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## Providing Assignments and Assessments That Promote Equity

**Kathy Berlin, PhD; Associate Professor & Program Director; School of Health & Human Sciences; IUPUI** [00:00:15]

Many faculty have given their students an assignment, explained that assignment to them, and there's always at least one student that comes to you and says, "But exactly what did you want on that assignment?" And you kind of look at them and say, "Read the assignment," and they're like, "Oh, yeah, yeah, I read the assignment, but exactly what do you want?" Well, that's kind of what a transparent assignment does.

**Kathy Berlin, PhD** [00:00:40] So one of the assignments for this semester is for you to do a health insurance review. I have put this into a three-page document that provides you with clear steps on how to conduct this assignment.

**Kathy Berlin, PhD** [00:00:54] So the idea behind this transparency and learning is that you provide students with a clear purpose, the objectives of the assignment, the task that they need to complete in an assignment, the resources that they will need to complete that assignment, the specific steps that they have to take, including question prompts to help them facilitate those steps, and then to talk about how they will be evaluated for the assignment, if there's a rubric that's tied to the assignment, and then what kind of impact would this have on their grade in terms of how is it weighted and how much time should they devote to this assignment?

**Jeff Suarez-Grant; Senior Instructional Designer; Center for Effective Teaching and Learning; California State University, Los Angeles** [00:01:43] The purpose is basically your elevator pitch. You're going to tell students why they need to take this assignment seriously, what they're going to be able to do as a result of that. Most often, right after the purpose section, is like the skills and where you can list the student learning outcomes. "Skills," that's an approachable, student-friendly word to describe student learning outcomes.

**Kelly Lester, MFA; Director, Center for Faculty Development; The University of Southern Mississippi** [00:02:02] The purpose is really important to me. It is the place where I not only share why we're doing the assignment, but how I think it's relevant to either their next steps in the class, their next steps in their career, their next steps as they're moving through into a professional role. And so those things where I really help make the assignment relevant and help them know why we're doing it.

**Madison; Student; The University of Southern Mississippi** [00:02:26] It is important to know the purpose of it because as a college student, you can easily feel like instructors is giving you busy work, you know, just to get a grade

**Mikail; Student; The University of Southern Mississippi** [00:02:36] You don't want to be wasting your time doing an assignment that isn't going to be beneficial to you. You want to make sure that at the end of the day, it's something that you sit down and you're like, I really did learn something that I can use in my future.

**Jeff Suarez-Grant** [00:02:49] Another section of that framework calls for the task: step-by-step instructions of what you expect students to do. And if you're going to err on the side of listing more steps than you think are needed, you don't necessarily know what students' familiarity is with using a library database, for instance. Tell them. Tell them what they need to do, tell them which database to use, tell them which website you go to. Include all of those steps there, all of those tasks.

**Kathy Berlin, PhD** [00:03:20] It gives them a blueprint, a diagram. It gives them a logical sequence that they can follow that they know if they follow these steps and they take into account the questions that you're asking, that in all probability they're gonna submit an assignment for which they'll earn a good grade. At the same time, when I talk to students and they later reflected at the end of the semester, they reflected that following that and thinking about the questions that were asked in during those steps helped them to really think about what they were being asked to do in a way they had not thought of.



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**Zion; Student; IUPUI** [00:04:03] Being given step-by-step instructions in the transparent assignments really gave me a better understanding of what she was looking for from the assignment and how I could do a better job on the assignment and get a good score.

**Jeff Suarez-Grant** [00:04:21] And then for the criteria for success, this is basically the, what, how you're going to evaluate the students. You're going to want to include a grading instrument like a rubric, for instance. And again, you're gonna want to make sure that the outcomes factor into that rubric to ensure that you're measuring and evaluating the students on what you told them they were gonna be able to learn, and also what you told them they were gonna practice in that assignment.

**Nicole Blalock, PhD; Assistant Professor, American Indian Studies Program; Core Faculty, Educational Leadership & Policy Studies Doctoral Program; California State University, Northridge** [00:04:47] Another element of the transparent assignment in my courses is sharing samples of previous student work. It will generally pull five to six examples of particular assignments that I know students in the past have found challenging and provide my own annotations, as read by the rubric for that assignment. So they're able to, before they even submit the assignment for the first time, do kind of their own review of their work and map it into the rubric and the expectations of the assignment.

