

Designing for the Unseen: What Student Confusion Taught Me About Course Clarity

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[Abstract] This reflective essay grew out of a question I have carried throughout my teaching: when students do not ask questions, does that mean they understand, or does it mean I cannot see their confusion? In my own courses, I often encounter silence where I might expect uncertainty. Students submit work, follow directions, and move through the course, yet I still wonder what struggles remain unspoken. Over time, I have come to realize that silence is an unreliable indicator of understanding and that much of what students experience in a course is not visible to the instructor.

This essay is not a research study, but a practice-based reflection on how that uncertainty has shaped my approach to course design. I reflect on the ways I try to respond to what I cannot see by making expectations more explicit, organizing courses consistently, communicating in multiple ways, and helping students connect learning to real purposes. Ultimately, the essay suggests that when we cannot fully know where confusion exists, our responsibility is not to assume clarity, but to design learning environments that make it more likely.

[keywords] student confusion, course design, transparency, higher education pedagogy

1. Introduction

I have often wondered whether the absence of frequent student questions in my courses reflects effective course design or simply unobserved confusion. Students may struggle silently, and the limits of instructor visibility mean that clarity is never fully verifiable. Even so, I have found that intentional design choices appear to reduce common points of friction. This article reflects on those practices while acknowledging the uncertainty inherent in interpreting student experience.

2. The Question that Started this Reflection

I began thinking about student confusion while auditing courses in our learning management system during the first week of the semester. My task was relatively straightforward: ensure that courses contained a syllabus with required information, assignments with clear due dates, and a welcome announcement from the instructor. Most faculty met these requirements. What struck me, however, was how differently information was presented from one course to another. In some courses, important information was immediately stated and easy to understand. In others, both students and I were left searching for what we needed.

At the same time, I was updating our Student Success course. Because this course is often one of the first experiences students have at the college, it seemed especially important that it was simple to navigate and easy to understand. A course designed to help students succeed in college should not itself become another obstacle to overcome. As I began reading about assignment transparency, course organization, and strategies for reducing student confusion, I realized something unexpected: many of the problems other faculty described did not seem particularly familiar to me. I did not frequently receive questions about where to find assignments, what students were expected to do, or how to complete their work.

When students in my courses failed to complete assignments, the reasons they most often shared involved competing responsibilities, limited time, or challenges outside the classroom rather than confusion about expectations. Yet the more I read, the more I questioned my own assumptions. Was my course design effectively supporting students, or was I simply unable to see all the ways students struggled? Was I attributing poor performance to outside circumstances when aspects of my design could still be improved?

Despite my efforts to communicate clearly, provide support, and answer questions, there were always a few students who struggled. They failed to submit work, did not meet expectations when they did submit assignments, or seemed unable to make gains from feedback. What troubled me most was that these students were rarely the ones who visited office hours, asked questions in class, or responded to feedback. Their struggles often remained largely invisible. I still do not know whether the absence of questions truly reflected clarity or whether some confusion remained unseen.

What I do know is that the uncertainty itself has shaped the way I think about course design. If instructors cannot fully see or measure student confusion, then perhaps our responsibility is not to assume students understand but to intentionally design learning experiences that reduce unnecessary barriers and make expectations as visible and accessible as possible. This approach does not require a complete redesign of our courses. Rather, as Lang (2021) argues, relatively small, intentional changes in teaching practice can meaningfully improve student learning experiences.

3. What We Cannot Always See

Students may avoid asking questions for many reasons, including fear of appearing unprepared, previous negative experiences seeking help, uncertainty about available resources, or cultural norms that discourage questioning authority. The reasons likely differ from student to student, and that uncertainty is precisely what makes confusion difficult to recognize. Some students, particularly those who are new to college, may not even know what questions to ask. They may recognize that they are confused but be unable to identify exactly what information is missing or how to seek clarification. There have been times when I was confused and did not ask for help. My instinct is often to search for answers independently and exhaust my own resources before seeking assistance from someone else. When I once described this tendency, someone responded,

"Yes, but you're naturally curious, and not everyone is." That comment stayed with me because it reminded me that people navigate uncertainty differently.

Courses are also often clear to instructors because instructors possess knowledge and experiences that students do not. Faculty understand the language of college, recognize patterns that novices do not, and often know instinctively where to find information and what questions to ask. It can be difficult to remember what it felt like to encounter these experiences for the first time. Because of this, it can be tempting to interpret silence as evidence that everything is clear. Yet silence and compliance do not necessarily indicate understanding. Students may follow directions, meet deadlines, and comply with policies while still experiencing confusion, uncertainty, or anxiety. From an instructor's perspective, genuine understanding and quiet confusion can sometimes look remarkably similar. The more I reflected on these possibilities, the less certain I became that I could accurately judge course clarity simply by observing student behavior. If that is true, then the question becomes not whether confusion exists, but how we intentionally design courses when we cannot always see it.

