

The Unwritten Rules of College

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Josh Hawkins for The Chronicle

Mary-Ann Winkelmes, who trains professors in “transparent” teaching, says the approach helps students understand why they have received an assignment, what they are expected to do, and how they will be evaluated.

By Dan Berrett

Las Vegas

Mary-Ann Winkelmes looked out at her students one evening 15 years ago. Even now, she can remember their day jobs: banker, security guard, plumber, lounge singer, priest.

She had dedicated her life to the art and architecture of the Italian Renaissance. But why, she wondered, did students in Harvard University’s extension program need to learn about it?

Yes, there is inherent value in studying beauty, mosaics, and Michelangelo. But her

students weren't going to become art historians. After the course was over, what would they take with them?

Ms. Winkelmes was inclined to think about pedagogy; at the time she was associate director of Harvard's Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning. What she wanted her students to carry forward, she realized, was more fundamental than frescoes: It was how to learn.

But how can a professor cultivate that? The question gnawed at her as she trained faculty members in teaching at Harvard, the University of Chicago, and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Her quest has animated more than a decade of studying how students learn and what instructors can do to help make it happen.

While at Illinois, she led a grass-roots [assessment project](#) of 25,000 students at 27 institutions in seven countries. Results showed that a simple approach can yield big results. Making the process of teaching and learning explicit to students — especially those who don't know what to expect — helped them see what Ms. Winkelmes calls "the secret, unwritten rules of how to succeed in college."

As an increasingly broad and diverse cross section of students enters higher education, knowing those rules matters more than ever. Without them, students stumble. They might miss the point of a paper, drift during discussions, or feel overwhelmed or aimless. But all students can thrive, Ms. Winkelmes says, if the tacit curriculum is made plain.

When teaching is what she calls "transparent," students better understand the rationale for assignments and how they're evaluated. New research on several campuses shows that students taught that way are more confident academically and feel as if they belong in college, which helps predict whether they succeed and remain enrolled.

The data suggest one practice in particular — giving assignments — that, done transparently, has a significant effect on students. Here at the University of Nevada at Las Vegas, where Ms. Winkelmes is now principal investigator of the project [Transparency in Teaching and Learning in Higher Education](#), she has distilled that finding into a straightforward protocol.

Professors who have signed on to the project consider three questions when creating assignments: what, exactly, they're asking students to do (the "task"); why students have to do it (the "purpose"); and how the work will be evaluated (the "criteria"). Then the instructors explain those things to their students. That's it.

Beyond faculty members in several departments at UNLV, people in online education, the library, even recreation services here are focusing on those three things. In the classroom, knowing the task, purpose, and criteria can help motivate students and make their courses relevant. In other areas, the information can help them navigate an intimidating system. To Ms. Winkelmes, the protocol helps students meet higher expectations of rigor, which, in turn, can ensure equity in educational quality.

Its three components are deliberately modest. Spelling them out for students does not mean wholesale changes, like flipping courses. It requires no fancy technology. Instead, the protocol is designed to give faculty members a ready technique to improve learning.

As minor and perhaps self-evident as the underlying questions may seem, it's surprising how often they go unexamined.

As creatures of academe, professors often take for granted the logic and the rhythm of their courses. Some have forgotten how much they know and care about the material relative to their students, who may simply be meeting requirements.

An assignment can become an old standard, reliable but creaky. Consider this one, from an introductory psychology course at Harvard about 15 years ago. A ghost is in a mansion with the characters from Scooby Doo. Each has suffered an injury to a different part of the brain, like the amygdala or basal ganglia. "The plan is simple," the assignment reads. "Someone needs to confront the ghost without getting too scared, someone needs to try to figure out what the ghost is saying, and someone needs to

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figure out what the next plan of action should be." The students must decide which character carries out which task and explain why.

During a workshop at UNLV last semester, Ms. Winkelmes asked a group of faculty members to identify the purpose of the assignment.

They drew on their understanding of college's hidden rules, guessing accurately that the assignment had been designed to gauge students' knowledge of parts of the brain. "Obviously," said Carryn Bellomo, an associate professor of mathematics, "you'd need to understand brain terminology."

"And how would you know if you were doing the project well?" Ms. Winkelmes asked. What are the criteria for success?