**Roman; Student; University of California, Northridge** [00:05:21] I definitely think it's beneficial to see work that is quality and work that needs to be improved because sometimes you, as the student, don't know what specifically, what it means to— like when you need to be better. Sometimes you just don't know exactly the format of what it needs to look like. Like a specific annotated bibliography or, or a specific project, and that. And it's nice to see, you know, past work so you can be firstly, inspired and then you know exactly what she's looking for.

**Kathy Berlin, PhD** [00:05:54] It clearly gives you almost a rubric in and of itself. So you're saying this is what the student needs to do. And when you go to grade that assignment, you could say, did they do this? If they met this, they met this. You can tie that into a rubric and make your grading of that assignment very objective versus a subjective analysis of it.

**Kelly Lester, MFA** [00:06:21] The transparent assignment guidelines remind them of what we talked about in class and give them a way to go back, sit, and have their focused attention: I'm doing this assignment right now. Here's what I need to do. And then on my side, I have less questions. I have assignments that are more in-depth rather than superficial because I haven't left them trying to figure out what I've asked them to do. I also have more submissions because sometimes students won't even submit something if they've sat down to look at the assignment and they're like, I don't even know. I'm not gonna do this well, so I'm not going to submit it. The transparent assignment motivates students, and it also guides them through to more in-depth work, which is ultimately what I'm looking for.

**Michael Davis, PhD; Associate Professor; School of Biological, Environmental, and Earth Sciences; The University of Southern Mississippi** [00:07:14] For each assignment, and I call them "mission tasks" instead of assignments, I tell them that we're training you to be biology superheroes, and these are your mission tasks, and each mission task has a little folder that comes with it on the syllabus. And you open the folder and you look inside and here's your super secret, you know, mission task that you have to do. It's important to, one, collect them together as the little assignments, collect them together as a single mission, but then arrange them so that they're in little bite-sized chunks. So if I say you've got to do a personal statement, and you've got to turn in a draft, and you've got to do a peer review, if I write that all as one assignment, it's just a little overwhelming for them sometimes. So what I do instead is we just break each of those things out into little bite-size, separate assignments that fit in the larger mission task. And they're able to kind of just check— In that way, if they, if they mess one up, they don't mess up their whole assignment. You know, the point values are not as great for each individual one. And so the smaller ones, the drafts, the point values are less. But the the reason that's in bite-sized pieces is just to, to not



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overwhelm them and have them just kind of take little chunks as they move through and understand the process of the assignment, really. Not just how you do this assignment, but there's a stepwise process. And so those are the bites in the individual steps.

**Deninne Pritchett, PhD; Chairperson and Faculty Member; Department of Psychology; Central Piedmont Community College** [00:08:36] Breaking larger assignments down into smaller assignments allows students to display a level of competence with specific content before moving on to the next content, which is, again, we're scaffolding. There are courses that I have a final project that is either two weeks long and I also have a course project that is essentially a full-semester project. Students in the first week that the project is introduced, they think it sounds interesting, but they don't think that they're going to be able to do it for several reasons. But when I break the assignment down into doable parts, that something is due every other week, and that there is a checkpoint, and that students receive credit or are graded on these certain checkpoints, they realize that all semester they've been building up to this final project.

**Natasha Nurse-Clarke, RN, PhD; Assistant Professor; School of Nursing; Lehman College, CUNY** [00:09:37] I've found that scaffolding assignments really helps with students, particularly with feeling overwhelmed. The biggest place that I've seen this is with group assignments. It takes a while for group dynamics to settle. It takes a while for students to feel comfortable sharing ideas in a group. So one of the things I like for students to do in group is again, an outline. Who's gonna be working on this, who's gonna be working on this, who's gonna be working on this? And then the next step is submit maybe something like an annotated bibliography or a brief outline of what the slides are gonna look like. If it's a slide presentation. And then, do the recording. And then, open it to the class. So students can see the steps along the way so that it's not so overwhelming. And this future pacing really helps, particularly with asynchronous online courses, where it's very easy to forget deadlines. And then before you know it, it's here. So I like to future-pace students a lot with that.

**Josh; Student; Lehman College, CUNY** [00:10:39] I think it's extremely beneficial when a large assignment is broken down into these smaller pieces because I mean, as a student, we have a lot being thrown at us. There's a lot of things we have to focus on. But beyond that, I honestly think it's practice for sort of real-life scenarios in terms of problem solving. I think it reflects a positive strategy in terms of tackling big situations in the workplace or in life. You have to be able to assess the important priorities and go a step at a time. I think it yields the best product.