to previously learned content, you help students understand and organize this new information in their minds.

Include signposts and transitions. These are markers that clearly signal important, or challenging points. They can also signal transitions from a subtopic to the next.

Explain why the material is important and relevant to them and their world.

### 3. Explain Course Content

- Begin class with a quick, 3-minute review of where you left off from last lecture and explain the linkage between concepts developed in the previous lecture to the current one. This keeps continuity in the course.
- Allow the next few minutes of class for questions about the previous lecture.
- Try something different-open with a question, a video, a headline and pull content into a facilitated discussion.
- Watch students while you are lecturing to determine if they are following what you are saying. Watch for nonverbal cues.
- Stop and clarify if a student looks puzzled. If you see students having trouble taking notes or sitting with a blank or quizzical looks on their face, stop and say, “I seem to be losing some of you; let me explain this point another way.”
- Look for the Muddiest Point. In this exercise, students are asked to jot down their response to the question, “What was the muddiest point you encountered in the material today?” Variations have included, “What was the most confusing idea we covered today?” The muddiest point provides an indication on what needs to be covered again in class. We can judge whether the level of confusion is roughly what we’d expect, or whether we need to take a serious look at slowing down the pace in order to revisit earlier concepts or skills. (The Skillful Teacher by Stephen Brookfield pg. 38).
- Limit the number of points you make in a lecture. Research shows that students can absorb three to five points in a fifty minute period and four to five points in a seventy-five minute class. Be ruthless in paring down the number of major points you make, and be more generous with examples and illustrations that clarify your arguments.
- Reserve the last five or ten minutes of each lecture for students' questions and the relevance of material as they move forward.

### 4. Summarize Content and Takeaways

- Select one or two students at the beginning of class to summarize the major issues, concerns, and conclusions generated during discussion. Or tell the class that you will call on someone at the end of class to summarize. This strategy encourages students to listen more carefully because they may be called upon to give the summary.
- Bring closure to the discussion when the time is right. Announce that the discussion is ending, “Are there any final comments before we pull these ideas together?” Use your closing summary to emphasize two or three key points and to provide a framework for the next session.
- Write comments on your class notes immediately after class about what didn’t seem clear to students. Use the notes as guides for revision the next time you offer the course.
Consider using the last five to ten minutes of class for getting feedback. For example, ask students to write a summary of the issues discussed, the pros and cons, and their conclusions.

Periodic summaries from preceding material will help students learn better. It will allow them to check on possible misperceptions and it will help them in organizing the material not only in their notes but in their minds.

Two to four times a semester, give students the assignment of summarizing the most important concepts in the course up to that point.

Close the course. The closing comments in the last lecture/session deserve some effort. Put the course in its larger context. Why do you feel the material is relevant? Might you have some inspirational words to impart? Can end with a story of how the content is used successfully. Evaluations are not a bad way to follow a good close.

SOURCES:


Lyons, Rich. Personal interview. 21 September 2010.


Watson, Janet (2016) In class observations Senior Faculty Advisor Berkeley Haas.