Teaching Strategies Showcase

Indiana University’s Teaching for Student Success

 Module 1: Course Design

Title: Becoming More Transparent in My Teaching

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Location: IUPUC

# Context for this strategy

For years (about ten years, to be more precise), I struggled with my students’ request to be provided with high-quality examples of completed course assignments. As a teacher educator, I believe it is important for my students to practice classroom research and self-reflection; therefore, most of my course assignments require students to draft a combination of expository, narrative, persuasive, and descriptive texts. Because each teaching situation that my students experience in K-6 field settings is vastly different, I justified my refusal of providing examples with the rationale that providing such examples could compromise the authentic nature of the drafts by encouraging my students to replicate situations shared in the example pieces.

# Step-by-step implementation

My shift in thinking began as I adopted the Understanding by Design (UbD) framework of Backward Design developed by Wiggins and McTighe in 1998. Not only did I adopt the UbD framework for my own instructional planning, I modeled this framework as I taught my students to plan instruction in the K-6 classrooms in which they worked in field placements. Backward design starts with the end in mind. This necessitates the consideration of the learning outcomes desired from instruction before any instructional activities are considered. I found myself restructuring course assignments to align with overarching learning outcomes for the course, as well as considering particular learning outcomes for individual assignments. At the same time, I took on a classroom-based research study looking at pre-service teachers’ understanding of various mathematics concepts. I came to realize that my students could learn from the artifacts of student work that I was using in my research by thinking through the quality of understanding expressed in the student artifacts. In short, I found that using student artifacts from my research as examples upon which my students could reflect, only strengthened my students’ understanding of key mathematical concepts.

This shift in the use of examples in my courses opened my mind to other possibilities, I began using de-identified research artifacts to help students create rubrics to measure student understandings. By the time I attended a webinar presented by Dr. Mary-Ann Winkelmes on Transparency in Learning and Teaching (*TILT)* in 2017, I was open to the idea that examples of quality work did have a place within my teaching AND that the use of such examples did not impede on my students’ opportunities for developing reflective practice. Hearing more about Winkelmes’ work and research findings around the *TILT* framework, I decided to ease the *TILT* framework into my instruction.

I began by revising one of my course assignments to be in compliance with the *TILT* framework. I introduced the assignment, an integrated lesson plan assignment, by building upon the *TILT* framework through the specification of assignment criteria and by providing an annotated example of successful work before by students begin working on their assignment. This purposeful sharing is made explicit through the use of the Transparent Assignment Design Template in designing the assignment description document. The template encourages the explicit sharing of important assignment information such as, the purpose of, the skills developed by, and the knowledge gained by completion of the assignment, as well as the definition of the assignment-related tasks and the criteria for successful completion of the assignment.

The implementation of the *TILT* framework in my instruction has been an iterative process, beginning the first semester with the use of the Assignment Design Template and work towards helping students self-monitor by focusing on assignment criteria as outlined in the scoring rubric, followed by the second semester with sharing a completely annotated exemplar of a complete integrated lesson plan. Four semesters later, my courses include two redesigned assignments using the *TILT* framework.

# Student response to this strategy

The results of my shift in thinking towards a more transparent view of assignment design has benefited my instruction. It is important to note that the assignments I mention above must be revised to near mastery, as my students, more than likely, will be implementing these plans with children in K-6 classroom. Simply stated, the completed assignments MUST result in a good lesson plan. In some cases, multiple revisions were required and additional support outside of class time was necessary. The support was in the form of written feedback, emails, and office hour visits. As a result of the additional support I provided, revised lesson plans were good enough to be implemented in the K-6 classroom and students have always earned above average grades on the assignments, mostly attributed to the acceptance of multiple revisions. The new, revised *TILT* assignments have not improved overall student grades; however, the additional support I provide upfront, as part of the *TILT* lesson plan format, has resulted in less out-of-class support requested by students. I have noticed that the questions students ask are less vague and more pointed towards the learning outcomes I identified for the assignments. The combination of the transparency that has made its way into my instruction in the form of the *TILT* lesson format and an increased emphasis on student self-monitoring using the scoring rubric as a guide has provided my students with a clearer path towards a successful product.

I am not claiming that the instructional shift described here is the formula for success for every higher educator. Quite the contrary. However, I do believe that re-examining our own beliefs about teaching and learning from time to time often leads to productive, new ways of thinking about engaging our students in learning.