3. If We Cannot Measure Confusion Perfectly, What Can We Do?

While I may never know where every point of confusion exists in my courses, I do believe I have a responsibility to try to view my course from the student's perspective. In communication courses, we teach students to be audience-centered—to anticipate questions, objections, and points of misunderstanding before they occur. If I expect students to thoughtfully consider the needs of their audience, I should hold myself to that same standard as an instructor. Students enter our classrooms with different educational experiences, different levels of familiarity with college, and different preferences for how they process information. Because I cannot know in advance which students will struggle or where confusion may arise, I try to design my courses with as many students as possible in mind.

This approach aligns with principles of Universal Design, which seek to remove barriers and create learning environments that are more inclusive for all students (Emekako et al., 2025). I deliberately try to reduce the amount of energy students must spend simply figuring out how to navigate a course. If students are struggling to find information, interpret directions, or understand expectations, then their attention is focused on those tasks rather than on learning the course content itself. Perhaps this is why one of my favorite things to hear from students is, "Well, that was easy." To me, that statement does not suggest that learning was watered down or standards were lowered. Instead, it suggests that a barrier has been removed.

Ultimately, I want students to understand that education is not reserved for people who already know how college works. Helping students understand how to navigate a course and where to find support may also contribute to their sense of belonging and persistence. I want them to believe that learning is something they can do and that support is available when they need it.

4. Make Expectations Visible

Students should never have to guess what assignments they need to complete, how their learning will be assessed, or why they earned a particular grade. They should not have to wonder where to seek support or whom to contact when academic or personal challenges begin to interfere with their learning. Students enter our courses with different experiences, levels of familiarity with college, and educational goals. Because of this, I intentionally try to make expectations explicit.

I explain the purpose of each assignment and include that information directly within the assignment description. I explain what students must do to earn points and provide rubrics for every graded assignment. Whenever possible, I provide examples that illustrate my expectations. I also break assignments into manageable steps. I provide guiding questions, brainstorming prompts, checklists of required components, and formatting expectations. These tools are not intended to lower standards. Rather, they help students direct their energy toward learning and applying course concepts instead of deciphering instructions.

Finally, I intentionally repeat important information throughout the course. Students are balancing multiple courses, each with different requirements and processes. Clarity is not achieved simply because information has been communicated once; it is strengthened when students encounter important information consistently and in multiple places. These practices also align with principles of transparent assignment design, which emphasize clearly communicating the purpose of an assignment, the tasks students must complete, and the criteria by which their work will be evaluated (Winkelmes, 2016).

5. Organize Consistently

When students first enter my course, I want them to immediately know where they are, who their instructor is, what is due, and how to get started. They should be able to locate assignments, access course materials, and identify how to contact me if they have questions. My modules are organized by week, and each module begins with a single overview page containing learning objectives, required materials, supplemental resources, and assignments with direct links. Assignments also appear separately within the module, and materials follow the same sequence each week so that students can develop familiarity with the course structure. The course homepage includes a link to the syllabus, a complete course schedule, and a clearly labeled "Get Help" section that directs students to academic and support services.

These organizational decisions may seem relatively small, but I believe they matter. Every moment students spend trying to determine what they need to do or where to find information is attention that cannot be devoted to learning. My hope is that students spend less energy navigating the mechanics of the course and more energy engaging with the content.

6. Communication in Multiple Ways

I provide information in multiple formats because I have experienced what it feels like when information is presented in only one way. Throughout my own education, I have watched

classmates struggle with ideas that seemed straightforward to me while I struggled with concepts they appeared to grasp effortlessly. Those experiences reminded me that students do not all approach learning in the same way. Because I cannot know in advance which explanations, examples, or formats will be most meaningful to individual students, I try to provide multiple ways for students to access important information and engage with course concepts. Important information is often communicated more than once and in more than one format. Assignment expectations may be written, reinforced through announcements, discussed during class, and illustrated through examples.

I do not communicate in multiple ways because I assume students are incapable of learning through other methods. I do so because confusion can emerge when information does not initially make sense to students. Sometimes all that is needed is another explanation, another example, or another opportunity to engage with the material from a different perspective.

7. Make Learning Relevant

I connect course concepts to students' lives because I have found that students engage more deeply with learning when they understand why it matters. Regardless of the subject we teach, students are more likely to invest effort when they can see value and purpose in what they are learning. When students understand why they are completing an assignment or participating in an activity, they often understand expectations more clearly as well. Purpose provides context. It helps students move beyond asking, "What do I have to do?" toward asking, "Why does this matter?" and "How can I use this?" Increasingly, higher education is also being asked to make employability skills more visible within academic coursework. Helping students recognize how assignments develop communication, critical thinking, teamwork, problem solving, and other transferable skills provides another layer of purpose. When students understand not only what they are learning but also how those abilities connect to future careers and civic life, course expectations can become more meaningful. I also find that reflection deepens learning and makes it more meaningful. I ask students to consider their assumptions, beliefs, and experiences and to think about how what they learn in one context can transfer to another.

