

Expert Insights

Linda Nilson, PhD, Higher Ed. Education Expert & Author, Clemson University [00:00:00] According to the research, teacher clarity is the most important factor in student learning, single factor, in student learning.

Narrator [00:00:10] Complexity is the enemy of success, execution, reliability, the list goes on. As it turns out, complexity is also the enemy of learning. Research finds a positive association between instructor clarity and students' course evaluations, motivation, and academic performance. Providing clear directions and explanations is a straightforward way to make your teaching even more effective.

Linda Nilson, PhD [00:00:39] Students can't learn what they don't understand and what comes in an organization that defies their, their thinking, that they can't put it together an organized way. By the way, the only way we remember anything is when it's organized. It's got to be organized.

Narrator [00:00:57] When presenting directions for an assignment or class activity, start by explaining the purpose, how it relates to course outcomes. Students will see the relevance and likely be more motivated.

Linda Nilson, PhD [00:01:09] In giving clear directions about a task, you're simply talking about what they are supposed to be doing. But you need also put in there the purpose, why they're supposed to be doing what they're doing, how they will benefit, what they will gain, what skills they will either acquire or refine. And this gives them motivation.

Narrator [00:01:31] Then break directions into steps. For example, with multistage activities, offer directions in increments, giving enough guidance for students to complete the first step. Then provide more directions for the next step. And the same process can be used when introducing directions for multipart assignments by pausing to answer questions between the directions for each component. Reinforce your expectations by providing directions in writing. Students can then add their own notes for clarification to refer to when completing the assignment.

Linda Nilson, PhD [00:02:07] So if they're supposed to be following five steps, you show them first the five steps, how a problem is worked. Then you take out a step, the next time through, and so they've got to think of that step and fill it in themselves. And you take out two steps, and then three, and four, and then, before you know it, they can do it on their own. Very important scaffolding.

Narrator [00:02:28] Finally, directions can become clearer when the expected process and end product are understood. Provide a sample of a finished assignment or model the process you expect students to complete. These models allow students to see and examine what your directions are intended to produce.

Linda Nilson, PhD [00:02:46] Clear directions will actually create a learning road map for students. So it tells them how to get to create a good product, whatever you're asking them to do. Oftentimes students need models, so they need not only, like, very clear directions, but also, like, a good product will look like this. A good product will look like this. And sometimes you should say a not-good product, a poor product will look like this. So I don't want to see any like this. I want to see you do things that look like these excellent products.

Narrator [00:03:22] To determine if your directions were clear, you can conduct short surveys at the end of the class in which the assignments were explained. These surveys will also unearth any points of confusion you need to address. In addition to techniques that can clarify your directions, approaches that can help clarify your explanations include the use of organizational cues. Such cues include forecasting, to give students an idea of what to expect. For example, simply presenting the main topic for class session better prepare students for the session. Another cue: signal transitions to new material.

Making clear that you're building on what you've already studied and moving to a new topic gives your explanations a clarifying structure. Highlighting key points by noting that something is important and that your students should be sure to write it down is a third type of cue that adds emphasis, as does repetition. Restating, reviewing, and rephrasing main points and difficult concepts helps students grasp ideas that they may be encountering for the first time.

Linda Nilson, PhD [00:04:31] We should remember the, the old expression, the old saying that you tell people what you're going to say, then you say it, and then you tell them what you just said. We should be doing more of that. We feel so hemmed in by so much content and yet we can talk about content all day and teach nothing. So we need to stop and teach. So, yes, repetition is a wonderful thing. It, it, it's, according to cognitive psychology, we learn by repetition, we learn especially when that repetition is multimodal.

Narrator [00:05:09] Throughout your delivery, be sure to adjust your pace. Slowing your speech when topics are complex or for students to take notes is a powerful signal of something's importance. Your word choice is also critical. Unlike the jargon we readily use with colleagues, decide when and how to introduce new terms. Handouts with terms and definitions will also help students develop the discipline-specific vocabulary they'll need to engage with more sophisticated material. Finally, visual aids, as the term implies, help to make explanations clearer, whether they're diagrams, videos, maps, pictures, animations, or other images integrated into a lecture or discussion.

Linda Nilson, PhD [00:05:58] When students understand directions and explanations, they perceive that they're learning more, and they're correct; they are learning more.

Narrator [00:06:09] In many academic fields, some of the most influential ideas are celebrated for their elegance and simplicity. The same can and should be true of our teaching, with a clarity of explanations and directions that help our students gain understanding.