The professors looked at the assignment. The most explicit instruction was the most superficial: to use 12-point type, double-spaced, with one-inch margins.

Ms. Winkelmes returned to the math professor's "obviously" comment. "To us as teachers, as people with Ph.D.s who've been doing this for years, it was easy," she said, "though even we had to dig a little bit."

Professors in computer science, history, kinesiology, and sociology, as well as the university's first-year-experience program, began using Ms. Winkelmes's protocol last year in entry-level courses. Though subtle, it has had a profound effect on them, they say. It has forced them to think about what they assign to their students and why.

David E. Copeland started off as a skeptic. An associate professor of psychology, he found the task, purpose, and criteria protocol "a little too simple" to have much of an impact. But he figured it would be painless to try, so he gave it a shot.

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Mary-Ann Winkelmes of the U. of Nevada at Las Vegas: Making the process of teaching and learning explicit to students — especially those who don't know what to expect — helps them see "the secret, unwritten rules of how to succeed in college."



In one of Ms. Winkelmes's workshops, he looked at an essay assignment he'd been giving — modeled on one he'd done as a student — on metacognition, or understanding one's own thought process. Rereading it with the protocol in mind, he realized he'd been using it on autopilot.

"Pick something that you have learned in this course that has changed the way you view the world," the assignment read. "Think about the idea more deeply," it said, "and apply it to your philosophy of life." The essay was supposed to be three or four pages (in 12-point type, of course).

At the workshop, explaining the exercise to a colleague in a different department, Mr. Copeland saw that his assignment failed to get students to monitor or reflect on how their views had changed.

So he revised the assignment, which now comes in two parts. First he asks students to answer 10 questions, in two or three sentences each, and to rate their confidence in their answers. What percentage of the brain do people use? Why do people dream? At the end of the semester, students answer the questions again. They explore the

differences between their answers, pair up, and discuss how their views have changed.

The first version of the assignment had several hallmarks of rigor, or what often counts for it. It was an essay, called for students to "think about the idea more deeply," and required them to cite outside sources. But in asking students to describe how their thinking had changed, the exercise was prone to the distortions of ego and memory.

The revised version revealed how students' thinking on specific subjects had actually evolved. Some have told Mr. Copeland they were surprised to see how much their ideas changed.

Mr. Copeland now looks at entire courses differently, he says. His assignments used to be a series of unconnected ideas; now he's trying to make his assignments build on one another toward an explicit purpose: getting students to think critically and monitor their perspectives. His courses once chiefly taught facts, which he realized his students often forgot; now he also wants them to leave with analytical skills they can continue using years later. "It really makes you think," he says of the protocol, "about what students are going to take away from the course."

The demographic changes hitting higher education make that sort of explicit teaching more important.

In the past few decades, Nevada's demographics have shifted markedly. The percentage of Hispanic residents has nearly tripled since 1990, and almost 60 percent of UNLV's enrollment are minority students. About a third are the first in their families to attend college, and a similar share are low-income. Most come from Nevada, whose public schools rank at the bottom nationally for preparing students to succeed.

Len Jessup, UNLV's president, was a first-generation student himself. He remembers the pressures he felt, on campus and at home, knowing his parents didn't understand why he was writing research papers instead of finding a job. A program like Ms. Winkelmes's, he says, "would have helped at school and at home to explain the value of what I was doing and why I was there."

Mr. Jessup hopes the university's efforts to teach a student body that resembles the nation's future will draw other institutions to visit and learn from UNLV.

For now, though, just 39 percent of UNLV's first-time, full-time students graduate in six years. Students drop out for many reasons, of course. Financial pressures, work schedules, and not getting into required courses can all derail progress. But a lack of clarity in and outside the classroom is a key obstacle, and relative to the others, it is often overlooked.

"Navigational capital" is what Tara J. Yosso calls the familiarity — less common among first-generation and minority students — to chart a course through certain kinds of bureaucracies. On a campus, that's reading a syllabus, talking to professors, filling out financial-aid forms, making sense of transfer agreements, and more.

"Understanding the rules of the game is one of the most difficult parts for historically underrepresented students," says Ms. Yosso, a professor of educational studies at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. "Universities presume that how to navigate around them and in them is readily apparent."

