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## Introduction to Transparency in Learning and Teaching

Mary-Ann Winkelmes

*TiLT Higher Ed*, [wink@tilthighered.com](mailto:wink@tilthighered.com)

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## Introduction to Transparency in Learning and Teaching

Mary-Ann Winkelmes

*TILT Higher Ed*

Transparency in Learning and Teaching (TILT) is an educational framework for engaging teachers and students in communicating together about how students are learning, how they can apply their learning in real-world situations in their lives after college, and why instructors manipulate the students' learning experiences in the specific ways they choose. The simple, tripartite TILT Framework (purpose, tasks, criteria) serves to frame those conversations among teachers and students, to help teachers make evidence-based choices about instructional strategies, and to support students' critical thinking about their learning before they begin a learning activity or project (Winkelmes, 2013). Students who approach their academic work with an understanding of its purpose (specific skills they will practice, knowledge they will gain, and how they might use that learning after college), the task (a plan for the actions they will take to complete the work), and the criteria (how to judge the effectiveness of their labor on work that is underway, and what multiple examples of successful work might look like) are more likely to succeed than students who don't. Studies have demonstrated TILT's benefits for college students, including gains in academic confidence, sense of belonging, metacognitive awareness of learning, persistence, engagement, and work quality (Boye & Tapp, 2019; Calkins & Winkelmes, 2018; Copeland et al., 2018; Gianoutsos & Winkelmes, 2016; Howard et

al., 2019; Kang et al., 2016; Magruder et al., 2019; Musselman et al., 2016; Ou, 2018; Porshnev et al., 2021; Winkelmes et al., 2016).

Transparent learning and teaching occur in the act of reciprocal communication, in the interactions among instructors and students who are sharing their understanding, plans and expectations with each other. The TILT Framework is more than an outline for how teachers can explain academic work to students. It is also a guide for students' metacognitive awareness of their learning and a process for inviting students to share their expertise about their own learning experiences with their instructors. Further, it is a tool for educational equity (Winkelmes, 2019, p. 1). When teachers and students apply the framework together before a specific project or assignment, they can ensure that students have an equal readiness to begin the work and equal access to the necessary resources to complete it (Winkelmes, 2019, p. 26).

### Why TILT?

There are several good reasons to use TILT in higher education. First, it requires only a small change while it yields significant gains for both students and teachers. Students who experienced transparent instruction saw gains in their academic confidence, sense of belonging,

and metacognitive awareness of their skill development (Winkelmes et al., 2016). These factors are known predictors of students' success (Hausmann et al., 2009; McGuire & McGuire, 2015; Walton & Cohen, 2011; Wang et al., 1994). TILT contributes to students' persistence in college, not only in the courses where they experience transparent learning and teaching, but also in courses taken up to two years later (Calkins & Winkelmes, 2018; Gianoutsos & Winkelmes, 2016). Teachers, including the authors of the chapters that follow, have described benefits for themselves that include more time-efficient feedback and grading, less time spent re-teaching or reviewing essential concepts, better teaching evaluations, and the satisfaction of seeing high quality work from students (Winkelmes et al., 2015).

TILT is a tool for educational equity. Transparent instruction offers even larger benefits for underserved college students – those who are ethnically underrepresented, low-income, or first in their families to attend college (Winkelmes et al., 2016). The larger gains of transparent education for underserved students are reparative and essential. They help to rectify the current inequality in college graduation rates, where underserved college students are about half as likely to graduate in four years as their White and Asian peers (U.S. Department of Education, 2021).

TILT also helps to address a sustainability challenge in higher education characterized by low graduation rates and underestimations of value. Most students entering college in the U.S. now belong to that underserved group of first-generation, underrepresented, or low-income students. Only about a third of those students completes college in 4 years, and only 26%

of U.S. adults with college experience surveyed by Strada-Gallup survey strongly agreed that college education is relevant in their daily lives and work (Strada-Gallup, 2018). TILT can help students to recognize the value of the skills and knowledge they gain in college, and students who recognize the value of their college learning are more likely to complete college than those who do not.

And finally, transparent learning and teaching can complement large-scale, institutional student success programs that evolve slowly. It helps instructors to address several of the most daunting barriers to student success that teachers identified at hundreds of institutions of higher education where I surveyed them: unequal preparation, motivational challenges, time-management, and access to academic resources (Winkelmes, 2023). Institutional efforts to improve student success by redirecting scholarship funds, restructuring advising services, and revising curricula might take years to reap rewards. TILT can be implemented immediately to help teachers and students make a difference in their daily academic interactions by promoting more equal readiness for academic work and more equitable learning gains.