Ultimately, my goal is to make learning feel real and accessible. I want students to develop habits of mind that extend beyond any single discipline—the ability to think critically, ask questions, recognize patterns, consider multiple perspectives, and remain curious about both the world around them and themselves.

8. Clarity is not the Opposite of Rigor

The purpose of clear design is not to make learning easier by lowering expectations. Its purpose is to remove unnecessary obstacles so that students can devote their effort to the intellectual work that truly matters. In many ways, this view reflects Bain's (2004) argument that teaching involves "engineering an environment in which [students] learn" (p. 49). I have occasionally heard faculty suggest that students today need too much support. There is likely some truth in the observation

that independence develops through struggle. However, independence develops over time. We do not ask someone who is learning to ride a bicycle to immediately compete in motocross. We hold the bike steady, help them practice balancing, and gradually let go as their confidence grows. Sometimes we even add training wheels when additional support is needed.

Students should struggle with comprehension, synthesis, application, and transfer of ideas—not with figuring out expectations that were never clearly communicated. Confusion about course requirements or where to find support does not make a course more rigorous. Instead, it consumes time and mental energy that could otherwise be directed toward learning. When we provide rubrics, communicate expectations repeatedly, organize materials consistently, offer examples, and break complex assignments into manageable steps, we are not lowering standards. We are helping students learn how to function within a system that may still be unfamiliar to them. Students still analyze, apply concepts, revise their thinking, solve problems, communicate effectively, and meet the same learning objectives.

In doing so, they are also developing many of the transferable skills increasingly recognized as essential for workplace success. In some cases, clarity may even allow students to achieve those objectives at a higher level because less of their effort is spent deciphering expectations and more of it is directed toward meaningful intellectual work. Every minute students spend trying to figure out how the course works is a minute they cannot spend learning from it.

9. Reconsidering My Assumptions

Can I know with certainty that my students were never confused? Absolutely not. I can anticipate potential pain points and look for indicators that something may not be working, but I cannot know with certainty why students struggle. Our opportunities to understand students' experiences are often limited and imperfect. Sometimes we receive comments through course evaluations, but those evaluations occur after the course has ended and rarely capture confusion in the moment it is happening. What about the students in the middle—the students who quietly complete their work and move through the course without drawing our attention? Is it possible that they experienced moments of confusion that I never saw?

As I reflected on these questions, I realized that much of my course design has been shaped by my own experiences as a new college student. Long before I encountered terms such as universal design, transparent assignment design, backward design, or scaffolding, I was attempting to make my courses easier to understand and more accessible to a wider range of students. Professional development and educational research did not create that impulse; however, it gave me language and frameworks for something I was already trying to accomplish. These approaches provide complementary frameworks for designing learning experiences that anticipate learner variability, clarify expectations, align instruction and assessment with learning outcomes, and provide students with structured support as they develop toward greater independence (CAST, 2024; Emekako et al., 2025; Wiggins & McTighe, 2005; Winkelmes et al., 2016).

I still do not know whether the absence of questions reflects clarity or simply unspoken confusion. What I have come to accept is that uncertainty is an inevitable part of teaching. I cannot eliminate all uncertainty about my students' experiences, but I can continue to examine my assumptions and intentionally design learning experiences that reduce unnecessary barriers.

10. Invitation to Readers

I hope this reflection encourages faculty to think carefully about for whom their courses are designed. It can be easy to create courses that make sense to us as experts in our disciplines or that prioritize efficiency and familiar routines. Yet our students bring different experiences, backgrounds, strengths, and uncertainties into our classrooms. When students never ask questions, perhaps we should become curious rather than comfortable. What might they be experiencing? Are there ways to invite questions and normalize confusion? Are there opportunities to make expectations more visible or processes more intuitive?

I have occasionally heard additional guidance and support described as "hand-holding." Yet I sometimes wonder whether guidance is precisely what some students need. No standards have been lowered. Instead, a student has been given clearer directions, more visible expectations, or a more accessible path through an unfamiliar experience. Perhaps our responsibility is not to eliminate all confusion or assume the information in our course syllabi can ever be perfectly clear. Instead, perhaps it is to continually ask what barriers might exist and what small changes could make learning more accessible. Every semester provides another opportunity to revisit our assumptions and ask a simple question: What do students need, and how might I help them spend less energy figuring out how to learn and more energy engaging in learning itself?

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