Ms. Winkelmes's transparency project recognizes that many underserved students come to a campus with aspirations and knowledge that faculty members often fail to appreciate, Ms. Yosso says. UNLV, she adds, "really tapped into making transparent more of that hidden curriculum."



In the classroom, having to clarify the task, purpose, and criteria of assignments nudges faculty members who may see themselves as purveyors of content from a focus on teaching to learning, says Chris Heavey, vice provost for undergraduate education at UNLV. Many education researchers consider that [a critical paradigm shift](#), one that faculty members associate with methods or teaching styles like class discussions, student-selected topics, and cooperative-learning projects.

Students notice the difference between a teacher- and a learner-centered approach, though the lingo differs. When professors pursued the latter, students described them as [highly organized or clear](#), according to the Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education. When students perceived that professors clearly explained material, used good examples to explore difficult points, were well prepared, and had a solid command of their subject, that correlated with gains in the students' critical-thinking skills, as measured by a standardized test.

Beyond UNLV, the Association of American Colleges and Universities, where Ms. Winkelmes is a senior fellow, is working with seven colleges — including California State University at Los Angeles, Queensborough Community College of the City University of New York, and the University of Houston — to apply transparent

teaching to [problem-based assignments](#). Researchers at the association are studying the results.

At UNLV, the work has just begun, and it may take a while to gauge success. The project will monitor graduation and retention rates, as well as student-, faculty-, and staff-satisfaction surveys, for signs of progress.

Will three words — task, purpose, and criteria — really be enough to spark deep change?

Ms. Winkelmes is among the first to say her protocol is no magic bullet. Many faculty members at UNLV have worried, at least initially, that teaching transparently was hand-holding. Life, jobs, and relationships don't come with instruction manuals. If you can't figure out an assignment, the thinking goes, maybe you don't belong in college.

Others see the transparency project as missing the mark. Take the idea of purpose. Professors and students often find themselves in class together for different reasons, says Stephen R. Herr, a former chair of the education department at Lane College, a historically black institution in Tennessee. For example, he finds his field fascinating; his students are often fulfilling a requirement. So when UNLV asks professors to spell out the purpose of an assignment, Mr. Herr wrote in an email, "I wonder whose purpose, and which purpose they are referring to."

Emphasizing transparency may also gloss over a crucial interpersonal dimension of teaching, says Mr. Herr, who has written for [The Chronicle](#) about standardization in teaching practices. Instructors who make the biggest impact on students rarely do so because they use a particular teaching technique. What makes a difference, Mr. Herr wrote, is that the professor "cared about them, paid attention to them, and was concerned about their well-being."

Yes, it can help to be explicit. But maybe it's even more important to show you care.

Any teaching method can be executed expertly or poorly, any campuswide effort rigorously or haphazardly adopted.

Last semester here at UNLV, many faculty members were still testing what it

meant to teach transparently. Some included the task, purpose, and criteria in their assignments but had yet to rethink their general approach. And some seemed to take little notice of students or moved quickly through the material, asking and answering a series of rhetorical questions.

Michael LoBello, now a sophomore, says his professors routinely described their courses' learning objectives, and the task, purpose, and criteria of assignments. It helped, he says, to know why he was being asked, for example, to analyze a myth.

But even when an assignment clearly explains the criteria for evaluation, a professor may not always follow them. "Every professor grades differently," Mr. LoBello says. "The rubber meets the road in different ways."

When done well, explicit teaching can be the opposite of hand-holding. If professors think through an assignment, students may not be able to fake it, and instead have to rise to cognitively complex work. In that sense, transparent teaching can benefit not only first-generation and underrepresented students, Ms. Winkelmes has found, but all students.

In one class last semester, she used transparent teaching to push for depth and rigor. A handout explained that day's purpose: to analyze primary and secondary sources, a skill students would need for their next big assignment, an annotated bibliography. The criteria for success were whether they left class with a reliable account of the creation and restoration of Michelangelo's frescoes in the Sistine Chapel and a clear sense of how to synthesize sources.