### **TILT's Past**

TILT prioritizes equity, and it aims to improve student success and faculty satisfaction. These goals are shared by many colleagues and students in higher education, which makes the process of applying the TILT Framework seem intuitive for many, and consistent with their educational practice. Because TILT is grounded in educational research around metacognition, problem-centered instruction, peer learning,

and authentic assessment, it aligns with goals held by many instructors and institutions. In fact, the idea for developing a collection of TILT tools and wisdom about transparent teaching and learning (a collection of templates, slides, videos, rubrics and other tools that is publicly shared at

<https://tilthighered.com/tiltexamplesandresources>) emerged from my work with instructors and faculty at the Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning at Harvard University in the late 1990s, where we explored publications and pedagogical evidence for an approach to teaching that would share a teacher's rationale for their instructional approaches with their students by metaphorically pulling back the curtain to reveal it (Winkelmes & Wilkinson, 1999). Since that time, many teachers, students, librarians, academic staff, and higher education leaders have contributed to TILT Higher Ed resources, research and measurement tools, data analysis, and publications. In 2009, we began data collection through the earliest TILT online surveys. By 2015 an evidence-based analysis of the beneficial and equitable impacts of TILT at a variety of public and private institutions was available, thanks in large part to funding from TG Philanthropy and partnership with Tia Brown McNair and Ashley Finley at the Association of American Colleges and Universities. The University of Nevada Las Vegas and the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign also provided important support.

### **Current State of TILT Research**

The number of publications about TILT's uses in higher education is growing exponentially. TILT has been tested in a variety of higher education contexts in 12 countries: urban, rural, geographically

dispersed, online, public, private, tribal, two-year trade schools and community colleges, three-year applied sciences contexts, four-year institutions of higher education as well as research universities, and in diverse populations ranging from very small (hundreds of students) to very large (tens of thousands). The first phase of research and publication about TILT offered data and analyses that aimed to encourage educators and students to give TILT a try.

This volume exemplifies a second phase in the state of TILT research. Teachers and students who have engaged in transparent instruction are creating new wisdom about how TILT works, where it is most helpful, where it may not work and why, what are the challenges and problems involved, how teachers and students and administrators might address them, and what new questions deserve exploration. The authors of this volume offer their wisdom gained from applying TILT in a range of situations: assignments, feedback communications, multiple-choice exams, syllabi, as a guiding philosophy for online course design, in educating K-12 teachers, in faculty learning communities, and across an institution's non-instructional units. And they use the TILT framework of purpose, task, and criteria as an organizing structure in their chapters.

### **Advice for TILT Practitioners**

Most of these chapters describe the benefits of TILT and offer new advice on how to apply it. For example, John LeJeune contributes to an ongoing conversation about TILTing exams. Dr. LeJeune's chapter is the first publication I'm aware of that addresses the issue by means of evidence-based experimentation. In addition to offering

insights about TILTING a multiple-choice exam, the chapter demonstrates how TILT can be used to make assessment more equitable and to guide classroom assessment research. (For additional publications on equitable assessment, including TILT, see Henning et al., 2022). Dr. LeJeune's chapter also models how TILT is a framework that can guide our selection of evidence-based practices for teaching and learning, like the use of clear, simple, and specific language in testing. In the context of multiple-choice exams, TILT can sometimes be helpful when instructors aim to design exam questions that remove distractions and other barriers to students' success. Removing unnecessary information from test questions and simplifying language helps teachers to communicate "all that we hope" and "no more than we want" in a way that is equally accessible to all students.

Professor Anish Dave offers another example of how the TILT framework can inform the selection and use of additional evidence-based teaching and learning practices. While research indicates that TILTING only two assignments in a term can improve students' learning, Dr. Dave applied the TILT Framework to all the assignment prompts in an introductory writing composition course. Using TILT as a frame for revising the Composition I course opened the door to adopting another evidence-based pedagogical practice. Dr. Dave applied John Hattie's Visible Learning approach in the context of feedback communication with students.

To scale up the benefits of TILTING, faculty learning communities (FLC) and other mentoring models have been effective in demonstrating and advocating transparent teaching and learning practices at institutions of higher education, and even in institutional

consortia. Panel events, for example, have been combined with TILT workshops to allow faculty colleagues to mentor one another, including at Texas Tech University in March of 2017, Inver Hills College and Dakota County in March of 2022, and Mt. Olive University in January of 2023. In this volume, Professor Debra L. Palmer and her co-authors Carrie Bachhofer, Allen Brown, Alaina Kaus, Michele A. McKie, and Thelma Sexton offer wisdom that emerged from their own FLC. Their chapter explains the intentional, evidence-based strategy for aligning staff and faculty in the organization and administration of the group, and the way that their peer mentoring model addressed challenges that individual instructors experienced in applying TILT. Experienced TILT practitioners served as mentors and facilitators to support the work of colleagues adopting TILT for the first time and to address their questions. Reflections contributed by the participants identify both the challenges to be addressed and the most successful aspects of the experience to be replicated for future instructors and colleagues.

Transparent learning and teaching practices have supported institutional improvements beyond the classroom when administrative leaders and staff adopt the TILT Framework to guide their collaborations. Judy Orton Grissett offers advice gained from such an experience, and her chapter indicates how TILT can complement a larger, system-wide student success effort. At Georgia Southwestern State University, the TILT Framework offered a common language for student affairs professionals, administrators, and faculty to communicate across the units of a university in accessible and simple terms about their contributions to student success. Their successes and challenges indicate that

TILT is a framework compatible with ongoing work and incremental advancement.

Equally valuable is what we can learn from situations where TILT does not make a difference and why. In the chapter, “The Impact of Transparent Instructions Upon Academic Confidence and Writing Performance,” Professors Ellen Cotter, Kerry Battle, Cedarian Holsendolph, Jonathan Nguyen, and Annabelle Price Smith found no significant results from TILTING assignment prompts with a group of 41 students. These authors observe that delivering transparency doesn’t guarantee students receive it. Indeed, it is the act of communication among students and instructors that produces transparency. Instructors have an opportunity during that communication to clarify or correct any interpretations they didn’t intend. Students are de facto experts on how they view their learning experiences. They are the arbiters who will define how they view the purposes, tasks, criteria, and real-world applications of an upcoming assignment, while there is still time for teachers to redefine and clarify.

### **Important Questions and Challenges**

One of the common challenges shared across many institutions is the temptation to TILT too much, or to provide students with *all* the information the instructor knows about an upcoming assignment. Giving students more information than they need to succeed on an assignment can result in assignment instructions that are so long and detailed that they become overwhelming and no longer transparent to students. As Dr. Allen Brown notes for this volume, students can help us to see how much TILTING is too much, because students are the experts who can tell

instructors when an assignment is no longer transparent, clear, relevant, and accessible to them. Dr. Cynthia Alby explains that while communicating with students about the purposes, tasks and criteria for their upcoming work is helpful, students at the introductory and advanced levels need different amounts of transparency. For example, students in introductory courses may benefit from more transparency about the actions that are expected or recommended while they are doing their work, while more advanced students who know more about how to do the work might benefit from further transparency about the instructor’s rationale for evaluating the work.

How much TILTING is enough? Research indicates that a very small change can glean significant gains for students. TILTING only two assignments has yielded significant and equitable gains in students’ confidence, sense of belonging, and metacognitive awareness of skill development. After an initial experience, many teachers aim to incorporate more transparency. Instructors who begin by TILTING one assignment or class discussion often continue to TILT other assignments, exams, class meetings, syllabi, other courses, and even engage colleagues in TILTING a group of courses or a curriculum. This can involve significant work. The time-consuming, effortful, and even existential aspects of TILTING are described by Dr. Michael Crosby and Dr. Rebecca Short. As professors of education, they are committed not only to adopting evidence-based teaching and learning practices but also to modeling them for their students who will become K-12 educators. They view TILT as a student-centered approach that informs their prioritization and selection of student-focused practices including student-centered

classrooms, syllabi, and learning and teaching behaviors.

### **TILT's Future**

This volume offers more than the insights from the authors' research and experiences applying TILT in a variety of situations. It also identifies important questions and areas for further exploration. For example, the use of TILT in online courses is the subject of a few publications, most of them case studies. Professor Sabrina Wengier and Professor Lorraine Debuison offer evidence in this volume about the benefits of TILT in asynchronous online courses. More analysis of online instruction implementing TILT is possible. The TILT Surveys have gathered data about online and blended education at the college level for nearly 10 years, and these data have yet to be studied.

The relationship between transparency and motivation has attracted the attention of scholars in psychology and neuroscience. In this volume, Professors Ellen Cotter, Kerry Battle, Cedarian Holsendolph, Jonathan Nguyen, and Annabelle Price Smith posit that the long-term benefits of TILT, like increased persistence, might accrue to even those students who saw no immediate gains from their experience with transparent instruction. They recommend further exploration at the intersection of transparency and motivation, a fruitful area for study some scholars have begun to investigate (Weisz et al., 2023).

Graduate and professional students have also experienced benefits from transparent instruction, but most publications about transparent instruction focus on undergraduate education, usually at the

introductory and intermediate levels. In this volume, Professors Debra L. Palmer, Carrie Bachhofer, Allen Brown, Alaina Kaus, Michele A. McKie, and Thelma Sexton point out the need for information about the impact and lessons learned from those who are using TILT with advanced-level undergraduates and graduate students. Studies of TILT's impact in professional education might use yet unanalyzed data from TILT Surveys of advanced-level undergraduates and graduate students.

This volume describes how faculty learning communities use TILT, and how administrators and staff can connect their student support efforts with teachers' work through the TILT Framework. My involvement with hundreds of schools in the context of TILT workshops, panel events, and TILT-focused conferences suggests that there is much untapped wisdom about how communities of teachers and students, staff, administrators, and academic leaders are connecting around TILT. The authors of this volume offer important contributions by advancing our understanding of how TILT works best, and by identifying the challenges and questions that future practitioners and scholars of transparent learning and teaching will address.

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MARY-ANN WINKELMES is the Founder, Director, and Principal Investigator of the Transparency in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education project (TILT Higher Ed). The impact of this project on students' learning and persistence has been the focus of her research publications. Dr. Winkelmes earned her PhD from Harvard University.