As for the task, she gave the class a choice: a chronological overview of the frescoes or concentrating on one piece of work. The class chose the latter, looking in detail at "The Last Judgment" and a series of letters between Michelangelo and Pietro Aretino, a noted writer of the time. In the first letter, Aretino told Michelangelo what the painting should look like, giving the artist about two dozen characters to portray. Pity, Michelangelo responded, "it is too late for me to adopt your conception of the matter," splendid as it was.

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Ms. Winkelmes encouraged students to read between the lines. Were the writers credible? What were their interests? The students broke into small groups, talking about the letters' intended audience. "I'm going to play devil's advocate here," Ms. Winkelmes said to one group. "Do you think Michelangelo is actually done?" As they had discussed earlier in the semester, decorative projects as vast as the Sistine Chapel take a long time to finish. His work on the Sistine Chapel, she reminded them, was still four years from completion.

As she walked away, the students kept talking. Even though Michelangelo would presumably be the most knowledgeable person about the chapel's progress, the letter could still reflect his interests, the students said. Maybe he was just pretending that it was too late for changes. "He could be pulling a Brian Williams," one student said, "and be making stuff up."

In his next letter, Aretino asked for a souvenir of the artwork, but Michelangelo never sent it. After seeing the finished work years later, Aretino was livid, writing to Michelangelo that, because of its rampant nudity, "The Last Judgment" belonged in a brothel. "I do not write this out of annoyance that you never sent me the things I asked for," the critic wrote. In a postscript, he asked the artist to tear up his letter.

What was happening there? Ms. Winkelmes asked. How did Aretino's critique of nudity jibe with papal directives at the time? Did the critic really want the letter destroyed?

One student, Alexander Cronk, said he was seeing for the first time the political, financial, and religious undercurrents that shaped "The Last Judgment."

"There's a lot more to it than just a guy painting," he said. "Not to make a painting joke, but there's a lot of layers to it."

Ms. Winkelmes mentioned again the next assignment: "The depth of conversation we just had is how you're going to look at sources for your annotated bibliography." Though she spent the rest of the hour on the deterioration and restoration of the Sistine Chapel frescoes, students may not have walked away that day with an encyclopedic knowledge of that artwork. But the purpose was to vet the reliability of sources.

"It's a much more complicated task than it looks like," she told her students. "Well done. That was hard work."

After class, Mr. Cronk said he'd started to notice which courses used transparent teaching and which didn't. Sometimes, he said, he'd read instructions several times and still not know what he was supposed to do. Or he wouldn't know why he was being asked to do an assignment in the first place.

Clarifying the task, purpose, and criteria doesn't diminish expectations to him. Instead, he says, it clears away distractions.

"I actually spend a lot more time learning the material rather than devoting a lot of unnecessary time to unscrambling what I'm supposed to be doing," he says. "I get a lot more out of class time."

How Professors Can Make Assignments Transparent

Some exercises can become old favorites that faculty members assign out of habit. To make assignments more explicit to students, or "transparent," instructors ask themselves the following:

Task: What, exactly, do they want students to do?

A task can be clear without accomplishing a professor's goal for a lesson. One example: A psychology professor wanted students to develop metacognition, or a sense of how they think and how that changes. The first version of his assignment asked them to pick a psychological topic and describe in an essay how their thinking about it had evolved. The revised assignment involved two new tasks: first, asking students at the beginning of the semester to answer a series of questions about different psychological topics (like "Why do people dream?") and to rate their confidence in their answers; then repeating the exercise at the end of the course and having them analyze the differences.

Purpose: Why are they asking students to do it?

Many traditional assignments come with no explanation at all; students complete

them because their professors tell them to. More-explicit reasons can include monitoring how their views change; describing how language and institutions produce culture; and making an informed decision about a major or a career.

Criteria: How will they evaluate the work?

The most explicit evaluation criteria are often the easiest to give — and the least important, like spacing, type size, and margins. Or they're vague: Follow directions, answer the question, write well, cite outside sources. Transparent criteria might include understanding the essential parts of a scientific paper and how to evaluate the use of evidence; employing data that are realistic and consistent with expectations; or demonstrating knowledge of the role of the media in creating standards of beauty. Some professors even ask students to suggest criteria.

Dan Berrett writes about teaching, learning, the curriculum, and educational quality. Follow him on Twitter [@danberrett](https://twitter.com/danberrett), or write to him at dan.berrett@chronicle.com.